

THE TORAH CODE

THE SYMBOLS OF YAHWEH

Volume 3: Living Symbols

BY
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Living Symbols

It's just "stuff"—the ordinary things that populate and permeate our daily lives. As counterintuitive as it may seem, Yahweh has chosen to communicate with mankind by investing with spiritual significance the most mundane bits and pieces of our days. He speaks to us not through His own glory, as we might expect, but through the matrix of our mortal existence, the components of our collective human consciousness. Anyone can understand His message, for it's communicated through the simplest things imaginable—it's *so* simple, in fact, that most of us miss it altogether out of sheer over-familiarity.

People usually notice what seems out of place, not those things they expect to see every day of their lives. Contrast—as we saw in the previous volume—is a natural teaching tool because it's easier to spot differences than stand-alone concepts. But God wants His truth to be common and ordinary, as ubiquitous as the air we breathe or the ground beneath our feet—not "special," something reserved for extraordinary occasions or relegated to times of great joy or deep sorrow. In Yahweh's economy, *breakfast* is a perfectly good reason to give thanks for His greatness. *Tuesday* is cause enough for rejoicing. The gravity that prevents us from floating off into space is but one of a million ordinary things that ought to remind us of God's constant provision.

That's why Moses said, **"Hear, O Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."** (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) Yahweh wanted His presence to be perceived and acknowledged by everybody, everywhere, all the time. So it should come as no surprise that the symbols through which He chose to reveal Himself would be ubiquitous in the corporate experience of man. These metaphors pop up everywhere. They are calculated to remind us that Yahweh, the one true God, is Love personified. It is therefore only natural that we should love Him in return with a whole heart and revere Him without reservation.

The wisdom of this method of communication can be lost on us, of course, if we fail to perceive our proper place in God's plan. Why are we even here? Consider the alternative "explanations" held dear by so many of our fellow

humans. Some, for instance, would say that there is no God, that He doesn't exist—that we and our world are all just the product of an endless string of fortuitous cosmic events, one happy accident after another in an implausible unbroken chain stretching back to the dawn of time. (The fact that there *was* a dawn of time some 13.7 billion years ago argues forcefully against this scenario: it makes the math impossible.) Such people would opine that conscience and faith are actually just devices society has invented to prevent itself from self-destructing—or worse, the result of random genetic mutations in our common DNA. Taken to its logical end, this view demands that anything that doesn't promote the survival or short-term gratification of the strongest individual members of society is antithetical to the overall goal of advancing the species. The *fittest* must survive, while mercy or altruism shown to those less fit only weakens the gene pool. (The “fit,” of course, are defined as “anyone who agrees with them.”) We should note, however, that the very God whose existence these people deny calls them “fools.” Considering the evidence, I'm willing to take His word for it.

Others would reason that although a Creator-God may exist, He surely must be so far above puny humanity that we can be only barely aware of each others' existence. We must therefore work very hard to impress Him, to appease Him, to bow in obsequious obeisance before Him. In what has to be the most illogical course of action ever pursued by man, these people ignore what this God actually said about Himself, and instead redefine or reinvent Him in an image more in line with their own preconceived expectations. One example among many: some conclude that His name (if He has one) must be “ineffable,” making it blasphemy to even utter it. So forget the fact that this name (Yahweh) is written some seven thousand times in His own scriptures: these “deep thinkers” *revere it into oblivion* by refusing to use it, going so far as translating it out of existence (in English, anyway) in the very document that purports to reveal Him. This whole insane process is known as “religion.”

The danger with religion (as a concept) is that it all too often masquerades as—and competes with—the very spiritual entity it purports to represent. I'm not condemning any *particular* religion here with an eye toward supporting its rival, you understand. I'm tarring everybody with the same brush. Religion, in the end, is the method humanity has invented in order to reach out to God. Most people would ask, “What's wrong with that?” It's simply this: religion's starting point is man: it's what *we* believe, based on what *we* have determined to be true about God, affecting *our* behavior and defining *our* rituals. But that's completely backward: in reality, it is God who reaches out to us, making all these subsequent things *His* prerogative, not ours.

Think of our world as a laboratory: the microorganisms being studied (us) can't really comprehend the scientist (God), the microscope, or even the petri dish—it's up to the scientist to approach them. It doesn't matter what the microbe "thinks." It just isn't equipped to contemplate the big picture. Yet one dictionary defines religion as "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs; a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects." The germs, in other words, have laid claim to the lab.

You may protest, however, that parts of the Bible certainly make it *look* as if "religion" is God's *modus operandi*. The Book of Leviticus, in particular, is replete with rituals, rules, prohibitions, moral guidelines, and instructions concerning classes of people (priests and Levites) who were set apart from everybody else in order to perform complicated religious-style rites. The Book of Exodus goes into great detail describing an elaborate tent the Israelites were to use when worshipping their God—a structure that would, with its furnishings and appurtenances, provide the template for a future "permanent" temple. Naturally, most of us look at all this and wonder: what's the difference? The Jews have their rules, traditions, and places of worship, and the Christians have theirs, as do the Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Animists, etc.—even atheist secular humanists. Man, it would seem, is a very religious creature, even when he's not.

Let's take the issue of worship venues as an example. Is there really any fundamental difference between a Muslim mosque with its *qiblah* facing Mecca, a traditional cruciform Christian church with its nave, narthex, baptistery, and altar, a Hindu temple with a beehive-shaped *sikhara*, or a Jewish synagogue with its ark containing the Torah scrolls? No, not really, because they share one thing in common: they are all the inventions of the people who worship there. Their architectural features and modes of worship all stem from what man thinks would be an appropriate setting in which to approach his God.

There is but one exception to this rule: the wilderness tabernacle (and the temple later based upon it) stands alone in this regard, for its design, service, construction, and even dimensions were specified by Yahweh Himself. The Israelite ex-slaves *didn't* get together and say, "This God who brought us out of bondage in Egypt is obviously very powerful, so let's design ourselves a portable worship center, appoint a bunch of priests, and invent some rituals so He'll know whose side we're on." Quite the contrary. They had no idea what to do. All they knew for sure during those first few months of freedom (when they were receiving the instructions) was "follow the pillar of cloud and you'll be okay."

Not even Moses could be credited with designing the tabernacle. He was told what to do by Yahweh Himself, who summoned him to the top of Mount Horeb under conditions so terrifying, the Israelites were perfectly happy to let Moses intercede for them: **“Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of Him may be before you, that you may not sin.’ The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”** (Exodus 20:18-21) And there, amid all the lightning and smoke, Yahweh Himself showed Moses precisely what He wanted the Israelites to do.

After specifying what building materials would be required for the tabernacle, and then giving the people an opportunity to voluntarily respond to the need, God told Moses, **“Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.”** (Exodus 25:8-9) This instruction is absolutely unique in the annals of “religious architecture.” Nowhere else is God purported to have said, “Build My house exactly like this.” From the Tower of Babel to the Crystal Cathedral, our religious edifices are invariably as magnificent and impressive as we can afford to make them. When the resources are available, the architectural expression of our religious thought tends to end up looking like the Acropolis, the Vatican, or maybe the Ka’aba: huge spaces and magnificent buildings, impressive on the outside and opulent on the inside. But what did Yahweh’s tabernacle look like? From the outside, it looked like a smallish gray rectangular box, about fifteen feet wide, fifteen feet tall, and forty-five feet long. It looked more like a single-wide mobile home, or maybe a shipping container, than something you’d envision for the earthly abode of Almighty God. It was dazzling on the inside to be sure, but only a handful of anointed priests were ever allowed to go in there. Even the courtyard surrounding it was unassuming—a space about the size of a modest suburban lot, 150 feet long by 75 wide, enclosed by a flimsy seven-foot-tall linen curtain. Saint Peter’s square it was not.

In a future chapter, we’ll discuss in detail what the tabernacle, its layout, and furnishings meant. It obviously wasn’t designed to impress anyone. (If we wanted to be impressed by God’s glory, we could simply look up at the Milky Way galaxy streaking across the night sky. Nothing we could build would ever compete with that.) Rather, the tabernacle was constructed to *teach us*: every specification, dimension, material, position, and function was calculated to inform us about some facet of Yahweh’s plan for mankind’s redemption and restoration—in terms that anyone, from any era or culture, could comprehend.

And what of the temple that replaced the old tabernacle? I found it fascinating that Yahweh never commanded that a temple be built at all. He merely *allowed* it because it was David's heartfelt wish, the outcome of his unflagging devotion and lifelong desire to honor Yahweh. Israel under King David had been blessed materially—far in excess of what the tribes of the exodus had to offer—so the scale and opulence of the new temple would reflect these blessings. Put in terms we can comprehend today, David provided his son Solomon with an enormous treasury of raw materials: 9.6 *million* ounces of gold and 20.4 million ounces of silver (and that's using the conservative conversion equivalent of 75 pounds of metal per talent; it could have been as high as 90), in addition to all the bronze, iron, and other materials that were donated. But the plan—what the building's architecture *meant*—had been established by Yahweh Himself. Upon explaining the details of the plan to his son Solomon, David cautioned him, saying, **“All this He made clear to me in writing from the hand of Yahweh, all the work to be done according to the plan.”** (I Chronicles 28:19) We aren't told whether this was a fresh written revelation from the hand of God or “merely” a reference to the Torah's instructions concerning the tabernacle, but from what we know of Solomon's temple, its design was basically a scaled-up version of the original sanctuary. The story it tells remains the same: a story of atonement, cleansing, illumination, provision, communication, and intimate fellowship with our God.

Whatever “religion” we perceive in the Torah, then, is an illusion. Its rites, rules, and appurtenances were specified by Yahweh, not invented by His followers. They are intended not to impress us, force our submission, or intimidate us into compliance, but to teach us about Him and His plan for our restoration. They are an invitation, not an ultimatum; a path, not a destination.

These precepts are, in a way, like a language or code through which Yahweh communicates to us. If we understand what the “words” mean, we will be in a position to hear and heed what God is telling us, no matter what human dialect we speak or what age or culture we inhabit. We've already seen how God presents His own character in terms that are (or at least can be) universally understood by mortal man: light, air, food, and water. We've learned that He appeals to us through such uniquely “human” concepts as communication, family relationships, refuge, and strength. We've explored the sweeping panorama of God's plan—His inexorable will moving us from nothing to something, from lost to found, from limited to infinite, from temporary to permanent.

Now, as we begin to home in on the specifics of God's "lexicon," we'll see the trend continued. This "vocabulary" Yahweh has opted to employ is about as far removed from religion as it's possible to be. Religion endeavors to present God as special, distant, awesome, mysterious, and unapproachable—because He *is*, from our perspective. So it may come as something of an epiphany to discover that God doesn't portray *Himself* that way at all. The symbols and metaphors through which Yahweh has chosen to reveal Himself and His plan to us are the most common and mundane of things—things we encounter on a daily basis.

So yes, He's "special," but at the same time, He wants to be the central essence of our existence, the very matrix in which our lives are lived out, not something added onto the periphery. (Look at it this way: if Yahweh were a cupcake, He'd be the flour and sugar, not the sprinkles on top.) Yes, He's "distant," for He cannot be contained within the universe in which we live, and yet He desires intimate association with us, dwelling within our very souls, becoming our quickening force, our *raison d'être*. Yes, He's "awesome," a Supreme Being rightly to be feared, respected, and taken more seriously than anything else we can imagine, but at the same time, He craves a sweet familial relationship with us, as a father and mother do with their infant child. Yes, He's "mysterious," yet He has gone *far* out of His way to teach us who He is, what He's like, and how much He loves us. And yes, He's "unapproachable," but only because He is holy, while we are fallen, imperfect creatures. But He has proposed a plan whereby we *can* approach Him, a plan in which we can assume His holiness, be clothed in His righteousness, and attain His perfection. Though it is impossible for us (as strangers) to *acquire* these things, Yahweh has made it possible for us (as His children) to *receive* them: they are a gift, not a goal—an inheritance, not income earned for a job well done. Consider this: the president of the United States may be the "most powerful man on earth," but *somebody* calls him "daddy." With him, as with God, intimate accessibility is a question of relationship, not relative merit.

God's vocabulary, these "words" through which He communicates His essence and intent to us, are not abstract psychological constructs accessible only to religious cognoscenti. They are, rather, the very warp and woof of the fabric of everybody's daily lives. Yahweh's symbols are the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the places we live, and the creatures with whom we share the world—all of which He invests with symbolic significance in order to teach us indelible lessons about His own character. He speaks to us through the relationships we share, the institutions in which we participate, and the forces of nature that He Himself put into place—the raw materials of our mortal experience. Even when He employs ritual observances to teach us, they're invariably meant for "dramatic effect," like a game of charades in which we are asked to act out in pantomime the things God wants us to know about His plan.

If this all seems reasonable and intuitive (which it is), then ask yourself why the religions of man invariably resort to obtuse theological mumbo-jumbo instead. They routinely ask us to embrace concepts that make no real sense in any language. I'll mention a few examples to make my point, but bear in mind that the insanity of man's religious invention goes far deeper than this cursory list:

Let's start close to home with the religion of Christianity (not to be confused with the simple *relationship* with Yahweh, through Yahshua, that goes by the same name). We're first asked to believe that God is a trinity—three divine persons with one essence. Never mind the fact that Yahweh (invariably misidentified as “the Lord”) never described Himself this way; “three persons with one essence” doesn't *mean* anything. It's theological gibberish. (See Volume I, Chapter 2, for what He *did* say: Yahweh is *One*, and He manifests Himself to men using six distinct forms or manifestations, depending on what He's trying to achieve in our lives.)

Or consider this: the largest branch of the religion of Christianity (Roman Catholicism) teaches that during the simple, symbolic memorial meal commonly known as “communion” or the “Eucharist,” something called “transubstantiation” takes place, in which the bread and wine are said to *literally* become the body and blood of Christ, even though all that's accessible to the senses (or scientific enquiry) remains as it was. I've got no problem with miracles, you understand (like the virgin birth or the resurrection of Christ), but I've got a *big* problem with nonsense. Miracles not only have to have an objective reality; in God's world, they invariably have a point, one consistent with God's character and revealed word. Logically, they can't just be “declared to be true” despite all empirical evidence to the contrary. The idea of transubstantiation, of course, is a transparent attempt to make human works—administered by a manmade religious institution—the basis for salvation: if “the Church” is in charge of who may (or more to the point, may not) “eat the body and drink the blood” of Christ (see John 6:54), then they—not God—hold the keys to eternal life and everlasting damnation. This is but one of many “Christian myths” that exist only in the minds of inventive theologians (or covetous clerics) with no earthly idea of how God communicates, what He said, or why He said it. Our systematic study of Yahweh's symbols will hopefully sort out many of these misconceptions.

Our brothers the religious Jews speak their own dialect of gibberish. While both Christianity and Judaism profess to count the Tanach, or Old Testament, among their scriptures, they are in radical disagreement as to what it—and especially the Torah—says and means. Christians who study the Torah (alas, a tiny minority) see a reflection of Yahshua the Messiah in every precept. But the Jews (who since the days of Rabbi Akiba have been defined, as much as anything

else, by their *rejection* of Yahshua) search in vain for alternate explanations. It's like trying to define "up" if you don't believe in gravity.

So they appeal to both a written Law (one they don't keep because it can't be kept) and a parallel "oral Law." This oral Torah, which is supposed to explain the written Law, was supposedly delivered to the elders of Israel at the time of Moses. It is said to have been transmitted entirely by word of mouth for over fifteen hundred years before it was finally committed to parchment (as the Mishnah—all 63 tractates, 525 chapters of it) a component of the even more ponderous Talmud (a "document" that consumes twenty-two fat volumes in English). Never mind the fact that the oral Law is far more lengthy and complicated than the written Law we find in our Bibles, making it (admit it, guys) impossible to transmit from memory; it often flatly contradicts both itself and the Torah it purports to explain. Rabbinical Judaism might have been able to make a plausible pretense of holding this house of cards together as long as they had the Sanhedrin to help them "teach as doctrine the commandments of men," and "make void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down," as Yahshua angrily put it. But the Sanhedrin was toothless after the 70 AD sack of Jerusalem, was reduced to the status of a rabbinical rubber stamp by 200, and made its final "binding" pronouncement in 358, making even the written version of the oral law something of a bad joke today—a sad and irrelevant anachronism. Meanwhile, the written Torah lives and breathes, as fresh and timely today as the day it was delivered to Moses amid fire and smoke atop Mount Horeb—if you understand its role in revealing Yahweh's coming Messiah.

What about less familiar religions, those with no Judeo-Christian bloodline? Hinduism employs an inventive and complex system that can apparently be made to mean virtually anything you want it to mean—meaning that in the end, it means nothing at all. They have a "Supreme Being," called the Brahman (to whom nobody seems to pay much attention) surrounded by three hundred thirty-three *million* "gods"—take your pick. I don't think Yahweh is listed among them, nor would He want to be, I'm guessing. The Hindu religion is peppered with positively ingenious gobbledygook that sounds profound and pious rolling off the tongue. But it can't be tested, can't be falsified, and can't be of assistance to anyone seeking real answers in the real world: it's human wisdom at its most eloquent—and least practical.

Open the literature anywhere and you can find absolute nonsense, esoteric and incomprehensible ramblings passing for "deep thought." For example, Vivekananda states that "Reality or Brahman is a unity, oneness or absolute, changeless, eternal, and such that no predicates can apply to it: in the Absolute there is neither time, space nor causation. The idea of time cannot be there, seeing that there is no mind, no thought. The idea of space cannot be there, seeing that

there is no eternal change. What you call motion and causation cannot exist where there is only one.” It’s almost as if they’re trying to equate the Brahman with Yahweh, in that nothing and no one would exist without His direct volition. But if that is the case, why in the world would you not worship this Supreme Being exclusively? At its core then, Hinduism is a purposeful, systematic violation of Yahweh’s first and second Commandments: **“I am Yahweh your God, who brought you...out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God.”** (Exodus 20:2-5)

Buddhism is a spin-off of Hinduism, sort of like the religion of Christianity is a spin-off of Judaism. At the risk of sounding unkind, it seems to me that they like the idea of incomprehensible Hindu philosophical gibberish, but all that devotion to the gods, not so much. Collinson writes: “Buddhist philosophy appears to recognize the impermanence of the Self (contrary to Hindu thought). In Hinduism the bliss of nirvana is broadly conceived of as a state of total union with Brahman, the ultimate and absolute Reality of the universe, in which individuality is completely abolished. Buddhist doctrine differs from this in some important respects. For one thing, it does not assert the existence of Brahman as the unifying and ultimate power of the universe. It also rejects the concept of the individual immortal soul. It maintains that the empirical personality consists of five kinds of entity, or *skandha*—body, feelings, desires, mental conceptions, and pure consciousness—but that none of these is permanent and so cannot constitute anything that could be understood as soul. Accordingly, Buddhism concludes there is an empirical personality that has a psychic or mental aspect, but it finds no reason to affirm the existence of an enduring soul capable of finding eternal salvation through absorption into the Brahmanic absolute.”

Well, I’m certainly glad we got *that* cleared up. In case you’ve lost your bearings in this sea of silliness, we’re talking about the difference between the way Yahweh communicates—through symbols and metaphors drawn from the most common experiences of man, invested with significant truth, and used as parables or teaching aids for our ultimate good—and the way man expresses religious thought—through esoteric, incomprehensible claptrap with little or no practical value.

I’ll hit (and I do mean *hit*) one more of these manmade religious constructs before moving on. But be aware that every religion on earth—every scheme invented by man in order to attain God (or so they’d have us believe)—eventually devolves into this sort of ridiculously impenetrable balderdash. In the end, it’s all style and no substance—as they’d say in Texas, all hat and no cattle.

Islam is perhaps the dumbest religion of them all, though it's one of the most successful *political doctrines* of all time, due to its proven ability to enslave people through religious intimidation. (As Muhammad once said, "He who fears will mind.") It claims to be monotheistic, but it is a direct descendant of sixth-century Arabian pagan culture: each of the gods (yes, that's plural) it has embraced at one time or another was once a constituent of a pagan pantheon. It claims the Qur'an to be the very word of their god, Allah, but the book is a literary disaster, a disorganized and contradictory rant that was supposedly "transmitted" to Muhammad via the "ringing of a bell" in his mind, which he interpreted into "scripture," though he was illiterate.

Islamic religious rules and requirements (their "pillars") are derived not from the Qur'an, but solely from the teachings of Muhammad (recorded in the Hadith, or "Sayings of the Prophet," recorded by al-Bukhari and others), and his biographies (the Sunnah, or "example," of the Prophet), compiled centuries after his death by Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham, and al-Tabari. The Hadith and Sunnah, though they often present Allah's Messenger in an extraordinarily unbecoming light (by Judeo-Christian standards, anyway), are essential to Islam because the Qur'an is incomprehensible without the background, commentary, and timeline they provide. In fact, Islamic Sharia law (with the notable exception of Jihad—"holy war") has no basis at all in the Qur'an without the support it derives from Muhammad's recorded words and deeds. But those very records unapologetically portray Islam's prophet as a money-grubbing pirate, a brutal and insecure womanizer, a serial kidnapper and rapist, and—according to his own assessment—a demon possessed pedophile.

A murderous gangster like this is hardly the sort of fellow you might expect to be the founder of a great religion, you say. Well, it depends on how you define "religion." Some snippets on the subject from the Qur'an: "Lo! Religion with Allah is surrender." (Qur'an 3:19) "Say: 'What! Will you instruct Allah about your religion?' They impress you (Muhammad) that they have surrendered. Say, 'Count not your surrender as a favor to me: Nay, Allah lays you under an obligation.'" (Qur'an 49:16) "And fight with them until there is no more persecution, and religion should be only for Allah; but if they desist, then surely Allah sees what they do." (Qur'an 8:39) I must admit: Islam may be evil, but at least it's "up front" with us. This religion states blatantly that its sole purpose is to subjugate you, enslave you, force you to surrender, make you submit and pay taxes to Allah and his messenger. The very word "Islam" *means* submission. Allah demands that everyone bow to him in obsequious obeisance five times a day. (Actually, the Hadith of al-Bukhari reports that Allah originally demanded *fifty* prostrations a day, but Muhammad, peace be upon him, negotiated it down to five. Well, what's a prophet for, anyway?)

All anybody in the west seems to “know” about Islam is that it’s a “religion of peace,” and the only sure way to reach paradise is to get yourself martyred killing infidels. The only way to reconcile these two blatantly contradictory things, of course, is to redefine “peace” as the state that will only exist when everybody has either been killed or has been forced to submit and pay taxes to Islam. It’s the polar opposite of what a Jew would call *shalom*.

And what is paradise? In Judaism, it’s being comforted after death in a place called “Abraham’s bosom.” Hindus picture it as nirvana—a state of oneness with the universe, a.k.a., nothingness—escape from the endless cycle of reincarnation. Christians see it as spending blissful eternity in the presence of their God and Savior (though *religious* Christians tend to stop somewhat short of that, fixating on “mansions in glory” and “streets of gold”). But for Muslims, it’s an endless orgy with seventy-two doe-eyed sex-starved virgins, rivers of wine, and low hanging fruit. Sorry, ladies: nothing for you. Allah is nowhere to be found: he’s in hell, gleefully turning the spit upon which the infidels (whom he personally *predestined* to go there) are being roasted alive forever. Nice.

The seventy-two virgins thing isn’t really a well established doctrine in Islamic scripture, by the way. It’s an extrapolation, a deduction. It has to be pried out with a crowbar, lubricant, and lots of wishful thinking (sort of like purgatory is for Catholics). But the mullahs and imams find it oh-so-helpful in whipping frustrated young Muslim males into a state of suicidal religious fervor. The Hadith does state, however, that the maximum capacity of paradise is 70,000 souls. This probably sounded like a lot to Muhammad, but considering how many Muslims have walked the earth since the seventh century, it means that your chances of getting in are less than 1 in 40,000—*and that’s if you’re a Muslim!*

My point is not that Islam is a positively goofy religion (which it is). My point is that Islam, like *all* religions, is doomed to failure because it begins with a faulty premise—that man can reach God, whether through devotion, sacrifice, obedience, submission, ritual, or intellect; in short, that man can unilaterally define who God is and determine what He wants. Even the religion of atheism—secular humanism—falls into the same trap, teaching as established doctrine that man can rid himself of God by simply denying His existence (or even more foolishly, declaring *himself* to be the supreme entity in the universe). But man cannot appeal to God under his own power or intellect any more than a paramecium under a microscope can reach out to the scientist observing it.

No, if God and man are going to communicate, it will have to be on God's terms, at His instigation, and in His language. We humans—driven by our universal inner craving for the divine presence—are usually so busy talking about God we forget to listen to Him. We're so intent on looking for God (in all the wrong places), we fail to perceive Him—right where He said He'd be. We say we want to feel God's presence, but then we insulate ourselves from Him with layer upon layer of worldly "padding"—distractions, amusements, mind-dulling noise, and non-essential "essentials." Yahweh, meanwhile, keeps telling us (in so many words), *You won't find me in philosophical rhetoric, theological obfuscation, or religious oppression. Look around you: I have revealed Myself in and through My creation—life and death, light and darkness, food and drink, clothing and shelter, relationships and institutions. I speak in terms even a small child can understand, using examples, metaphors, parables, and proverbs.*

The Psalmist Asaph reports, **"Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of Yahweh, and His might, and the wonders that He has done."** (Psalm 78:1-4) There are several things worth noting here: (1) God's message is not mysterious, hidden, or reserved for the elite; it is something He teaches to everyone willing to learn, asking us simply to hear and heed His word. (2) His truth is delivered in the form of parables or "dark sayings," not decrees and ultimatums—even when He is *instructing us*. The point is free will: we are expected to use our senses—to follow the obvious clues He has left us—and make informed choices based on what we have learned. (3) These truths have been proclaimed and recognized from the beginning—our fathers knew them and taught them to us, as we are supposed to pass them on to our children in turn. And (4) Yahweh asks us to take nothing on faith (in the sense of blind, unreasonable belief), but rather to base our convictions on the record of His previous deeds, His proven character. He has demonstrated His power and love in the past; He can be expected to keep His promises in the future.

Another Psalm reveals a bit more about how Yahweh communicates: **"Hear this, all peoples! Give ear, all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together! My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre."** (Psalm 49:1-4) First, note that everyone, not just Israel, or the priestly class, or the privileged, but *everybody* is the intended audience of Yahweh's voice. Second, he who speaks with wisdom and understanding (as we learn elsewhere) is, by definition, the one who reveres Yahweh. It has nothing to do with being intelligent, clever, or educated. A high IQ is merely a gift from Yahweh (and one the lucky recipient would be well advised to use in the service of the Kingdom of

God). Wisdom, on the other hand, is what flows naturally from a mind in sync with Yahweh's. And it is this wisdom, this understanding, that allows the child of God to comprehend His proverbs and riddles, these parables with which Yahweh communicates, while the merely "smart" person is often left dumbfounded.

An example of this principle is found in Ezekiel 17, where Yahweh instructs His prophet to pose a riddle to the people of Israel. **"The word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel."** Solving a riddle requires insight into what its symbols mean. A parable draws a comparison between what is already known and the intended lesson. **"Say, thus says the Lord Yahweh: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon..."** (Ezekiel 17:1-3) What follows is a complicated and colorful story ostensibly about what the eagle did and what happened as a result. But everybody knew it wasn't really about a literal eagle. It was a parable: they were supposed to figure out from the symbols what the prophet was predicting.

In this case, Yahweh Himself provided the solution to the riddle, the interpretation to the parable, right there and then: **"Then the word of Yahweh came to me: Say now to the rebellious house, Do you not know what these things mean? Tell them, behold, the king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and took her king and her princes and brought them to him to Babylon...."** (Ezekiel 17:11-12) The "eagle" turned out to be Nebuchadnezzar. It's not my purpose to dissect the entire parable here; I merely want to point out that every feature of the riddle had a counterpart in the life of Israel. What the eagle did in the riddle had prophetic ramifications for Ezekiel's immediate audience, though they were in a state of denial and didn't want to hear it. But beyond the mere correlation of story components, there was a moral or spiritual lesson attached to each one of them. Notice that the eagle went to "Lebanon," but Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem. The point is that Lebanon (with its snow-capped mountains and tall, stately cedars) is Yahweh's "code word" or symbol for pride—something for which the inhabitants of Jerusalem were being judged—through Yahweh's unwitting emissary, Nebuchadnezzar.

If we don't take time to examine and contemplate these "code words," we will risk missing the real point of what Yahweh is trying to tell us. But if that's the case (you ask), why doesn't Yahweh simply tell us what He's thinking, straight out? *Don't be arrogant, people!* Actually, He does that too. But there's something about figuring it out yourself—about seeing the "light bulb" turn on—that makes a deeper impression and brings a degree of clarity to the situation that we wouldn't otherwise have. One example: David may have felt a few "guilt pangs" over the Bathsheba affair, but he didn't really come to grips with the heinous nature of his crime until he was told a parable by the prophet Nathan (II Samuel 12). When his own sin was described in indirect third-party terms, David became

understandably enraged at the guilty party, but the “light bulb” didn’t really go on until Nathan told him, “You are the man.”

There are often times in scripture where the meaning of the parable was left a mystery, to some of its hearers, anyway. Yahshua told quite a few parables that He didn’t explain to the multitudes, but only to His disciples: **“When He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parables. And He said to them, ‘To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that ‘They may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven....’”** He was quoting Yahweh’s instructions to the prophet Isaiah here (Isaiah 6:9-10), the point being that in order for the truth to set you free, you have to be willing to listen to it, to heed it, to take it to heart. Neither Isaiah’s audience nor Yahshua’s (for the most part) were willing to do this. They just wanted their religion, their illusion. They hadn’t been receptive to the symbols of the Torah—all of which pointed toward Him—so they would be presented with questions, not answers: **“With many such parables He spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to His own disciples He explained everything.”** (Mark 4:10-12, 33-34)

Yahshua once compared “getting it”—coming to understand the symbols and metaphors of Yahweh—to the ordeal of childbirth. (Note how He resorted to parables even when He was explaining how parables work.) The mom-to-be endures pain and sorrow, but only temporarily: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you....”** He’s referring, of course, to His impending crucifixion—the atoning sacrifice that would finally explain every blood sacrifice in the Torah, showing them for what they were all along: *parables* meant to teach us of the unfathomable love of God, a love so great that He would lay down His own perfect and innocent life that we, the guilty, might live. The disciples’ emotional agony during Christ’s sojourn in the tomb is likened to the woman’s labor, which is promptly forgotten amid the joy of holding her newborn. It’s a picture of our response to the resurrection.

“In that day you will ask nothing of Me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” The point (I think) is that Yahshua’s impending resurrection would demonstrate—to an extent not yet realized by the disciples—that Yahshua *actually was* God in the flesh. He wasn’t merely a prophet, an anointed rabbi, or the founder of a new sect. A devout Jew wouldn’t dream of praying to Yahweh in the name of Isaiah or Moses—mere men. And up until now, the disciples had a rather fuzzy conception of Yahshua’s

actual identity. He is intimating something quite profound here: *I am about to demonstrate, by rising from the dead under my own power, that My whole human persona has been a parable, a device designed to teach you what Yahweh your God is really like. But you will soon witness the plain truth of the matter: I Am Yahweh in flesh—you may pray to Me as you do to Him, for I and the Father are One.* **“I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father....”** Having been instructed to pray, “Our Father...may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we couldn’t really pray in Yahshua’s name unless we understood—viscerally *and* experientially—that Yahshua and the Father were actually one entity, that they bore the same identity, that they were *the same person*—Almighty God.

“His disciples said, ‘Ah, now You are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! Now we know that You know all things and do not need anyone to question You; this is why we believe that You came from God....’” Really? Though they were now starting to see the first glimmers of light, the disciples still had a steep learning curve to negotiate. So, **“Jesus answered them, ‘Do you now believe? Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me. I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.’”** (John 16:20-33) Follow the train of thought here: the resurrection would prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Yahshua was actually God in the flesh. Like His habitual teaching method, Christ’s very *body* was a parable, a story told to reveal a timeless truth. But this was a parable that only people with God-given wisdom (that is, people who revered Yahweh) could comprehend: Yahweh had become Love Personified, walking among us as a man, laying down His guiltless life in order to render us innocent, with our sins covered and our uncleanness washed away. The “labor pains” of the crucifixion would soon be replaced with the joy of the accomplishment of God’s plan. And the peace that followed would be the natural, inevitable result of knowing precisely where we stood with the Almighty—redeemed, restored, and sealed for all eternity.

It’s a great story. And every word is true.

We are about to embark on a journey of exploration, searching for the meaning and significance of scores of “bread crumbs” God has laid down as a trail of truth throughout the scriptures—clues that often look so common, so ordinary, we might miss them altogether if we didn’t remain vigilant. But why? You well may observe, *We have the written word, translated into our own language. Shouldn’t that be sufficient to tell us what Yahweh wished to communicate? Why do we need to explore all of these symbols, metaphors, and parables too?* These are valid questions, the answers to which will help to explain why I felt this study was necessary.

Although human language is the primary vehicle through which God has chosen to speak to us, very few people are fluent in the original languages (primarily Hebrew and Koine Greek). And besides, the original autographs have long since been lost. (This is probably a good thing, of course, since we in our ignorance or enthusiasm might have made them objects of worship if we still had them.) So we are at the mercy of textual tradition, scholarly opinion, and archaeological serendipity (like the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls). All we have are copies, and worse: translations of copies. Although the Bible is by a very wide margin the best textually-supported ancient document we have, the fact remains that there are thousands of minor textual discrepancies among the extant early manuscripts. While we most certainly have the solid gist of what God meant to communicate, we don’t have His actual words. And the controversies still surrounding His scriptures demonstrate convincingly that we don’t fully understand His mindset. The words are apparently not enough.

Consider the “interpretation” factor. In both Hebrew or Greek, the syntax, word order, tense, mood, voice, and case all conspire to make effective translation an extremely “iffy” proposition. There is a constant tug-of-war between word-for-word translations (which when taken to extremes are incomprehensible in the target language) and thought-for-thought renditions (which assume that the translator is perfectly attuned to the heart and mind of the Almighty—something that should not be assumed, *ever*.) As an example of how hard it can be, I offer the familiar John 3:16—in English words but in the original Greek order and sentence structure: “Thus for loves the God the cosmos as besides the Son the only-generated He gives the every the one-believing into Him no should be being destroyed but may be having life forever.” Gives you a whole new appreciation for the translators’ job, doesn’t it? It’s not as easy as it looks.

Another factor: I’ve stumbled onto dozens of Hebrew words that carry dual meanings, both of which are (or can be) valid. A classic example is the verb *anah*, the central requirement of the Day of Atonement. In that context, our English translations invariably take it to mean “to afflict” (as in, to afflict one’s soul, to seriously reflect and repent). But it also means “to answer” or “to respond,” which

in the context of this particular holy convocation makes at least as much sense. I have concluded that *both* translations are not only valid, they are both implied in the Hebrew text—something that makes a simple word-swap translation impossible.

Another problem is that language is a moving target. Words change meaning and character over time, place, and culture. Ironically, the venerable Authorized “King James” version of the Bible (with an assist from William Shakespeare) has done more to stabilize the English language than perhaps any other factor. But even then, if a twenty-first century American gets hold of the actual non-updated 1611 text, he’ll find it virtually unintelligible. The familiar “Jesus,” for example, wasn’t introduced until 1629; until then, His name was rendered Iesus, the Latin form of the Greek Iesous, Iesou, or Iesoun (depending on the case), a transliteration in turn of the Hebrew Yahshua or Yahushua (the vowels wouldn’t have appeared in the first century Hebrew or Aramaic form)—a common name meaning “Yahweh is salvation.”

And finally, I must sadly note that people don’t (or perhaps can’t) read anymore. (If you’ve gotten this far, I’d have to assume you’re one of the blessed few who still do.) Compared to the eloquent, thoughtful writings of, for instance, America’s founding fathers, we are now a nation of functional illiterates. We communicate in hasty, ill-conceived, and poorly worded sound bites, Facebook entries, and 140-character “tweets.” Unwilling to discuss our differences with reason and civility like intelligent human beings, we now express ourselves with bumper stickers, placards, and riot-chants, doing our best to drown out any and all rational thought. Our words are no longer meant to be kept and treasured, like bundles of letters lovingly and thoughtfully composed, written in longhand on personal stationery, and delivered by hand by uniformed couriers. Now our thoughts are utterly disposable. Like our lives, I fear. Sigh.

Is it any wonder, then, that Yahweh didn’t put all of His “eggs” in the proverbial “basket” of human language? He—from the very beginning—supplemented His verbal communication with an underlying system of symbols and metaphors. These operate sort of like a “check-sum” number in a laser-scanned bar code: if we’re reading His words correctly, they should be supported by—and compatible with—the parallel non-verbal symbol. Everything should “add up” if we rightly understand our Father’s words. And conversely, if God’s symbols and statements seem out of sync with each other, it should be taken as a sign that we don’t really understand one or the other of them. In other words, we need to adjust our opinions to conform with Yahweh’s. God’s symbols help us evaluate whether our understanding of His words is accurate or a bit skewed.

These symbols, however, were never intended to *replace* God’s words, nor are they meant to stand on their own, teaching independent truths. The lessons,

properly understood, will be parallel and mutually supportive. They'll tend to shed light on each other, making the sum of their disparate parts greater than the whole. I mention this because there are schools of thought—like Kabala—that attempt to ferret out hidden meanings in the sacred texts. They might use number-letter codes (gematria), equidistant letter sequences (ELS), or other quasi-mystical methods. I'm not saying that God couldn't have built things into the scriptures that aren't apparent by simply reading the text; I'm merely pointing out that information gained from such disciplines should never be used to establish doctrine, but only to verify truths that are apparent through more conventional means. God may be glorified through esoteric, hidden codes; He is not *revealed* through them. Hidden codes of this type are by their very nature highly speculative: if you work at it, you can “prove” pretty much whatever you please.

But (you may protest) are not the symbols, metaphors, and parables of scripture—the topic of this book—vulnerable to the same sort of subjective analysis? I'm about to assert (for example) that sacrificial lambs indicate “innocence.” But how do I know this? Since lambs are fuzzy, and since they're not exactly known for their sly cunning, couldn't we just as easily conclude that they symbolize “gullibility” or “stupidity?” How are we to know when we're on solid ground, and when we're barking up the wrong tree? Are you supposed to just “trust me?” No. We must subject our theories to a battery of litmus tests if we want to be confident about our conclusions.

First, we must learn to use our God-given powers of observation: look for the obvious, something so fundamental, even a child can understand it. The natural attributes of the symbol will more often than not suggest a hypothesis—which can then be tested and verified. Thus (for instance) the function of leaven or yeast in the making of bread paints a picture for us: leaven is a fermenting substance that changes bread from within, making it a apt metaphor for the pervasive corruption of sin.

Second, we should search the scriptures for specific definitions and pointed clues. Although not universal, they are present often enough to make the exercise worthwhile. As an example, goats are specifically said to symbolize sin in the instructions for the Day of Atonement. And we know that leaven is to be viewed in a negative light (as corruption, not merely change) not only because the Torah instructs Israel to symbolically remove it from the recipe on certain occasions, but also because of statements like Yahshua's: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.” We don't have to be particularly wary of change *per se*, but we are always to guard ourselves against corruption.

Third, each of God's symbols has clear significance within the culture of the people who received the scriptures—invariably something that will transfer easily to other cultures. A lamb is a lamb, no matter when or where you're living. The

symbols are invariably part of God's creation, instructions, or institutions. They're never manmade things (pyramids or weapons, for example), which can become anachronisms in short order. It should be pointed out, however, that literary metaphors (such as "the sword" symbolizing any implement of war, for example) are not the same thing as spiritual symbols.

Fourth, note that God is very specific in His symbolic designations. Lambs mean one thing; but sheep (grown-up lambs) indicate something else entirely, and rams (mature male sheep with horns) speak of yet another spiritual reality. The very same animal, in fact, could embody all three of these symbolic entities at different stages of its life, as its circumstances change. But it doesn't matter: a lamb indicates a different spiritual truth than a ram does. In a similar way, there is a symbolic distinction between bulls and oxen, beyond what we might deduce from their genetic differences.

Finally, we are to employ what might be called proper "scientific method" to test our hypotheses. That is, if we wish to assign a symbolic meaning to a recurring element in scripture, it must not only be logical and consistent, it must also be falsifiable. Returning to our "lamb" example, if we were trying to establish that lambs indicate stupidity, then instances where the illustration yields total nonsense would demonstrate our idea to be wrong. So when John the Baptist sees Yahshua, and announces, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," we have to be honest with ourselves and admit that stupidity can do nothing to remove sin. Our theory has therefore been proven false: we need to look elsewhere. Our hypotheses must exist in flawless symbiosis with the words of scripture—both its broad outlines and its details.

Feel free to question my conclusions if you perceive better ones. I get the feeling that Yahweh's prolific use of symbols is intended to encourage us all to think, to ponder His word, to meditate on His thoughts—and I certainly don't have a monopoly on truth or wisdom. We are to *shama*—hear and heed His voice, listen and obey with attention and interest. We are to *ra'ah*—to see, look at, regard, consider, and perceive what our God has placed before our eyes. If we "study to show ourselves approved" in this matter, it is my prayer that we will be able to stand with the Israelites of old and declare, **"Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us His glory and greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still lives."** (Deuteronomy 5:24)

The Staff of Life

It should not be terribly surprising that Yahweh would choose to employ as His most basic symbols those things that present themselves in our daily lives—the things we ourselves eat, drink, smell, and use. These are the things we see around us as we walk through our world, things we encounter on a daily basis. The items we'll explore in this chapter were chosen because they were not only commonplace and universally recognized by the generation to whom they were introduced—exodus generation Israel—but could also be related to by anyone who would encounter the symbols, for as long as mortal man would walk the earth.

Easily the most fundamental of these symbols is bread, the basic staple of the diet—*so* basic, in fact, the same Hebrew word is used for both “bread” and “food.” Whatever truth could be observed from the Iron Age Mediterranean diet would apply equally well to all men of any age. What was true of wheat and barley (and for a short time, manna) for the Israelites could be understood just as readily by other peoples whose staples were something else—corn or rice, potatoes or yams. The point was that God provided what was needed for us to live on. Even though we (in our fallen state) had to work for it (see Genesis 3:17-19), the fact remained that our food just “popped up out of the ground,” a gift from God.

And what was true for our bodies was equally true for our souls. As Moses reminded the Israelites at the end of their wilderness sojourn, **“He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh.”** (Deuteronomy 8:3) As bread—food—is fuel for our mortal bodies, God’s Word is “fuel” for our souls. It’s what makes and keeps us alive in the spiritual sense—a life that can (if we eat what is provided) keep us alive and healthy *forever*.

Even in this life, of course, bread isn’t the only thing we need to make life fulfilling: it is only the beginning. So Yahweh has, as we shall see, recruited several other commonly encountered substances with which the Israelites would

have been intimately familiar to demonstrate or symbolize concepts in the spiritual realm of which we all need to be cognizant. Olive oil served several purposes. It was food, but it was also used as an ointment—an anointing medium—and as fuel, burned in lamps to provide light after the sun had set. This combination of characteristics made olive oil an apt metaphor for the ministry of Yahweh’s Holy Spirit in the life of His people.

In a similar way, wine was used by God to teach us something about what He was doing for mankind—something that wouldn’t be fully understood until long after the Torah had been implemented. Obtained by harvesting the fruit of the vine, then crushing it (much like the process used to obtain olive oil), wine was required to be ritually poured out onto the ground when certain blood sacrifices were made at the Tabernacle. Eventually we would understand: the wine represented the blood of Christ, shed for the remission of our sins so that we might be reconciled to Yahweh. Until the passion of Yahshua, the rite made no sense; afterward, it did. But if we were unwilling to see Christ’s sacrifice as the fulfillment of the Torah’s picture, God’s instructions concerning wine would forever remain a mystery.

Animal flesh had been a part of the authorized human diet ever since the flood of Noah. But in the Torah, Yahweh refined the picture: He instructed that the fat of the sacrificial animal was to be handled separately, and set apart in His honor. Even if the sacrificial animal was to be eaten by the worshiper or the priests, the fat was to be burned on the altar in Yahweh’s honor. The picture taught us that as God sacrificed His very best—His only Son—to redeem us, we in turn are to reserve our very best for Yahweh.

Several other substances were used (or specifically prohibited) in Torah ritual worship as well, all of them laden with spiritual significance, if only we’ll pay attention to the Instructions of Yahweh. Salt spoke of preservation, purification, and flavor; leaven (i.e., yeast) was a picture of the insidious corruption of our sin; incense was to be made to a specific and detailed recipe, the ingredients of which all had something to say about our communication with God in prayer. One of those ingredients, frankincense, took on a life of its own in the Levitical rites, teaching us about the purity to be gained through sacrifice. And finally, honey was invested with symbolic significance as the sweet life available to us as children of Yahweh, but voluntarily relinquished by His Messiah as He came to fulfill all of these symbols on our behalf.

If nothing else, these symbolic substances should impress upon us that God wasn’t making up His plan of reconciliation as He went along. Rather, He planned it all in exquisite detail, peppered with robust and meaningful metaphors, from the very beginning.

BREAD/GRAIN

3.1.1

God's Provision

“Unless Yahweh builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless Yahweh watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for He gives to His beloved sleep.” (Psalm 127:1-2) “Bread” in scripture is a rather transparent euphemism for anything necessary for the maintenance of the mortal human body. The Hebrew noun *lehem*, translated “bread,” denotes food in general—it’s from the verb *laham*: to eat. But as Solomon (the author of this Psalm) hints, the “bread of anxious toil” can be anything we provide for ourselves outside of the context of our relationship with Yahweh. We are to ask for His provision, be satisfied with His assessment of our needs, and be thankful for whatever we’re given. I hasten to add, however, that we’ve been “given” six days in which to work, not to mention brains, hearts, hands, and feet. God gives us good gifts, but it’s up to us to unwrap them.

Yahshua told His disciples pretty much the same thing Solomon did: **“Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?...Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”** (Matthew 6:25-34) Being “anxious about tomorrow” is a subtle form of idolatry: it’s saying in your heart, “My God is not able to meet my needs, so I must provide for them myself. Being industrious is not a sin, but taking credit for God’s provision is.

Another point: David wrote, **“I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread.”** (Psalm 37:25) If we are *not* “righteous” (Hebrew: *tsaddiyq*—innocent, judicially guiltless, justified by God, or vindicated) then we can expect no such provision. “Social justice” is therefore nothing less than a flat denial of Yahweh’s sovereignty—His ability and

willingness to provide for His children (those who are *defined* as “righteous”) *as individuals*. I’m not saying that God’s people will never fall on hard times: they occasionally do, and the Torah provided for them through the tithes of Israel. But that’s my point: *God provided*. His people were instructed to tithe on their increase—gains He had provided up front. The tithe was rendered only by people who honored Yahweh and His law—it wasn’t extorted from pagans and idolaters. Thus even poor Israelites were sustained by Yahweh: they were never reduced to “begging for bread.” Theocratic Israel was a far cry from the welfare state we’ve built today, where the productive (or merely blessed) are robbed to pay for the votes of the unproductive majority. (Oooo, that sounded harsh—I need to stop watching the political fray on TV.)

In all fairness, it does seem harder to make ends meet than it used to be. But perhaps this too is an illusion: easy credit in the western world for the past few decades has insulated us from the harsh reality of our true situation—and that insulation is now being torn away by the winds of prophetic change. The true nature of our situation was bluntly declared immediately after our parents fell into sin: **“And to Adam [Yahweh] said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** (Genesis 3:17-19) Life is hard because we—*all of us*—choose (to some extent) to trust ourselves instead of trusting God. So our “bread,” the life we strive to provide for ourselves, is attained through pain, the sweat of our face, and “anxious toil.” But what’s essential in our lives—our eternal relationship with our heavenly Father—is as free as the low hanging fruit in the Garden of Eden was to Adam.

Yahweh therefore begs us to reexamine our priorities: **“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”** There are pitfalls in being blessed. The line between what’s essential and what’s merely “desirable” can become fuzzier with every penny we earn. It becomes all too easy to confuse “bread” with *crepes suzette*. The point is not that a few “frills” in our lives are necessarily evil implements of the devil—poverty is no particular virtue. It’s that we need to keep crystal clear in our minds the distinction between what we *need* to live and what we *want* to make our lives more pleasant. Both categories are reason for thanksgiving, but only the former is essential. **“Listen diligently to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to Me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant.”** (Isaiah 55:1-3) If we understand the mind of God, we’ll realize that the “bare essentials”

He's offering are, in the long run, opulent beyond our wildest imagination. The covenant providing eternal life—the ultimate slice of “bread”—is ours if we will but “listen diligently” to Yahweh, “incline our ears,” come to Him, and “hear” Him—that's *shama*: listen, pay heed, understand, and obey.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Yahweh made “bread” a recurring symbol in the rites and appurtenances of the tabernacle, for it's what He provides to sustain us—in this life and in the next. Previously (in Volume I, Chapter 3), I explored the concept of “bread” as a symbolic way of revealing something about Yahweh's character: His role as provider. Here we're looking at it from the other direction—that which Yahweh provides. I realize that this is splitting hairs to some extent: what Yahweh provides is, in the end, mostly Yahweh Himself. So forgive me if some of this looks familiar. I'll try not to repeat myself too much.

As one entered the Holy Place, he would notice a small table placed against the right-side (northern) interior wall. Judging by the sheer volume of instruction concerning its construction and use, we can surmise that this was quite important to God, despite its small size. **“You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make a rim around it a handbreadth wide, and a molding of gold around the rim. And you shall make for it four rings of gold, and fasten the rings to the four corners at its four legs. Close to the frame the rings shall lie, as holders for the poles to carry the table. You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these. And you shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons and bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. And you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before Me regularly.”** (Exodus 25:23-30) The “bread of the Presence” was to be displayed on this little table, eaten by the priests, and replaced every Sabbath day. “Presence” is the Hebrew expression *paniyim lipne*, two related words that together mean (roughly) “face to face,” or “in the face (or presence) of.” These loaves are sometimes referred to (in English) as the “showbread” because they were laid out before God, “shown” in His presence. There is no special Hebrew word directly translated “showbread” however: it's always called either the bread of *paniyim* (face or presence) or simply *lehem* (bread or food) in scripture.

The instruction concerning the “showbread” itself is as follows: **“You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before Yahweh.”** “Fine flour” is not a measure of quality or texture so much as it is a definition: the

chaff (indicative of that which is worthless, of no nutritional value) has been removed. In other words, this wasn't "whole grain" bread. Although fiber in bread is generally a good thing from a dietary viewpoint (and was thus part of the normal Israelite diet), the fact that the grain husks could not be digested and utilized by the body made them a ready metaphor for worthlessness or irrelevance—the things in our lives that are not essential or beneficial. **"And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to Yahweh."** Frankincense, as we'll see later, indicates purity through sacrifice. **"Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before Yahweh regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of Yahweh's food offerings, a perpetual due."** (Leviticus 24:5-9)

The imagery of this "showbread" is reasonably self-evident. Since the bread is "in God's presence," and since there are twelve loaves, we can surmise that they represent the whole household of faith. It further seems (to me) that because they are to be arranged in two piles or rows side by side, one row represents Israel, while the other represents the Church. Both groups are sprinkled *separately* with frankincense. That is, both are made pure through Christ's sacrifice, but their points of view were different: Israel (through the Torah) looked forward to it, and the ekklesia (through the Gospels) looked back. This observation is given credence by Paul: **"The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?"** (I Corinthians 10:16-18) Aaron the High Priest ultimately represents Yahshua the Messiah (the anointed intercessor): it is he who presents the loaves before Yahweh. When? On the Sabbath—the day that stresses the fact that we cannot work our way to God, but must rather rest in His finished work. The bread (the congregation of the faithful) is holy—that is, set apart for Yahweh's honor and use—and it is to be before Him "perpetually"—forever. And one last thing: the bread is said to be "*from* the people of Israel"; in other words, the entire household of faith owes Israel a debt of gratitude for being the "designated driver" of our scriptural heritage.

The "Bread of the Presence" wasn't the only grain offering specified in the Torah, of course. In fact, blood sacrifices were often to be accompanied by a grain offering, or *minha* (from the consonant root *mnh*, meaning "to give," significant because grain or bread is a symbolic picture of God's provision—that which He gives to us). Of course, *every* priestly ritual was a prophetic rehearsal of something Yahweh was planning to give us or do on our behalf—most of which was fulfilled in the life and mission of Yahshua our Messiah. The grain offering was deferred until Israel entered the Promised Land (see Numbers 15:2) because they were not in a position to plant or harvest wheat or barley in the wilderness,

and you couldn't really make "fine flour" (as opposed to whole grain "meal") out of manna. Removal of the husks *meant* something.

Since the priests were precluded by their divine calling from earning a living in the usual way, the grain offerings comprised part of their livelihood. But (and this is important) the people who brought the *minha* didn't consider this to be payment or remuneration for services rendered; it was, rather, an "offering to Yahweh." Grain was part of the tithe, of course, but it also accompanied the animal sacrifices—and there were many throughout the year. The law of the *minha* is recorded (with every other type of offering) early in Leviticus: **"When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to Yahweh, his offering shall be of fine flour."** No "worthless" chaff or bran. **"He shall pour oil [symbolic of God's Spirit] on it and put frankincense [purity through sacrifice] on it and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, an offering by fire with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh."** Since "Aaron's sons," the priests, are symbolic of redeemed believers (children of the Anointed Intercessor, Christ) they are both recipients and contributors of the *minha*. But *all* of the frankincense was to be rendered back to Yahweh in His "memorial portion," because although we are conduits of God's provision in this world, only He can provide purity through sacrifice. **"But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of Yahweh's offerings made by fire."** (Leviticus 2:1-3) Again, what the priests received had not really been given to them, but to Yahweh. As Paul would later phrase the same truth, "We are joint-heirs with Christ."

Moses continues: **"No grain offering that you bring to Yahweh shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as an offering by fire to Yahweh."** Nothing "corrupt" (represented by leaven) was to be offered upon the altar, for our Savior was free of corruption. Honey was not to be burned on the altar because it represents "the sweet life," the antithesis of Yahshua's advent. He came as a suffering servant. That being said, we are encouraged to provide a bit of "sweetness" to our fellow man—improving his earthly lot however we can. **"As an offering of firstfruits you may bring them to Yahweh, but they shall not be offered on the altar for a pleasing aroma."** Salt, on the other hand, was required with every *minha* presentation. **"You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt."** (Leviticus 2:11-13) It speaks of preservation and flavor—things Yahshua provided to us, and that we are to pass on to others. All of these "additives" will be addressed more fully later in this chapter, by the way.

"If you offer a grain offering of firstfruits to Yahweh, you shall offer for the grain offering of your firstfruits fresh ears, roasted with fire, crushed new grain. And you shall put oil on it and lay frankincense on it; it is a grain offering. And the priest shall burn as its memorial

portion some of the crushed grain and some of the oil with all of its frankincense; it is an offering by fire to Yahweh." (Leviticus 2:14-16) The Feast of Firstfruits (see Leviticus 23:9-14) was a special case, designed (on the surface) to give the worshippers of Israel the opportunity to thank Yahweh for the anticipated harvest at the very beginning of the season—when the first of the barley was just starting to ripen. No “processing” was to be done—baking it into loaves or cakes or anything like that. Rather, the grain was to be simply cut from the field, crushed to separate out the chaff, and roasted. All of this esoteric symbolism, however, became crystal clear on Nisan 16 (Sunday, April 3), 33AD, the definitive fulfillment of the Feast’s prophetic promise: the resurrection of Yahshua from the tomb. He had been cut off from life, crushed for our transgressions, stripped of his worthless mortal body, surrendered to the flame of judgment on our behalf, and was lifted up as a “wave” offering before Yahweh. In doing this, He made the “oil” of the Holy Spirit available to us, He purified us through the “frankincense” of His sacrifice, and He preserved us from corruption with the “salt” of His covenant. And by doing so (as if that weren’t enough), He proved that the harvest of *our* souls was sure to follow: death had been swallowed up in victory!

I can’t stress enough that when the Torah rambles on about things like grain offerings—what to put in and what to leave out, how to do them and when—Yahweh is telling us a parable: He’s speaking in symbolic terms about His Messiah. These literal rites were to be performed by Israel as sort of a “dress rehearsal” of the production Yahweh was in the process of staging: our eternal redemption. Christians (or Jews, for that matter) who can’t see that the Feast of Firstfruits was *not* merely about “praising God for the harvest and the dedication of the first portion of the later crops” (as the margin note in the *Ryrie Study Bible* puts it) have missed the entire point.

I mean, read this explanation of the *mincha*: **“This is the law of the grain offering. The sons of Aaron shall offer it before Yahweh in front of the altar. And one shall take from it a handful of the fine flour of the grain offering and its oil and all the frankincense that is on the grain offering and burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh. And the rest of it Aaron and his sons shall eat. It shall be eaten unleavened in a holy place. In the court of the tent of meeting they shall eat it. It shall not be baked with leaven. I have given it as their portion of My offerings by fire. It is a thing most holy, like the sin offering and the guilt offering. Every male among the children of Aaron may eat of it, as decreed forever throughout your generations, from Yahweh’s offerings by fire. Whatever touches them shall become holy.”** (Leviticus 6:14-18) Is it even *remotely* possible that the Creator of the universe meant nothing more than what appears on the surface of this theological ocean? To believe *that* (as many do) you’d have to be able to look at a Lamborghini Murcielago and “see” nothing but paint and a little glass. The truth goes deeper. There’s more to it. Much more.

I hasten to add that these are symbols, not allegories. That is, although Yahweh clearly meant for us to look beyond the literal surface meaning of His precepts, there *is* a literal, objective reality behind each symbol. God meant something specific and meaningful with each scriptural metaphor. Actually, that's an understatement: everything we see here, if we're able to perceive its intended implication, carries with it *eternal* consequence. And as I said, the *object* of these symbols is always real, concrete, and literal—not abstract, figurative, or “spiritual” (as in “meant only to teach a moral principle”). Charles Feidelson, Jr. explains the difference: “It is in the nature of allegory, as opposed to symbolism, to beg the question of absolute reality. The allegorist avails himself of a formal correspondence between ‘ideas’ and ‘things,’ both of which he assumes as given; he need not inquire whether either sphere is ‘real’ or whether, in the final analysis, reality consists in their interaction.” I'm not saying Yahweh never uses allegories. He does, though very sparingly. But the symbols employed in the Torah all point toward something real, literal, and vitally significant to every person alive.

Ordinarily, bread is made from grain—usually wheat or barley in Bible lands—something that not only comes from a living plant, but (like fruit) is the “seed” or genetic component of that plant. I think this is one more subtle way God has chosen to remind us that life comes only from life—a train of thought that leads us (if we're willing to think) directly back to the loving provision of Yahweh, life's First Cause.

But there was one short period of time when Yahweh short-circuited the whole process of planting, growth, and harvesting, and went directly from need to provision. I'm speaking, of course, of the manna the Israelites lived on in the wilderness. Here's what happened: **“And the people of Israel said to [Moses and Aaron], ‘Would that we had died by the hand of Yahweh in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.’ Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you....”** I realize that they were kind of new at this whole “trust Yahweh” thing. But had they forgotten *how* God had taken them out of Egypt? It hadn't exactly been subtle. Only one month had passed since they left their lives of bondage, and already they were assuming that the God who had turned off the sun and killed the Egyptian firstborn (not to mention Pharaoh's armies) had run out of ammo, so to speak. Okay, so feeding a couple of million people was “impossible.” But sending frogs, hail and locusts *on schedule*—and then removing them—wasn't exactly easy, either. At some point, we all need to cross this same bridge: deciding in our own hearts whether Yahweh is actually

God—thus capable of keeping His promises, however outlandish they might seem—or He’s not, in which case slavery or rebellion are our only options.

So God now promised to “rain bread from heaven.” I can imagine a wry smile creeping across Moses’ face. *Oh, sure, why didn’t I think of that? And next week we’ll get water out of a rock, right? You’re enjoying this, aren’t You?* After a lifetime of watching Yahweh provide for me in similarly unexpected ways, I’m finally starting to get the picture: adversity is merely a quiz in the schoolroom of life. Trust Yahweh and we pass; panic and we fail. I’m not saying these pop-quizzes are pleasant or fun, but they do help us gauge our progress. We haven’t really mastered the subject, however, until we can stand with Job and say, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him.”

So this hunger—and God’s solution to it—was a test: **“And the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.”** The lesson was twofold: trust Yahweh to provide for your needs day by day, and trust Him to secure the future as well. **“So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, ‘At evening you shall know that it was Yahweh who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of Yahweh, because He has heard your grumbling against Yahweh. For what are we, that you grumble against us?’ And Moses said, ‘When Yahweh gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because Yahweh has heard your grumbling that you grumble against Him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against Yahweh....”** (Exodus 16:3-8) There’s an admonition for all of us here, and we usually miss it. Things happen in our world that we don’t like, don’t understand, or don’t agree with. We tend to lash out against those whom we perceive are “causing the problem,” our political opponents or philosophical adversaries. We need to understand that even if they *are* “causing problems” (though we seldom have enough information to be dogmatic about who the *real* villains are) they’re not worth attacking. Our destiny is in the hands of Yahweh our God, not these relatively puny humans, no matter how wrong (or how powerful) they might seem. Name any driving force in the history of human affairs—from Nimrod to Nero, from Attila to Ahmadinejad. If they were honest, they’d all have to say, “What are we? We’re nothing.” The real war is being fought on a *spiritual* battlefield—and our Commander in Chief has already won.

But I digress. **“In the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat.’”** Bread from heaven, just as He promised. But remember, the adversity-provision cycle was a test: **“This is what Yahweh has commanded: Gather of it, each**

one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer [about half a gallon—enough to fill the average human stomach—*twice*], **according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent....**” Do the math here: 600,000 men, plus their wives and children—about two million souls—each collecting half a gallon of manna per day—for *forty years*. What’s that, about fifteen billion gallons? That’s a lot of manna. Our God is not on a budget.

“And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.” Reminds me of life itself: rich or poor, we all “go home” with exactly the same amount of worldly goods. **“And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over till the morning.’ But they did not listen to Moses. Some left part of it till the morning, and it bred worms and stank. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, each as much as he could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted....”** Two more lessons: (1) If we don’t trust God to provide for us tomorrow as He did today, life will stink, no matter how greedy we are; and (2) we need to receive what Yahweh has provided in a timely fashion—when it’s available. As Paul put it, “*Now* is the favorable time; *now* is the day of salvation.”

As if to make sure everybody knew that this “manna” thing wasn’t merely some random (and fortuitous) freak of nature, Yahweh used it to teach the lesson of His Sabbath: *in the end, you can’t work for your salvation*. **“On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, ‘This is what Yahweh has commanded: Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to Yahweh; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.’ So they laid it aside till the morning, as Moses commanded them, and it did not stink, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, ‘Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to Yahweh; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none....”** All of the gathering and preparation had to be done during the six days of the “work week.” All you could do with the manna on the Sabbath was enjoy it. This is all a transparent metaphor for God’s plan of salvation, and its schedule. It’s a gift that has been freely offered ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden (well, okay, Eve *jumped*). If Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8 have any validity (and I am convinced that they do) then we are very near the end of the “sixth day” of God’s redemption week. If we don’t go out and pick up what Yahweh provided—the “bread of life,” Yahshua the Messiah—before “sundown,” then come the Sabbath, we’ll starve.

But some people, then as now, refuse to be taught. **“On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, but they found none. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! Yahweh has given you the**

Sabbath; therefore on the sixth day He gives you bread for two days. Remain each of you in his place; let no one go out of his place on the seventh day.’ So the people rested on the seventh day.” (Exodus 16:13-30) This wasn’t rocket science; the instructions are quite straightforward. And yet, there were still those who flouted God’s law. In terms that could only be misunderstood by the most stubborn and hardheaded of rebels, Yahweh told them not to gather manna on the Sabbath. The all-too-transparent reason (we can see in hindsight) was that although He provides everything we need, there will come a time when mankind must rest in what He has *already* given us. The prophetic ramifications are hard to miss.

It is therefore frustrating to note that this passage is the source of the rabbinical concept of the “Sabbath day’s journey” that decrees that you can walk only two thousand cubits (a little over half a mile) on the Sabbath. It drives me crazy: first they ignored the clear context: “Don’t go out and gather manna (i.e., don’t provide ‘salvation’ for yourself) on the Sabbath.” And then they played fast and loose with God’s literal requirement. I mean, if you’re going to be a legalistic stickler here (something I’d at least *respect*), the text says not to go *anywhere*—two thousand cubits is two thousand too far. As usual, if you don’t take pains to understand the symbol God has presented, you’ll be lost.

Manna was a substitute for grain that would ordinarily have been used to make bread. We aren’t told exactly what it was, but we do know how it arrived and what it looked like. **“Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it and ground it in handmills or beat it in mortars and boiled it in pots and made cakes of it. And the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it.”** (Numbers 11:7-9) Bdellium sounds to me like a radioactive isotope or something. But actually it was an aromatic, transparent yellowish resin from an Arabian tree, similar to myrrh. The name (Hebrew: *bedolah*) comes from a root verb meaning to separate or divide, set apart, or make a distinction. Since we’re also told that manna was like coriander seed, we’re getting the picture: its form was that of particles, pellets, or seeds that people could easily distinguish and pick up from the ground. It’s not too much of a stretch to observe that God’s provision *in general* follows the same pattern: it is easily distinguishable from what the world has to offer, it is sufficient, complete within itself, it “tastes good,” and it shows up right when we need it. A miracle of logistics.

It’s not that God doesn’t want us to stand on our own two feet, labor joyfully, and be productive. Manna was admittedly an emergency measure, like burning candles when the electricity is out. It was not meant to be the status quo in our mortal lives; it was only meant to get us through the wilderness in one piece. So we read, **“While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening on the plains of Jericho.”** That’s on the

west bank of the Jordan—*within* the Land—for you who are geographically challenged. **“And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of the land. And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.”** (Joshua 5:10-12) As soon as they crossed the Jordan and entered the promised land, God ceased feeding Israel miraculously, and began meeting their needs providentially.

This is where the “politically correct” crowd begins to take issue with Yahweh’s *modus operandi*. Since His people have to live *in* the world, but are instructed to be separate *from* it, we see time and again in scripture that the resources of pagans and idolaters are tapped to provide for the needs of Yahweh’s children. The pattern is obvious here: fields planted by Canaanites were harvested by Israelites. Later we see David using the spoils of war to fund the first temple; the Persian King Cyrus financed the second temple; and Herod the Idumean tyrant paid for its spectacular upgrade at the time of Christ. In my own life, when I was running my own business, most of my clients were non-believers. My biggest client, in fact, was a company owned by Muslims! I worked hard and served them well, but the fact remains, God’s providence was funneled through the pockets of people who didn’t honor Him. Don’t get me wrong: this is not a license to steal from His enemies. But we should not have a problem with letting them “pay our way” by being valued employees or productive vendors to them. When Yahshua taught us that the meek will inherit the earth, He was referring to the provision of barley on the plains of Jericho, not the miracle of manna at Kadesh-Barnea.

Manna, as we have seen, was literally “bread from heaven.” **“When the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell with it.”** (Numbers 11:9) It’s purpose was to miraculously provide life for the Israelites when they could not provide it for themselves—and more to the point, associate this sustenance with Yahweh in the eyes of the people. This makes it an all-too-obvious metaphor for Yahshua of Nazareth, who told the crowds, **“The bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to Him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’ Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life....”**

How does bread “save” us? How does it give us life? When we eat food, its nutrients are assimilated into our bodies. It literally becomes part of us, repairing us at the molecular level and providing the energy we need to move us through our days. The Messiah does precisely the same thing for our souls. When we receive Him into ourselves, He restores us, helps us grow, and becomes the fuel

utilized by the spiritual “engine” dwelling within us—the Holy Spirit. And because the Spirit is eternal, so are the effects of assimilating Christ: **“Whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst....”**

I have no doubt that the first time the Israelites saw the manna lying there on the ground, some of them didn’t think of it as “food.” But word must have spread quickly once that first brave soul listened to Moses and gave it a try. Unfortunately, the world still hasn’t accepted the idea that Yahshua the Messiah is the spiritual “bread” that’s so essential to our well being. But like the manna, He’s the only game in town; so we’ve only got two choices: receive Him or remain spiritually hungry. **“But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out....”** This sounds at first blush as if predestination might be in play, but the intricacies of Greek grammar dispel that thought. The word “gives” is the Greek *didosi*, derived from *didomi*—to give, grant, or bestow. This form is the third person singular present active indicative, which to us mortals merely means that the “giving” of us who come to Christ is a continuous, linear action that the Father is performing, one that is actually (i.e., not just hypothetically) occurring. To read any more into this (such as the negative proposition that God might decide to proactively withhold souls from His Messiah, who would then cast them out) is absolutely unwarranted. The bottom line is that the path to Yahweh is through Yahshua, who promises never to reject an honest searcher. Salvation is ours for the asking. All we have to do is receive it.

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:33-40) In other words, forget religion. God is not *primarily* interested in our good behavior, obedience, alms, or penance, though these may be good things. His *will*—what He wants first and foremost—is that we should look on His son Yahshua (that is, perceive who He is and what He has done) and believe in Him (trust and rely upon Him) the same way that the Israelites came to “believe in” the manna in the wilderness. They didn’t really have to understand where it came from or what it was; they only had to go out and get it, knowing that it was, in point of fact, the difference between living and dying.

So just as bread is provided by God to preserve and sustain our mortal bodies, Yahshua is provided by God to preserve and nourish our souls. Yahshua pointed out the symbols’ equivalence at the last supper: **“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’”** (Matthew 26:26) The bread had originally been made by cutting down the standing grain, crushing the living kernels to make flour, and then subjecting

the dough to the oppressive heat of the oven. Now the bread was broken in pieces and distributed among men. All of this is a thinly veiled euphemism for what Yahshua endured for our sake. It is to our shame, of course, that God found it necessary to subject Himself to all this pain on our behalf. But He did it, and did it gladly, so that we, the objects of His love, might live.

I must pause and ponder, then, what His reaction must be to those who, in light of these things, refuse to partake of the Living Bread He has laid before us. The Israelites in the wilderness complained (ignorantly and unfairly) that God had brought them out of Egypt so they could die of hunger and thirst in the desert. It would therefore have been unthinkable for them to have refused to eat the mysterious manna and drink the miraculous water—*for any reason*—when it appeared before them. How strange it is that the same is not true concerning the *spiritual* food the world craves—Yahshua the Messiah. The vast majority of mankind shrugs, yawns, and says, “I’m not *that* hungry.” Incredibly (to me, anyway) the world looks at Christ’s gift and says, *That’s too easy—there must be a catch, or He’s not what I was expecting, or I can take care of myself*, or my personal favorite dumb excuse, *I’m on a diet: I don’t need spiritual sustenance*. Don’t kid yourself. Just as your mortal body won’t last long without food, neither will your soul. Spiritual anorexia is 100% fatal.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Yahweh has in the past used physical hunger to answer spiritual stubbornness. Facing the Babylonians in the wake of centuries of idolatry, Israel was given this prophetic message: **“Moreover, He said to me, ‘Son of man, behold, I will break the supply of bread in Jerusalem. They shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay. I will do this that they may lack bread and water, and look at one another in dismay, and rot away because of their punishment.’”** (Ezekiel 4:16-17) It’s not like they hadn’t been warned. Moses had told them what to expect when they turned their backs on Yahweh: **“And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters, whom Yahweh your God has given you, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you. The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing else left, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns.”** (Deuteronomy 28: 53-55) It’s one thing to feel a little peckish. It’s something else entirely to be so desperately hungry that you’re ready to kill and eat your own children. Yet despite the warnings, this is precisely what happened to Israel several times during their long and rebellious history. Their physical hunger was intended to remind them of their self-imposed spiritual starvation.

Does the hunger of God's judgment still loom in mankind's future? I'm afraid it does. Describing the conditions that will precede the end of the age (calling them the "beginning of birth pangs") Yahshua informs us: **"Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places."** (Matthew 24:7) And as the Tribulation shifts into high gear, it will take on "Biblical proportions," so to speak: **"When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, 'A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!'"** (Revelation 6:5-6) A "denarius" is a full day's wages for a typical blue-collar laborer. So it's not like there won't be any food, but nobody but the elite upper class will be able to buy much of it. This implies that there will be an ever-widening gap between rich and poor; the middle class will all but disappear. And hunger will be the order of the day.

Perhaps you're asking (as Abraham did when enquiring about Lot's fate), **"Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?"** (Genesis 18:23) God might reply, *No, of course not, but just how righteous do you think you are?* After all, Ezekiel informs us, **"The word of Yahweh came to me: 'Son of man, when a land sins against Me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord Yahweh."** (Ezekiel 14:12-14) On our own, you and I don't measure up to the likes of Noah, Daniel, and Job, I'm guessing. How then can we be delivered when Yahweh "breaks the supply of bread" in the world, as He has promised to do? Is He going to "sweep away the righteous with the wicked this time? Is He going to feed only the best of us, and let the rest starve?

Not exactly. Ask yourself: what was the basis of Lot's "righteousness" as he lived his life in Sodom? He was no "Daniel," I can assure you. From what we're told, Lot was weak and venal, and his moral compass didn't exactly point north. But with all his faults, he did worship the God of Abraham. His relationship with Yahweh, however strained it must have been by his chosen environment, was the sole basis of Lot's "righteousness." Lot's physical removal from Sodom before disaster struck was prophetic of something yet in our future. This singular event, hinted at throughout scripture, will prove to be the fulfillment of the fifth of Yahweh's seven "holy convocations," the Feast of Trumpets. In it, *all* of believing humanity—the living and the dead—will answer Yahshua's call and be caught up into the clouds to meet Him, clothed with new immortal bodies. Paul describes it in detail, and he even tells us *why* God has arranged this unusual exit strategy for us: **"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with Him."** (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10) The "righteousness" that can be counted upon

to “deliver our lives” (like Noah’s, Daniel’s, or Job’s would have) is borrowed—it is imputed or *assigned* to us, because Yahweh’s Spirit dwells within us. It is the very righteousness of Christ, the bread of life.

However, just as famine and hunger—the lack of physical bread—can be a sign of our refusal to receive spiritual nourishment, the reverse is also true. There is a positive correlation as well: **“He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”** (II Corinthians 9:10-11) This is *not*—as it may look at first glance—an argument for a “prosperity gospel,” where you’re told that if you contribute to this ministry or that, you will be blessed with material riches. God’s provision is not designed to feed our greed. Rather, Paul is merely stating that investment in God’s kingdom will result in a continued ability *to invest in His kingdom*. It’s the “harvest of your righteousness” that’ll increase—not your bank account (necessarily). Of course, it’s axiomatic that such givers will enjoy enough “prosperity” to hold body and soul together: our needs will be met *however* God chooses to provide for us.

Paul apparently had this promise from the pen of Isaiah in the back of his mind: **“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”** (Isaiah 55:10-11) Yahweh alone decides how His resources will be allocated among men. The counterintuitive truth—one we must not forget—is that He has determined to speak His words through our mouths—our “unclean lips,” as Isaiah put it. It’s one thing for us to have faith in God. Once we understand who He is and what He’s done, that makes perfect sense. But it’s another thing entirely to come to the startling realization that *God has faith in us*. It’s humbling, daunting, and not a little scary. But He is our Father: He has provided everything we need for life and godliness.

OIL

❧ 3.1.2 ❧

The Spirit of Yahweh

When the Israelite slaves left Egypt, it was a surprise to virtually everybody. The exodus hadn't been their idea, and it certainly wasn't brought about by anything they had done (like going on strike or fomenting revolution against the Pharaoh). Rather, it was all Yahweh's doing, from determining the timing, to recruiting Israel's unlikely and reluctant "leadership," to performing a series of awesome and unsolicited miracles. The Israelites had been living their settled, miserable lives in the only world they had known for the past four centuries. They were in no position (or mood) to instigate anything. But by the time Yahweh was through messing with Egypt, it was clear that His people were leaving, and they weren't coming back. They took everything they owned with them, from their household belongings to the parting "gifts" the terrified Egyptians had practically thrown at them on their way out.

But (as with our lives as believers) even though they weren't able to save themselves from anything, God did invite them to joyfully participate in their newfound freedom. **"Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, 'This is the thing that Yahweh has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to Yahweh. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring Yahweh's contribution: gold, silver, and bronze; blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen; goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, and goatskins; acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece.'" (Exodus 35:4-9)** It would transpire (though they didn't know it yet) that everything Yahweh asked for would be used in the construction or service of the symbol-rich tabernacle of meeting—the place where Yahweh would meet with Israel over the next half a millennium.

Leaving the world for Yahweh *isn't* a case of "Meet the new boss; same as the old boss." The "contribution" was entirely voluntary. (The "commandment" was that Moses should make the request of the people, but only the "generous of heart" were expected to donate their stuff.) At this point, they thought they were headed straight for the promised land; only Yahweh knew that their rebellious attitude would result in forty years of wandering in the trackless desert. The point is that those who were not generous, those who didn't have a heart of worship for the God who had just rescued them, were thereby "sentenced" to lugging around their heavy possessions themselves—until they died of sheer exhaustion. But those who gave liberally out of a generous, thankful heart would get to sit back

and watch the Levites do the heavy lifting. The irony is enough to make your sciatica kick in.

The list is by no means comprehensive. But it does include one commodity that would be used several different ways in the worship at the sanctuary, a commodity that was as ubiquitous as wheat and barley had been during the years in Egypt. This, of course, is olive oil, a staple of the Mediterranean diet since the dawn of history. Thus we read, **“When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to Yahweh, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it.”** (Leviticus 2:1) Adding oil to flour was the normal procedure in this culture. The instruction goes on to state that whatever form the grain offering took—loaves, wafers, “pancakes” made on a griddle, or bread cooked in a pan (as we’d make cornbread)—the flour was *always* to be accompanied with oil. Folks would normally have baked their bread with oil anyway, but God is making a point: He is investing olive oil with symbolic significance, just as He had grain.

We’ve noted how the Israelites weren’t really in a position to make offerings of “fine flour” (grain with the husks removed) in the wilderness, since the only staple “grain” that was available to them was manna. They couldn’t stop and plant a field of wheat and wait until it was ready to be harvested, because they had to be ready to follow the pillar of cloud to a new location at a moment’s notice. It’s even worse with olive oil, of course: olive trees take years to mature. They had brought enough oil with them for the purposes Yahweh had specified—the anointing oil and fuel for the menorah—but the normal grain offerings, requiring large amounts of olive oil, were deferred until they had entered the promised land: **“When you have come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving to you, and you make an offering by fire to Yahweh, a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or in your appointed feasts, to make a sweet aroma to Yahweh, from the herd or the flock, then he who presents his offering to Yahweh shall bring a grain offering of one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil; and one-fourth of a hin of wine as a drink offering you shall prepare with the burnt offering or the sacrifice, for each lamb.”** (Numbers 15:2-5) Yahweh does not ask of us that which is beyond our ability to give. In fact, He never asks us to “give” *anything* except for a portion of that which He has given us first.

This instruction is fairly peppered with symbols, all of which we’ll explore in detail eventually. In the meantime, using my not-so-secret decoder ring—*the Torah Code*—the prophetic message here reads something like this: “The eternal life we are given as children of Yahweh was bought for us through the total sacrifice of His Messiah as He endured judgment in our place. It is therefore appropriate and desirable that we remember and memorialize what our God has done for us by leading lives that honor Him. We can do this by being thankful, keeping our word, loving God by caring for our brothers and sisters, recognizing

the Source of our provision, being filled with Yahweh's Spirit, and remaining forever cognizant of the Life that was poured out in order that we might live." Or something like that.

The *relative amounts* of fine flour and oil listed here give us even more information. If the grain represents God's provision, namely Yahshua the Messiah, and oil (as we shall soon establish) is Yahweh's Spirit, then it is apparent that God's Spirit wasn't merely "applied" or poured out upon Him, but was rather "mixed" throughout His very being, shaping His character and providing His power. Since a "hin" is about a gallon and a half (making the specified quarter of a hin about one and a half quarts—1.2 liters), we should observe that the fine flour was positively *goopy* with oil—permeated, saturated, *wet* with it. In other words, Yahshua wasn't just *influenced* by the Holy Spirit; He oozed the Spirit's presence and power from every pore. But consider this: *the same* Spirit dwells within every believer today. So why isn't our walk as flawless and effective as Yahshua's was? Maybe it's a *lubrication* problem—there's not enough "oil" in our lives.

Where did I get the rather counterintuitive idea that olive oil is a symbol for the Spirit of God? As I've said, Yahweh takes His symbols very seriously, and when one is as fundamental to our understanding as this one is, Yahweh often goes out of His way to explain it. So the prophet Zechariah was given a vision: **"And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, 'What do you see?' I said, 'I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.' And I said to the angel who talked with me, 'What are these, my lord?' Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, 'Do you not know what these are?' I said, 'No, my lord.' Then he said to me, 'This is the word of Yahweh to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says Yahweh of hosts.'" (Zechariah 4:1-6)**

The immediate message to Zerubbabel (the leader of the returning Jewish exiles, not to mention being an ancestor of Yahshua) was that he would succeed in rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple—and not through political pressure or force of arms, either, but through the will of God's Spirit. **"Then the word of Yahweh came to me, saying, 'The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent me [the angel] to you [Zechariah]. For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice,**

and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.” (Zechariah 4:8-10)

Zerubbabel is (obviously) a prophetic stand-in for Yahshua the Messiah here. The “day of small things” is a reference to the modest scale of the second temple in comparison to Solomon’s former magnificent edifice. The people had forgotten (if they ever knew) that the temple wasn’t merely a building, but was actually a picture of redemption of mankind wrought by Yahweh—something that would be achieved through Yahshua. The prophetic point is that Yahshua’s authority (represented by Zerubbabel’s “plumb line”) would be established through the power of the Holy Spirit, not through military conquest (as the messianic hopefuls of Yahshua’s day expected). It’s perfectly clear, in hindsight.

Zechariah, of course, didn’t understand a word of it, so he pushed the angel for clarification: **“What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand? And a second time I answered and said to him, ‘What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out?’ He said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ I said, ‘No, my lord.’ Then he said, ‘These are the two anointed ones who stand by the lord of the whole earth.’”**

(Zechariah 4:11-14) Like virtually every other prophet of Yahweh, Zack was being given more information than he’d bargained for. The olive trees are the source of the oil (which he has just been told represents the Spirit of Yahweh). I would surmise, then, based on what we’ve already observed about the Messiah, that the two trees are symbolic of the two “natures” of the Messiah’s mission—i.e., His two advents, the first as our redeeming sacrifice and the second as our glorified reigning king, both of which are achieved in the power of Yahweh’s Spirit alone.

But this is where the whole thing goes sideways, if you don’t stay on your toes. Though the “olive trees” are Yahshua, the two *branches* extending from them are something else. In the original Hebrew, they’re not “anointed ones,” but anointed *sons*—*beni yitshar* (not *Mashiyach*, as might have been expected)—literally, “sons of olive oil,” which, as we now know, implies being “born of the Spirit.” (Is the lesson of John 3 ringing any bells here?) To learn who these particular “sons of the Spirit” are, we need to visit the book of Revelation. **“And I [a mighty angel who was talking to John] will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the lord of the earth.”** (Revelation 11:3-4)

Who, then, is “the lord (*adonay*) of the whole earth”? Surprisingly, it isn’t Yahshua (at this particular moment in time). It’s the one commonly known as the Antichrist: **“And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.... Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. Authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name**

has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.” (Revelation 13:5, 7-8) For three and a half horrible years, this “beast from the sea” will *de facto* be the “lord of the whole earth.”

So why are the two witnesses, these “anointed sons,” standing *by* him? I’m afraid this too is a bit of a mistranslation. The Hebrew phrase is *amad al*. *Amad* means to stand, remain, endure, or take one’s stand. One of the word’s nuances, I believe, nails it: *amad* can mean to accuse: formally, to stand bringing an accusation in a legal setting. And *al* means against, over, upon, or above. Read the whole description of what these two men do, in Revelation 11. The two witnesses, these sons of the Spirit, are seen standing *against* the Antichrist. They’re the ants at his picnic, pronouncing judgment upon the beast and his kingdom and calling for plagues of “biblical proportions” upon the whole unrepentant world. These plagues, if I’m not mistaken, are to be administered by the angels of the seven “bowl” judgments of Revelation 16, which will be poured out upon the earth during the Antichrist’s forty-two month reign of terror.

Lest we forget what got us started on this little scriptural odyssey, we were trying to figure out what olive oil meant. And here, at the end of the trail, we find that it’s what we were told at the very beginning of the journey: goodness won’t prevail through might or power—neither by political pressure or force of arms brought to bear against the powers of evil in the world. (So much for the “Onward Christian Soldier” mentality.) It will be achieved, in the end, by the Spirit of Yahweh alone—the precious golden oil emanating from the olive trees of Messiah’s dual nature, servant and king.

It bears mention that just because something is used as a symbol in God’s word, its corresponding physical reality isn’t thereby rendered meaningless. Yahweh’s enduring interest in our souls doesn’t negate His care for our mortal bodies, which, after all, are the vehicles in which our eternal choices must be made. So, for example, there is a whole chapter (Leviticus 11) telling what animals are okay to eat, and which ones aren’t. Science has verified that the things on the “forbidden” list are, without exception, toxic in comparison to those that are approved. By instructing us about what (and what not) to eat, God was doing two things: telling us how to keep our bodies healthy, and teaching us to be discerning about what we put into our souls. So since olive oil is clearly recruited as one of Yahweh’s symbols, and is also approved for food (and indeed, is a mandated part of the priests’ diet), we would expect to find that God specified something healthful for us. But is this the case?

Technically, the only difference between oils and fats is that oils are liquid at room temperature, while fats are solids. Aren't fats (triglycerides, fatty acids, unsaponifiable lipids—*horrors!*) supposed to be *bad* for us? Well, maybe. Today, we have a dizzying variety of foods from which to choose, including oils from a wide variety of plants—corn, peanut, soybean, coconut, safflower, rapeseed (canola), palm, cottonseed, sesame seed, sunflower—nuts, seeds, melons, gourds, and scores of other sources, animal, vegetable, *and* mineral. So how does olive oil stack up? Was God wrong to make it such a big part of the Hebrew diet? In a word, no. *Living Without Magazine* reports: “An abundance of polyphenols, monounsaturated fat and vitamin E makes olive oil one of the heart-healthiest options in the oil department. An impressive 75 percent of calories come from monounsaturated fat, which confers heart protection by lowering LDL (“bad”) cholesterol while simultaneously raising HDL (“good”) cholesterol levels. The polyphenols in olive oil—its potent antioxidant plant compounds—have been shown to reduce bone loss, improve cholesterol levels, decrease blood pressure, stymie the spread of cancerous cells, reduce inflammation and prevent the bunching together of blood platelets which protects against stroke and heart attacks. Portuguese researchers found that one major antioxidant in olive oil called DHPEA-EDA is particularly effective in protecting red blood cells from oxidative damage by menacing free radicals.” Did we really need to look it up, or could we merely have taken Yahweh’s word for it?

Besides being nutritious, olive oil was an essential commodity in everyday life in Israel, making it a ready metaphor for a whole range of roles the Spirit of God performs in the believer’s experience. (1) Olive oil was flammable and burned cleanly, making it an ideal source of light (read: truth). (2) Olive oil was readily available, and the trees could live and produce for centuries—there are olive trees in Jerusalem that are said to be two thousand years old. (3) The olive trees of Canaan were a “gift” from God to the invading Israelites, but one that could be received only upon their entrance into the land. So Yahweh told Joshua’s generation, “**I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.**” (Joshua 24:13) The symbols tell us, then, that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God: there’s nothing we can do to “earn it.” Further, the Spirit is a reality only *within* the believer’s life—It is not available (or even discernible) outside it. (4) Olive oil was also useful as an ointment, an aid in healing and restoration. It was said to be part of the mugging victim’s “cure” under the care of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34), and James recommended its use (in conjunction with prayer) in the healing of illnesses (James 5:14; see also Mark 6:13). The lesson, of course, is that the Holy Spirit is responsible for our restoration, renewal, and healing. If we’ll but look for it, we’ll always find a consistent parallel between the scriptural symbol and its spiritual reality.

The “dark side” of all these spiritual benefits is also revealed through the physical symbol. Olive oil is extracted from the fruit by beating and crushing it. We are reminded that the Holy Spirit was made available to us through the painful process predicted by Isaiah: **“He [Yahshua the Messiah] was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”** (Isaiah 53:5)

There is more than meets the eye in this vignette describing the hours prior to the Messiah’s crucifixion: **“Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and He said to his disciples, ‘Sit here, while I go over there and pray.’ And taking with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then He said to them, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with Me.’”** (Matthew 26:36-38) The Garden of Gethsemane is located at the foot of the Mount of Olives, just east of the Temple Mount. “Gethsemane” is derived from two Aramaic words. A *gath* is a press, used for crushing grapes or olives; *Shemen* means fat or oil (such as olive oil), a medication or unguent, or “fatness” (in the traditional sense, a state of well being or prosperity). Gethsemane, then, is the place Yahshua went to get *squeezed* on our behalf—crushed as in an olive press, releasing the Spirit for our benefit. As Yahshua Himself explained, **“It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you.”** (John 16:7) And lest you think I’m being overly dramatic, remember this: **“And being in an agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”** (Luke 22:44)

It’s horribly ironic: in agony over his own sin, David had pleaded, **“Take not Your Holy Spirit from me.”** (Psalm 51:11) But in agony over *our* sin, Yahshua subjected Himself to the very thing that had so terrified David—separation from the Holy Spirit in the crushing pressure of Gethsemane, the oil press. It was on our behalf that He hung on the cross praying, **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”** (Matthew 27:46) It was a rhetorical question (not to mention a fulfillment of the crucifixion prophecy of Psalm 22). He *knew* why: the Father turned His back on His only begotten Son out of compassion for us, His adopted children. There can be no greater love.

David said of Yahweh, his “Shepherd,” **“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”** (Psalm 23:5) Anointing one’s head with olive oil seems like a strange practice to us today, but historically it was a sign of consecration, dedication, or blessing. It was often used to denote special recognition, or to confer honor, favor, responsibility, or

authority upon the anointed. Anointing with oil was seen as a pleasing, gratifying act: **“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there Yahweh has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.”** (Psalm 133:1-3) If eternal life is this closely associated with anointing with oil, we should pay close attention to what the Word has to say about it.

The oil used to anoint the priests of Israel was to be a special formulation, the instructions for which are so detailed and specific, we should (by now) be alerted that there’s a symbol tsunami headed our way: **“Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh 500 shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is, 250, and 250 of aromatic cane, and 500 of cassia, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and a hin of olive oil. And you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil....”** The formula began with a *hin* (about 1.5 gallons) of olive oil, indicative of Yahweh’s Spirit. But what were these other ingredients?

Myrrh is a resinous gum or oil from balsam or other trees with an oily bark. It is fragrant and slightly bitter, hence the name, *mor*, from a Hebrew root meaning bitterness—a reminder of the Messiah’s sorrows endured on our behalf. (A shekel, by the way, was a little over a third of an ounce, so five hundred shekels would be about ten pounds.) Cinnamon (Hebrew *qinamown*) is the familiar fragrant bark we still use as a spice to this day. Its use as an aphrodisiac (along with myrrh) is suggested in Proverbs 7:17, reminding us that we are the *bride* of Christ: there is an emotional—even hormonal—component to our relationship with Yahweh’s Messiah. It’s not all business. The “sweet-smelling cane” is *qaneh*, an aromatic reed, but one also used as a standard of measure, normally six cubits (about nine feet). Yahshua’s human moral perfection is sweet indeed, but it’s also the standard by which we are all measured—and we all fall short. The last ingredient was cassia (*qidah*), a fragrant plant ingredient used in making perfumes and oils. It’s the “fragrant oil” spoken of in Matthew 26:12 and Luke 23:56—something used to anoint and prepare the Messiah for His burial—both before and after He gave Himself up to be crucified. The anointing-oil mixture, then, is a pungent description of Yahshua the Messiah, whose Spirit-filled life was the essence of love, the standard of holiness, and sweet salvation for us, achieved through Yahshua’s bitter suffering.

The entire sanctuary and all of its furnishings were to be anointed with this symbol-saturated brew: **“With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils and the basin and its stand. You shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy.”** It bears repeating: “holy” means set apart for Yahweh’s honor and purpose. Whatever meaning or

significance was implied by the esoteric ingredients we examined above was thus extended to the entire tabernacle. God was saying as clearly as He possibly could that the tabernacle and everything within it were a picture—a parable—of His plan for our redemption, centered in the life and work of His Messiah. We'll address these items in due time. For now, just note that **“Whatever touches them will become holy....”** That is a stunning revelation, if you stop to think about it: *anyone* who comes into intimate contact with what the tabernacle and its appurtenances signify—God's plan for the redemption of mankind—will become set apart from the world in order to honor the One who brought it all to pass: Yahweh. Just remember this: you can't enter the tabernacle without first encountering the altar of sacrifice and the laver of cleansing.

Who, then, was authorized to “touch” the holy things? There was only one class of people in Israel who could legally do this: the priests. Therefore, God told Moses, **“You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve Me as priests.”** As always, we must keep the symbol distinct from the reality it reflects. God is not saying that only priests (defined as male descendants of Aaron) could be saved or be made holy. He's saying, rather, that these priests *represent* those who are saved—male or female, Jew or gentile, *anyone* who “touches,” who proactively embraces, Yahweh's solution to our estrangement. **“And you shall say to the people of Israel [itself a metaphorical microcosm of fallen mankind], ‘This shall be My holy anointing oil throughout your generations....’”** In other words, whatever the anointing oil represented signified a truth that would be valid as long as mankind walked the earth. This wasn't just a “Jewish” thing, one intended to remain in force only as long as the theocratic assembly lasted. It was forever.

“It shall not be poured on the body of an ordinary person, and you shall make no other like it in composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it or whoever puts any of it on an outsider shall be cut off from his people.” (Exodus 30:23-33) Finally, Yahweh instructs that the anointing oil—representing Yahshua the Messiah, you'll recall—is not to be substituted, counterfeited, or misapplied. There is only one way to God: the way God Himself has provided. Yahweh is being brutally blunt here: whoever proposes that there is some other means by which man might ascend to God other than Yahshua the Messiah—and especially if he “anoints” a gullible and unsuspecting soul with his bogus brew—in effect dedicating and consecrating him to a lie—that person will die, in the spiritual, permanent, tormented-in-hell sense.

The Torah speaks at length about ordaining priests by anointing them with this special blend of olive oil. But no such instruction was given concerning the coronation of kings, for the simple reason that human royalty was never intended to be part of theocratic Israel's culture. Yahweh alone was to be their king, and

any human leaders God appointed (e.g. Moses, Joshua, or Samuel) were characterized as “servants” or “judges,” not monarchs. Yahweh knew, of course, that Israel would eventually want a king, but He characterized this desire as their rejection of *His* leadership. And yet, to certify His selection of Israel’s first kings, God instructed His prophet to anoint the chosen man with oil. (See, for example, I Samuel 16:1, 12-13.) Seeing the future Messiah latent in the historical King David, the Psalmist reports, “**I [Yahweh] have made a covenant with My chosen one; I have sworn to David My servant: ‘I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.’ ...I have found David, My servant. With My holy oil I have anointed him, so that My hand shall be established with him; My arm also shall strengthen him.**” (Psalm 89:3-4, 20) Yahweh’s anointing of David, then, was a dress rehearsal for the coming of the Messiah, *the Anointed One*.

For Christians who seldom venture west of the New Testament (you know—flipping pages to the *left*, into the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets) it may come as a shock that the concept of “Messiah”—*Mashiyach*, Yahweh’s Anointed One—is mentioned very sparingly in the Hebrew scriptures. After all, the Greek equivalent, “Christ” (*Christos*) is ubiquitous in the New Covenant scriptures (though it’s never actually spelled out in any of the pre-Constantinian manuscripts, but is rather presented as one of the so-called *nomina sacra*—abbreviations or code-placeholders for key words, in this case XΣ, written with a line over the top). That being said, those few overt Hebrew references to the *Mashiyach* (in the sense of the coming anointed Savior-King) are incredibly significant.

Scripture’s first reference to “the anointed one” in a role other than that of the anointed priest is this prophecy: “**The adversaries of Yahweh shall be broken to pieces; against them He will thunder in heaven. Yahweh will judge the ends of the earth; He will give strength to His King and exalt the power of His Anointed.**” (I Samuel 2:10) What’s remarkable here is who said it, and when. This is from the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, as she dedicated her young son to Yahweh’s service. At the time, Israel had never had a king ruling over them: it was an unheard of concept. In fact, Samuel himself would one day anoint Israel’s first two kings, Saul and David, the latter being the prototype and precursor of the Messiah to whom his mother had referred. Note that Yahweh is prophesied to accomplish through the coming Messiah things far beyond what David did—or Yahshua, for that matter. The prophecy of a powerful reigning King anointed by Yahweh is a reference to Yahshua’s *second* advent, something yet in our future.

This is made crystal clear in a Psalm revealing the identity of the Messiah as the Son of God: “**Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and against His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst Their bonds apart and cast away Their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.**” Yahweh and His

Anointed (Yahshua) are seen here in perfect sync, yet differentiated by their roles or functions: Yahweh “sits in the heavens.” That is, He is holy, set apart—above all the silly noise the nations are making. On the other hand, “the Lord” (Hebrew: *Adonay*) is by definition the One who exercises personal authority *among men* (see Matthew 28:18), the Anointed King, Yahshua—the One on whose shoulders the government rests (Isaiah 9:6). But because Yahweh and His Anointed are actually one person (John 10:30, 14:7), they are heard speaking with one voice: **“Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury, saying, ‘As for Me, I have set My King on Zion, My holy hill.’ I will tell of the decree: Yahweh said to Me, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You.’”** (Psalm 2:1-7) People who think the Messiah—Yahshua—is somehow less than God incarnate should find this Psalm fatal to their theory. In the end, you can’t hold onto both truth and delusion. You’re going to have to give up one or the other.

Amazingly, we were even told *when* the Messiah would appear. Daniel was told, **“Seventy weeks [literally, sevens] are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy.”** That is, the destiny of Israel—including the revelation of the identity of Yahweh’s Messiah—would be fulfilled in 490 of some “time unit.” These are never called “years” in scripture, but *half* of a “seven” is called “time, times, and half a time” (i.e., three and a half “times”), and this length of time is equated with both “42 months” and “1,260 days.” In other words, it appears that “a time” equals 360 days—sort of a schematic “year,” twelve 30-day months. **“Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself.”** (Daniel 9:24-26)

Sixty-nine “sevens” of these 360-day “times” (in other words, 483 “times”) works out to 173,880 days—between a well defined “starting gun” and the appearance of the Messiah. Based on the record of Nehemiah 2, the clock began ticking in the month of Nisan, 444 B.C. If the first day of the month is implied, 173,880 days brings us to Nisan 10 (Monday, March 28), 33 A.D., the very day the Torah commands that the Passover lamb be brought into the household (Exodus 12:3)—*coincidentally* (choke, cough) the very day Yahshua of Nazareth entered Jerusalem to the adulation of the throng singing *Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of Yahweh!* On Friday of that same week, Yahshua was crucified for our sins and laid in a borrowed tomb, **“cut off, but not for Himself.”** And don’t forget, He was “anointed” with cassia, one of the ingredients of the priestly anointing oil, both before and after His death. Coincidence? Not likely.

Olive oil was also the sole source of artificial light in ancient homes, the only way to dispel the darkness when the sun or moon weren't visible. Oil lamps are strewn across the archeological landscape like leaves on the forest floor: they're everywhere you look. Some are intricate and beautifully decorated, but all you really need is a simple open ceramic bowl with a notch or pinch to hold a wick. Many of them had handles, so you could carry them around to light your way as we would a flashlight. Not surprisingly then, oil lamps are alluded to in scripture to praise Yahweh for His guidance. For example: **"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."** (Psalm 119:105) Or, **"For You are my lamp, O Yahweh, and my God lightens my darkness."** (II Samuel 22:29) Since we now know that the olive oil fuel in these lamps is symbolic of the Holy Spirit, the metaphor has come full circle: that which contains the oil—the lamp—is the Word: the Messiah Himself.

It would have been strange, then, if God had *not* made oil in lamps a part of His tabernacle vocabulary. **"You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set up to burn. In the tent of meeting, outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall tend it from evening to morning before Yahweh. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel."** (Exodus 27:20-21; cf. Leviticus 24:1-4) The symbols tell the story: Aaron and his sons (the priesthood, representing all believers) are to keep the lampstand supplied with olive oil (God's Spirit), so that light (spiritual truth) may always shine forth in the presence of God's people. The lampstand stood against the south interior wall of the tabernacle; its lamps were focused forward, toward the north—toward the table of showbread, highlighting God's constant provision.

What, then, did the lampstand (or menorah) signify? The menorah was made to God's exacting design, and we should not be surprised to learn that every specification meant something significant: **"You shall also make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be of hammered work. Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its ornamental knobs, and flowers shall be of one piece."** Unity is being stressed. All of the menorah's "parts" were to be one unit—made inseparable through the way it was fashioned—by being hammered or beaten, i.e., subjected to adversity. **"And six branches shall come out of its sides: three branches of the lampstand out of one side, and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side..."** Here we see scripture's ubiquitous "six-plus-one" pattern, but with a twist. The One, that is, the center "stalk" of the lampstand, represents the Messiah. But there are three "branches" protruding from the right, and three from the left, all depending upon the center stalk for support. These two "groupings" attached to the Messiah are, I have concluded, believing Israel and the true church (or more properly, the *ekklesia*—

the “called out” of Christ). Neither can stand without the center support, and neither is more important than the other. In fact, the menorah would be decidedly unbalanced without both sides present. And yet, the two sides are separate and distinct, having but one thing in common: the center lampstand. All seven “parts” are responsible for shining forth God’s light.

Even the ornamentation tells us something: **“Three bowls shall be made like almond blossoms on one branch, with an ornamental knob and a flower, and three bowls made like almond blossoms on the other branch, with an ornamental knob and a flower—and so for the six branches that come out of the lampstand.”** The almond tree blossoms very early in the year—as early as January or February. This explains its name in Hebrew: *saged*—the waker. The almond is thus a natural metaphor for resurrection. **“On the lampstand itself four bowls shall be made like almond blossoms, each with its ornamental knob and flower. And there shall be a knob under the first two branches of the same, a knob under the second two branches of the same, and a knob under the third two branches of the same, according to the six branches that extend from the lampstand....”** These “ornamental knobs” or calyxes represent the part of the plant that forms the outer floral envelope, protecting the developing bud. God’s designs in nature mimic His designs in the spiritual realm. The lesson: we are protected, whether we realize it or not.

“Their knobs and their branches shall be of one piece; all of it shall be one hammered piece of pure gold....” Note that because we’re attached to the Messiah, we’re all going to get “hammered” together—the result being unity through mutual adversity. It’s hilariously ironic: even though we agree on very little (because of our common propensity to ignore Yahweh and His Word) Jews and Christians are invariably lumped together by Yahweh’s enemies in an equal-opportunity hate-fest. Ask any Muslim, secular humanist, socialist or outright communist: they can’t decide who they hate more, Christians or Jews. They don’t even know why.

“You shall make seven lamps for it, and they shall arrange its lamps so that they give light in front of it. And its wick-trimmers and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made of a talent of pure gold, with all these utensils. And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.” (Exodus 25:31-40) The seven lamps (read: complete or perfect truth) are the whole point, of course. Neither Israel’s take nor Christianity’s will stand by itself, but they both stand and shine when they’re joined to and supported by the Messiah. Sadly, this is not exactly reality today. Neither Israel nor the church (in the broadest sense) is “attached” in any meaningful or universal way to the Messiah. But the Menorah is a Millennial metaphor: it reveals what *will be* when Yahshua assumes the throne of Earth. Both the restored Jewish remnant and the real followers of Christ will stand side by side with their Messiah. We are not the same, but we are equally blessed.

Yahshua's disciples fell into both groups, of course. So He told them how to shine His light before an unbelieving world: **"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."** (Matthew 5:14-16) Note that the light is "in the house." It is not our job to light up the whole world, but rather to invite those who are outside into the house, so that they might become enlightened. That being said, the light of God's love cannot easily be missed by people looking through the windows into the house. If our light is shining, the world will have a clear choice to make—either consider it an invitation to come in and enjoy the same light and truth God's children do, or use the light to target us with paranoid slander launched from their foxholes in the shadows.

If the absence of light is darkness, and if olive oil—the fuel in our lamps—represents the Spirit of God, then we should pay attention to those times in scripture when we are told of the ramifications of having (or using) no oil. For instance, Yahshua once told this parable: **"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps...."** The "bridegroom" is obviously symbolic of the Messiah, the One for whom everyone is waiting. The procedure for a wedding in this culture was that the groom and his friends would arrive at an undisclosed hour at the home of the bride and her parents, they'd have a big wedding feast (lasting for several days), and then they'd all escort the bride in festive procession back to the groom's—now the newlywed couple's—home. This is all a pretty fair representation of what we're told of the coming rapture: we're all standing around in anticipation of Yahshua's promised arrival. We don't know when He's coming, but we know that He is, because of His love for His bride. (Normally, of course, the one seen anticipating the coming of the bridegroom would have been the bride—the church. But Christ wished to point out the dichotomy between those who "had oil" and those who did not, so the "bridesmaids" were recruited to play this role in the parable.)

"As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him....'" To the casual observer, all ten virgins looked just the same: they all said they were looking forward to the coming of the bridegroom—the Messiah. They all carried "lamps" with them, that is, they were all equipped to receive and utilize the Holy Spirit. If

I'm not mistaken, this capacity is universal in Adam's race—the “breath of God,” or *neshamah* (spoken of in Genesis 2:7) that, when indwelt with the Spirit of Yahweh, makes us “living souls.” And, perhaps surprisingly, all ten of the bridesmaids dozed off as they waited for the bridegroom to show up. Even the most well-prepared among us lose focus sometimes. The *only* difference between the two groups was that the wise virgins had brought olive oil with them, and the foolish had not—that is, some had Yahweh's Spirit, and some didn't. (As it's stated in John 3, they were “born only of water.”) This is obviously a characterization of the visible church—some of which is Spirit-led and eternally alive (even if we're not as alert as we're supposed to be), and some of which isn't really alive at all in the spiritual sense—they have no oil.

“Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matthew 25:1-12) This is a poignant description of the difference between the assemblies of Philadelphia and Laodicea, addressed by Yahshua in Revelation 3. The church at Philadelphia will be “kept out of the hour of trial that is to come upon the whole earth,” because they're ready, supplied with the “oil” of the Holy Spirit, when the bridegroom-Messiah comes. But those of Laodicea will not. They will not be admitted to the wedding feast (the “marriage supper of the Lamb,” Revelation 19:9)—something the Philadelphians will be enjoying in heaven as the Tribulation rages on earth.

Is all hope lost, then, for the “foolish virgins” of Laodicea? Amazingly, no. They still have an opportunity to have a relationship with the bridegroom—but not until the wedding feast is over. While the doors are shut, they are left outside to fend for themselves. But during that time, while their Philadelphian sisters are attending the feast, an invitation is extended to them: **“I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me.”** (Revelation 3:18-20) That's the rough symbolic equivalent of “going to the dealers and buying oil for yourself.” Those who do will find that life is still possible, even though they've missed the party. But I must stress that “oil” procured under these circumstances (in the middle of the night, after the party has already begun) is expensive. Most of the Laodiceans, I'm afraid, will pay for it with their mortal lives. Still, it's well

worth the price in the long run—our mortal lives weren't built to last anyway. Remember, Laodicea is counted among the seven called-out assemblies Yahshua addressed in Revelation 2 and 3. Although He finds their religious pretensions lukewarm and disgusting, and although none of them will be “born from above” in Yahweh's Spirit until after the rapture, I find it incredibly encouraging that their painful plight isn't permanent or irreversible. Even after the “doors are shut,” they may still go out and “buy oil” for their lamps. Judging by Revelation's statistics concerning their martyrdom, it's apparent that multitudes of them *will* open the door and receive the Messiah—before it *really is* too late.

As we have seen, olive oil was a normal component of the sacrifices and offerings described in the Torah. But there are a few exceptions to the rule. The first is in the “fine print” concerning the trespass offering—the *asham*. The *asham* was virtually identical to the *chata't*, or sin offering in most respects. (Whereas the *chata't* was meant to cover our sins, our unintentional lapses in behavior, the *asham* covered our mistakes or trespasses, our offenses in holiness.) What you'd bring for a trespass offering was based on what you could afford—either a female lamb or goat, two turtledoves, or two young pigeons were to be offered. If you were too poor even for that, you were to bring a tenth of an ephah (about two quarts) of fine flour; but unlike the regular *minha*, no oil or frankincense was to be added: **“But if he is not able to bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he who sinned shall bring for his offering one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour as a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it, nor shall he put frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering.”** (Leviticus 5:11)

I find it touching that in Yahweh's economy, being poor is no impediment to attaining forgiveness: no one in Israel would have found this an onerous financial burden. But why, we must ask ourselves, was no oil or frankincense to be included? The key seems to lie in the fact that there was no blood being shed—no innocent life was being sacrificed to atone for the poor man's lapse in holiness. This form of the *asham* thankfully acknowledges Yahweh's provision of perfect forgiveness. (Note that “fine flour” was to be used, i.e., no worthless, extraneous chaff was to be present.) But since no living sacrifice was made, no statement concerning the Spirit of Yahweh (symbolized by oil) was appropriate; nor would frankincense—symbolizing purity through sacrifice. There *was* no sacrifice. Here, in the tiniest of details, Yahweh was reminding us that attaining purity through the Spirit of God is possible *only* through the blood sacrifice of His Messiah. There is no other way. When Yahshua said, **“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life,”** (John 3:16) the underlying premise was that God's “giving” of His Son was as a *blood sacrifice*. He was the sacrificial *Lamb* of God who takes away the sin of the world.

One more obscure Torah precept (one I mentioned previously) specifies the absence of oil: **“Then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.”** (Numbers 5:15) This comes in the middle of one of the most esoteric (some would say, *goofy*) passages in the entire Torah. Numbers 5:11-31 describes the process whereby a jealous husband who suspects his wife of infidelity can drag her off to the priest and make her go through a strange ritual (including the grain offering described here) in order to determine her guilt or innocence. To the casual reader, the whole thing may sound sort of like medieval townsfolk throwing a suspected witch in the river. (If she sinks, she’s innocent, but if she floats, she must be guilty, so you can fish her out and burn her at the stake.) Manmade religion at its worst. This is nothing of the sort, I assure you. It’s another of God’s prophetic dress rehearsals.

In a nutshell, the woman is made to drink water that’s mixed with some dust from the floor of the tabernacle and swear that she’s innocent. If she is guiltless, then she is “free, and may conceive children.” But if she’s guilty of adultery, “her belly will swell and her thigh will rot.” Very colorful. Obviously, the husband would be a fool to put his wife through this if he weren’t *absolutely* certain she was cheating on him (*and* was willing to let her suffer the horrible consequences of her sin). After all, if she *was* innocent (and he was just being a paranoid control freak), she would never willingly share his bed again. The bond of mutual trust and respect would be gone forever. In other words, this procedure promises to reveal the truth, but it’s *never* to the husband’s benefit. He loses either way.

There is no scriptural record of this precept ever being used. That’s not all that unusual, of course, but it does beg the question: why was the precept recorded in scripture? Does it, perhaps, have prophetic relevance, like so much of the Torah? I believe it does. You see, in 1033, a great earthquake shook Jerusalem. One result was that the Spring of Gihon (the sole source of water for the old city, located in the shadow of the temple mount) turned septic—poisonous—and this condition persisted for forty years. This was taken as a bad omen by the Rabbis at the Jerusalem Academy, who subsequently left town and set up shop in Damascus. The Islamic overlords then raised taxes for all non-Muslims, driving out the last remaining Jewish farmers and tradesmen. But there were also ramifications for Christendom. The year 1033 saw a great surge in Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem, since precisely one millennium had passed since Yahshua’s passion. But the Catholic pilgrims, like the departing Jews, found the waters of Gihon (now *literally* mingled with the dust of the sanctuary) “bitter.”

Yahweh has described Himself as “a jealous God” (Exodus 20:6). Through the events of 1033, He flatly stated that both Israel and the Church had been

unfaithful to Him—they had joined themselves to false gods in a spiritually adulterous liaison. So the curse of Numbers 5 had come to pass, exactly as we had been warned. Not only did the Jews’ “belly swell and thigh rot” (so to speak), but the prophecy concerning the Church of Thyatira had come about as well: **“Indeed, I will cast her [the false prophetess “Jezebel,” who had seduced the Church into idolatry] into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.”** (Revelation 2:22) 1033 was characterized by spiritual adultery on the part of both Yahweh’s “wife” Israel and Yahshua’s “bride,” the Church. If anything could have illustrated our desperate need for redemption and restoration, this was it.

But there’s something else, if I may digress for a moment. 1033 marked the beginning of the sixth millennium since the fall of Adam made our redemption necessary. The fact that something prophetically momentous took place at this very time should make us sit up and take notice. After all, the other “millennial mile markers”—the fall, the flood, the almost-sacrifice of Isaac, the building of Solomon’s temple, and the passion of the Messiah—were all incredibly significant events in Yahweh’s plan of redemption, and they were all spaced at precise one-thousand year intervals, as far as we can determine. If we correlate this evidence with the scripturally ubiquitous six-plus-one “Sabbath week” pattern established by Yahweh (for reasons He never overtly explained), and with the mathematical formula (stated in both Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8) that with God, one “day” is as a thousand years, we (or at least, I) arrive at a startling conclusion: the *next* millennial milestone—the seventh—is right around the corner: 2033.

What can we expect to happen then? John describes it: **“Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.... This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with Him for a thousand years.”** (Revelation 20:4-6) If I’m right about any of this, Christ’s Millennial Kingdom will begin in 2033—*after* an unprecedented seven-year period of God’s wrath poured out upon the earth. And if I may put forth another “theory,” the Millennium will commence on the seventh and last of Yahweh’s “holy convocations,” the Feast of Tabernacles—October 8 that year. I’m not “guessing,” by the way; I’m merely observing what God said and drawing what to me are obvious conclusions. Feel free to draw conclusions of your own, but remember that Yahweh does nothing on a pointless whim. He told us this stuff for a reason. *Why*, if not to help us remain watchful?

Anyway, where were we? Oh yes, back in Numbers 5 (the prophetic ritual played out in 1033), trying to figure out why the barley flour “offering of jealousy” was to have no olive oil added to it. Now that we know how the scenario played out, it’s relatively easy to see: those being identified as adulterous (i.e., idolatrous) were not indwelled with Yahweh’s Spirit. Though they were part of biological Israel or part of a religious organization that called itself the church, they were *not* “born from above” in God’s Spirit. Olive oil, then, would have sent the wrong symbolic message. The adulterous wife/bride of a God who makes no secret of His jealous nature was being allowed to suffer the just punishment for her sins. But make no mistake: this was not something Yahweh took pleasure in. Why couldn’t we just remain faithful? Would it have been so hard?

Luke records the story of Christ’s literal anointing, and it’s precisely the opposite of what we might have expected. It wasn’t performed by the High Priest, or an influential rabbi, or even by John the Baptist, but by a broken, repentant sinner. **“One of the Pharisees asked [Yahshua] to eat with him, and He went into the Pharisee’s house and took His place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that He was reclining at table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed His feet and anointed them with the ointment.”** (Luke 7:36-38) Although the word translated “sinner” (*hamartolos*) technically just denotes “one who has erred, one who has missed the mark of perfection” (making it applicable to *everybody*), the connotation was that the sins of this woman had characterized and dominated her life; they had made her an outcast from “polite society.” Envision a known “crack ho” showing up at your typical uptight Sunday church service, and you’ll have a picture of the effect she had on those in attendance—except, of course, for Yahshua.

The woman had no concept of propriety. All she knew was that, confronted with the holiness of this Man, she was a sinner before God, in need of salvation. Her guilt consumed her, and she saw in Christ the redemption she so desperately sought. So she did the only thing she could think of to demonstrate her contrition and repentance. Though she probably didn’t know the Torah’s requirements from a hole in the ground, she instinctively did precisely what was required on the Day of Atonement: *anah*—meaning *both* affliction of the soul (hence the tears) and a proper response to God’s offer of forgiveness, answering the proposition set before her: what will you do about your sin?

But in the context of our present subject, it's not the woman's response that's so revealing, but the Pharisee's *failure* to respond. Yahshua pointed out to the Pharisee, Simon, that it's only natural for those who have been forgiven many debts to demonstrate their appreciation with a commensurate outward display of love and gratitude. The problem was that Simon didn't recognize or admit his own need for forgiveness before God. Being a Pharisee, he was blameless (in his own eyes), and proud of it. So Yahshua pointed out Simon's fatal flaw: *no oil*. **"You did not anoint My head with oil, but she has anointed My feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much."** (Luke 7:46-47) The Pharisee's reaction to Yahshua had been ambivalence, tempered with curiosity. Oh, sure, he wanted the fifteen minutes of fame that inviting the intriguing young rabbi to lunch could gain him. But he saw Yahshua as a colleague, a peer, an *equal*. To Simon, Yahshua was not the Anointed One—certainly not *his* Messiah. But the repentant woman (who recognized Yahshua as—at the very least—a prophet from God) had anointed Yahshua with oil and tears. For her faith, she had been forgiven of her sins. Simon, not so much.

In the present world, this dichotomy is universal: we are either made alive by Yahweh's Spirit dwelling within us, or we are not. We are either using the "olive oil" of the Holy Spirit in the lamps of our existence, or we're dwelling in darkness. But God has informed us in the clearest possible terms that there will come a day when every son of Adam, every daughter of Eve, will have made their choices—to live in Yahweh's light or to perish in the shadows. When that day comes, every soul who ever lived will experience the eternal consequences of the choices they made in mortal flesh, for this world—itsself a mere symbol of the eternal state that awaits Yahweh's children—is becoming obsolete, like a road sign we're passing on the highway.

Look at it this way: in the past century or two, we have become utterly dependent on our energy sources, but they all have fatal flaws. Coal is plentiful, but dirty. Petroleum lies mainly under the control of Muslims and madmen. "Green" energy sources like solar, wind, and geothermal are laughably inefficient. Biofuels compromise our ability to feed ourselves. Nuclear power is a high-stakes gamble: ideal—*until* something goes wrong. But *all of this* will be obsolete when God's children at last inhabit the new heavens and new earth as immortal souls empowered solely by the Spirit of Yahweh—the humble "olive oil" of divine metaphor. John describes the scene: **"And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."** (Revelation 22:5) In that day, the symbol will have been totally eclipsed by the awesome reality about which it was designed to teach us.

But lost humanity, without God's living fuel, will at last have come to know the true meaning of the term "energy crisis."

WINE

❧ 3.1.3 ❧

Life-Blood

Three dietary staples are often seen in the same context in scripture. We've just explored two of them—grain and oil. The third is wine. Together, they form a picture of Yahweh's covenant blessings—poured out in abundance if the covenant is being honored, and withheld if the covenant is being broken. Considered as a unit, they present a composite picture of Christ as God's gift to us: His miraculous provision of sustenance, spirit, and life itself.

As symbols go, wine is something of a “good news-bad news” story. It is a natural metaphor for blood—a deep red liquid obtained by inflicting injury upon the grape. And indeed, Yahshua Himself defined this one for us, equating wine with blood—specifically, His own. So since we are informed several times in scripture that “the life is in the blood,” wine, by association, also speaks of life—a good thing, as long as you've got it. Thus when we see blood (or wine) poured out onto the ground, we comprehend the picture: life is being lost.

Just as with grain and oil, wine was an integral part of the system of sacrifices and offerings Yahweh instituted in theocratic Israel. **“Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you, and you offer to Yahweh from the herd or from the flock an offering by fire or a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering or at your appointed feasts, to make a pleasing aroma to Yahweh, then he who brings his offering shall offer to Yahweh a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour, mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil; and you shall offer with the burnt offering, or for the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb....”** Some of these things weren't available in any significant quantities in the wilderness, so Yahweh made it clear that the Israelites weren't being told to do the impossible: the “rules” would only apply once they entered the promised land. (The *instructions themselves* were the important part, anyway.) Wine in particular was conspicuously absent from the wilderness diet, as we read in Deuteronomy 29:6. The point is, we can't offer something Yahweh hasn't yet provided—which is why it's absolute nonsense for an unredeemed sinner to try to gain favor with God by promising never to do one wrong thing ever again: *cross my heart and hope to die*. Sinlessness cannot be “offered” by someone who is sinful any more than a billion-dollar ransom can be paid by a pauper.

Larger sacrificial animals were to be offered with larger amounts of grain, oil, and wine, but the proportions remained relatively constant. **“Or for a ram, you shall offer for a grain offering two tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a third of a hin of oil. And for the drink offering you shall offer a third of a hin of wine, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh. And when you offer a bull as a burnt offering or sacrifice, to fulfill a vow or for peace offerings to Yahweh, then one shall offer with the bull a grain offering of three tenths of an ephah of fine flour, mixed with half a hin of oil. And you shall offer for the drink offering half a hin of wine, as an offering by fire, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”** (Numbers 15:1-10) Note that the amount of olive oil (symbolic, as we have seen, of the Spirit of Yahweh) was always the same as the amount of wine to be offered. This equivalence, I’m thinking, is no accident. Yahweh wanted us to connect the two things in our minds—Spirit with blood—both of which are vehicles of life. The two parallel “births” of John 3 are once again in view.

Two lambs per day, every day, were to be sacrificed at the sanctuary: **“The one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight; also a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with a quarter of a hin of beaten oil. It is a regular burnt offering, which was ordained at Mount Sinai for a pleasing aroma, an offering by fire to Yahweh. Its drink offering shall be a quarter of a hin for each lamb. In the Holy Place you shall pour out a drink offering of strong drink to Yahweh.”** (Numbers 28:4-7; cf. Exodus 29:38-41) One may wonder: since the animal’s blood was shed as it was sacrificed, why was wine—a secondary, *symbolic* form of “blood”—also required? Is God being pointlessly redundant here? The answer lies in the fact that only mortal, physical life resides “in the blood.” It’s temporary, a mere shadow of another kind of life—one infinitely beyond the mortal sort of existence we share with lambs, lions, and sea slugs. *Spiritual* life, however, is *not* in the blood. So although the blood of bulls and goats was assigned symbolic meaning, it was never actually efficacious in atoning for our sins. But since attaining eternal existence is that about which Yahweh wanted to teach us, He introduced the wine metaphor. The pouring out of wine in the Holy Place was a clear indication that Yahweh was anticipating a life-blood sacrifice of a different sort—one that He Himself would make, one that would achieve in eternity what our blood sacrifices at the altar did in finite time.

Wine is ordinarily spoken of as a blessing, a good thing. One of the evidences brought back by the twelve spies that the promised land was indeed “a good land, a land of milk and honey,” was a cluster of grapes so big it had to be carried on a pole between two of them. But isn’t wine an intoxicating beverage? Yes. So it may come as a bit of a shock to some of our more straitlaced brethren that even

wine's ability to compromise our sobriety is spoken of as a good thing. The Psalmist, for example, identifies it as a gift from God, gives thanks for it, and states why: **"You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart."** (Psalm 104:14-15) The fact that there is far more scriptural admonition warning against its misuse than there is thanksgiving for its ability to "make the heart merry" doesn't change the fact that God basically considers wine a gift, not a curse, something to be enjoyed in moderation and thankfulness.

This characterization will not change during the Millennial kingdom, either. The prophet Amos describes the good times awaiting us: **"Behold, the days are coming,' declares Yahweh, 'when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,' says Yahweh your God."** (Amos 9:13-15) Here, vineyards are compared to people: God will plant Israel in their land as the farmer plants vines in his vineyard—fully expecting to harvest fruit that, when fully mature, will "gladden the heart." Furthermore, Yahweh intends to guard His vineyard. Never again will His enemies be allowed to "uproot" what He has planted. Perhaps I'm taking the analogy too far, but it occurred to me that Yahweh considers being in the company of people who genuinely love, trust, and enjoy Him a bit intoxicating (cf. Song of Solomon 4:10, 7:9). We "gladden" His heart.

If we understand Yahweh's purpose toward us—that of blessing us with life and love—then we can see that everything that grows upon the earth, the foundation of our food chain, is really a miracle of transformation. God takes sunlight, water, air, nutrients in the soil, and a living plant (all of which He created and placed on the earth in perfect balance), and causes nutrition to result—something men and animals find edible and enjoyable. It shouldn't be too terribly surprising, then, that Yahshua's first public miracle was a demonstration of what Yahweh does for us all the time—a miracle of transformation, but compressed in time. I'm speaking, of course, of the famous incident in which He turned water into wine: **"There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with His disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, 'They have no wine....'"**

Note a few salient facts here at the outset. (1) Yahshua had already, at this early date, gathered disciples to Himself. But they hadn't followed because of His signs and wonders (i.e., evidence of His divinity) or even because of what He'd said and taught. About all He'd done at this point was to ask John to baptize Him,

after which He had endured forty days of testing in the wilderness. John had pointed out Yahshua as “the Lamb of God,” the one whom the Spirit had identified as the Messiah—the one who would baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit. That was enough for Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael, who had been seeking God’s truth even before Yahshua arrived. (2) His mother, Mary, though she had never seen Him do a miracle either, intuitively knew her son could be counted upon to do what needed to be done. After all, she had not gotten to this place in her life by being unresponsive to the leading of Yahweh’s Spirit. (3) For what it’s worth, the name of the town was Cana, which means “a place of reeds.” We ran across its origin previously in this chapter: *qaneh*, the “sweet-smelling, aromatic cane or reed” used in the manufacture of the priestly anointing oil, a word that also denotes a six-cubit standard of measure. Are we being told that Yahshua was about to be revealed as the standard by which all men are measured?

The narrative continues: **“And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what does this have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever He tells you.’** It’s kind of funny, how “in sync” Yahshua and Mary were. All she had done was inform Him of a problem, but He immediately sensed that the subject *really* being broached was when, and how, to begin telling the world who He really was—the Son of God. Mary was doing what Godly Moms always do: channeling the Spirit of Yahweh in the lives of their children. She gave the servants the wisest possible advice, something we should all still be heeding, all the time: *do whatever He tells you*. Mary had no idea what her son would actually do, of course. He could have told them, “Gee, guys, I guess you’d better take up a collection and go buy some more wine.” But He didn’t. Although the time for His sacrifice was still years away, the time for lifting the curtain a bit on His real identity had arrived. His disciples, at the very least, needed to see a glimpse, a preview, of the awesome power Yahshua wielded.

“Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, ‘Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.’ So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory. And His disciples believed in Him.” (John 2:1-11) It’s a familiar story to most of us, but let’s look closely at the telling little details. First, the containers were retasked, at least temporarily. Ritual purification had its roots in the Torah, but the scribes and Pharisees had turned the practice, once a living picture of Yahweh’s cleansing of our lives, into a dead religious obligation (see

Mark 7:3). So Yahshua transformed the pots into vessels dedicated to the celebration of love, relationship, fruitfulness, and lifelong commitment.

Second, note that the servants did their jobs with enthusiasm: they filled the pots all the way to the brim. All they knew for sure at this point was that the jars would be heavier, if they had to lift them. But they did as they'd been instructed, with a whole heart and pure motives. If we aspire to be God's servants, we ought to take a hint here. Third, taking the "water" to the master of ceremonies required an act of faith. The servants (although they probably figured *something* was going on) had no idea what had been done. They risked looking like insolent fools on the word of Yahshua, and they were willing to take that chance. Fourth, the servants alone knew what Yahshua had done (though they didn't know *how*); the master of ceremonies and the bridegroom didn't have a clue. We "servants" should get used to the idea that although we can easily recognize the providence of Yahweh in our lives, the world will usually be blind to it, assuming some "naturalistic" explanation rather than giving thanks to God, as they should.

Fifth, the wine Yahshua had created out of plain water was of surprisingly good quality. When God provides, He provides *well*. (Remember the manna? It was to all accounts both tasty and nutritious, even if folks did get a little weary of it after forty years.) Sixth, notice *how much* wine was produced—about 150 gallons. It was not without cause that Paul described Yahshua as "**able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.**" (Ephesians 3:20) Yahweh is not on a budget. And seventh, this miracle was embraced as a sign, a manifestation of Yahshua's glory. Not only was the water transformed into wine, but the disciples were transformed from merely being *interested* in Yahshua into *believing* in Him—trusting in the premise that He was actually Yahweh's Messiah.

Although wine is generally characterized as a good thing, an indication of blessing, in scripture, it can be misused, abused, even elevated to the status of a false god. Like any number of other good things—wealth, sex, sustenance, pleasure, or security—wine can become the object of our desire, replacing in our affections the very God who provided it to be enjoyed. As I said, the Bible spends far more time warning us about the pitfalls of drunkenness than it does extolling the virtues of this particular blessing.

Solomon, for example, asks, "**Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and**

stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things.” (Proverbs 23:29-33) The undercurrent of thought is not so much that drunkenness is a mistake in judgment, merely too much of a good thing. It’s that people often use alcohol as a means to an unwise end: disconnecting themselves from reality. It would be tempting to relegate this whole line of thought to an attempt to flee from one’s adverse circumstances—“drowning one’s sorrows,” as the saying goes. But that would be a gross oversimplification. People also drink excessively when they’re happy, when they’re bored, or just because it’s Friday night. And whether or not they’ll admit it, the reason usually boils down to that one thing: a desire to escape from reality.

It might seem to make sense (from a certain point of view) to get drunk when your life is rotten, when you desperately want to forget how bad things are. It’s human nature: if evil stands before us, we want to shut our eyes. But why do people also want to get drunk when they’re happy—when they’ve just gotten the big promotion, or passed some dreaded milestone? It’s just a theory, of course, but I believe it’s because they—deep down—realize that even at their best, their lives are pointless. *Okay, I’ve just gotten everything I’ve always wanted. So how come I still feel empty?* Reality without Christ feels just a little *too* real.

The solution to a pointless existence is to *get a life*—a real life, one that lasts for eternity, one that is lived in peace and fellowship with our Creator. That’s why Paul admonishes us, **“Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”** (Ephesians 5:18-21) I’m aware, of course, that the lost world would characterize *this* as “escapism.” Whereas they seek shelter from reality in wine (or some other equally pointless diversion), we seek it (they’d say) in religious fervor. But we who endeavor to be “filled with the Spirit” know better. We’re not fleeing from reality at all, but running *toward* it—embracing it. This isn’t “religious fervor” at all, but rather a conscious, rational determination to live life to the fullest, in good times and bad. The Spirit of God is not an escape mechanism, but a *coping* mechanism (so to speak); It does not numb our senses, but sharpens our perception of what’s really going on around us. It doesn’t merely insulate us from the world; it detaches us entirely from its evil—if we’re willing to let the Holy Spirit fill us. The world can still attack us, of course, but all it can reach is our mortal bodies, and these bodies no longer define who we are. They are but shadows cast by our true identities, the lives we live in God’s Spirit. You can stomp on my shadow all you want—I won’t feel a thing.

Wine influences our mortal flesh if we allow it to do so. And the Holy Spirit can influence our souls—but again, only at our discretion. The choices are ours.

Isaiah points out that the pursuit of pleasure is directly antithetical to the quest for the knowledge of Yahweh: **“Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them! They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of Yahweh, or see the work of His hands. Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge; their honored men go hungry, and their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure, and the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude will go down, her revelers and he who exults in her.”** (Isaiah 5:11-14) It’s not like the distinction is academic. Our actions have consequences—in the case of drunken dissipation: ignorance, exile, dishonor, hunger, thirst, and ultimately death. The pursuit of Yahweh’s kingdom yields exactly the opposite result: knowledge, peace, honor, satisfaction, and eternal life. So although there is nothing *intrinsically* wrong with “wine, women, and song,” to run after these things in lieu of Yahweh’s truth is to worship a false god.

This very distinction was codified in God’s instructions to the Levitical Priesthood. Speaking to Aaron the High Priest, Yahweh said: **“Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that Yahweh has spoken to them by Moses.”** (Leviticus 10:9-11) In other words, although it would be okay for the priests to enjoy wine in moderation when they were “off duty,” they were *never* to minister in the sanctuary when they were under its influence. Remember, the priests (in their *role* as priests) are symbolic of believers in general—those who intercede with God as children of the Chief Intercessor, Christ. And the sanctuary—the tent of meeting—represented the plan of Yahweh for the redemption of mankind. So the priests were to personify the “distinction between the holy and the common.” They were to exemplify the difference between the clean and the unclean. They were to demonstrate through their lives that the ordinary pleasures of life, though not forbidden under ordinary circumstances, had no role to play in our reconciliation with God. The point, I think, is that the material blessings God showers upon us should not be confused with what He has done to redeem us. There is no correlation between how “blessed” a person’s circumstances seem to be and how “saved” he is. (On a completely different level, this may also be a warning against using mind-altering substances to facilitate contact with deity—something endemic in pagan modes of worship the world over. Since Yahweh is real, one needn’t enter a shamanistic trance to encounter Him.)

The Levitical priesthood wasn’t a status one could attain through dedication, study, or good behavior. Genetic serendipity was the only criteria. It was a position thrust upon the males of one sub-clan of Israel—the sons of Aaron—whether they wanted it or not. I imagine God’s reason for setting it up this way

was that He didn't want anyone to get the impression that they could work for their salvation. On the other hand, neither was being *predestined* to salvation (or to the converse, for that matter). In point of fact, salvation had nothing to do with this particular image. God's children are often assigned what *roles* to play in the family drama, but whether or not we're in the family to begin with is a choice that's entirely up to us. Although the priesthood is metaphorical of the household of faith, it is not a picture of how to reach this status, but only of what we're to do once we've arrived.

So in order to avoid leaving the impression that His children's initiative or dedication meant nothing to Him, Yahweh instituted the "Nazirite vow," a voluntary, usually temporary, state of total separation to Yahweh that any believer could elect to do. And as with the priests, abstinence from wine while "on duty" was part of the formula. The name of the vow is derived from the Hebrew verb *nazar*: to dedicate, consecrate, devote, or keep sacred and separate. **"When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to Yahweh, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins."** (Numbers 6:2-4) It's the same basic image we saw with the ministry of the priests, only this time it's concentrated and focused. Not only was wine (symbolic of blessings enjoyed in this mortal life) to be avoided during the vow's duration, but so was any contact with grapes or anything made from them. (There were other prohibitions associated with the Nazirite vow as well, but they're beyond the scope of this discussion.) The idea seems to be the elimination of all potential loopholes and technicalities, in order to demonstrate the depth, sincerity, and totality of one's dedication and separation to Yahweh. It's an all-or-nothing approach to serving the God of Israel, one so difficult to maintain in our sinful, mortal state, that it was designed to be intense but temporary—sort of like fasting or holding your breath under water: you weren't meant to live your whole life like this, but it could nevertheless be a valuable, useful, or enlightening experience.

In this respect, it's sort of like the wilderness wanderings. In a previous chapter, we explored the symbolic distinction between the wilderness and the promised land. Now, with our new perspective, we can see why wine was not part of the wilderness experience (beyond its obvious scarcity): **"And Moses summoned all Israel [just before they were to cross the Jordan and enter the Land] and said to them: 'You have seen all that Yahweh did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day Yahweh has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet. You have not eaten**

bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink, that you may know that I am Yahweh your God.” (Deuteronomy 29:2-6) There are benefits to living settled lives in the land of promise—exemplified by having wine to drink that “gladdens the heart.” But there are also challenges. Not only are there “Canaanites” (enticements to compromise) in the land with whom we must do battle, but also certain hidden dangers that present themselves—blessings that threaten, if we’re not vigilant, to morph from gifts into gods.

We must therefore maintain constant watchfulness, lest we abandon the Giver as we pursue His gifts. Moses warned Israel about this very thing. (Well, that’s not quite accurate: actually, he prophesied that they *would* eventually fall into this trap.) Yahweh (in Deuteronomy 29-32) promised that He would send fierce enemies to punish this future rebellious permutation of the Israel whom He had gone so far out of His way to redeem. The only reason (He says) that He doesn’t wipe Israel out altogether is that He, having given His word to the contrary, doesn’t want these enemies to conclude that their own strength has made them victorious over God’s chosen people—and thus by implication, over God Himself. Moses then describes Israel’s future enemies: **“They are a nation void of counsel, and there is no understanding in them. If they were wise, they would understand this; they would discern their latter end! How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, and Yahweh had given them up?”** Good point: no one could possibly enjoy any success against Yahweh’s elect unless He Himself has empowered them—for His own purposes, to wit: to encourage our repentance. **“For their rock is not as our Rock; our enemies are by themselves.”** That’s especially relevant today: Israel’s enemies, like Islam, are “by themselves,” for the god they serve is *nothing*—a figment of the imagination. **“For their vine comes from the vine of Sodom and from the fields of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison; their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents and the cruel venom of asps.”** (Deuteronomy 32:28-33) Not every vintage is a blessing from God, it turns out. It’s another incredibly important lesson: a gift from an enemy is *not* a gift, but a curse. The wine the enemy offers us may look tempting, but it’s actually poison. Consider the source.

Case in point: Babylon. **“Another angel, a second, followed, saying, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.’”** (Revelation 14:8) This “sexual immorality” is a prophetic euphemism for idolatry—the love, veneration or adoration of *anything* other than Yahweh and His Messiah in the hearts of men. John later saw Babylon’s true character: **“Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of**

blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.' And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." (Revelation 17:1-6) "Babylon," the purveyor of idolatry in the world, has made her "lovers" blind, stinking drunk. But the wine she has been pouring out—that which the lost world finds so intoxicating—is the life-blood of Yahweh's saints—His sanctified ones, those consecrated through the covenant of grace. Satan can't touch God, so he settles for attacking His children, His loved ones, His bride. But Satan, being a created spirit, can't achieve anything of substance in this world without enlisting the assistance of men. So beware: people who do the devil's bidding will share the devil's destiny.

The ultimate "target" for Satan's minions was, of course, Yahshua the Messiah. The Torah's strange instruction to pour wine out onto the ground (as we saw above) was a prophecy of what would happen literally on Calvary's pole, fulfilling the promise of Passover. So on the night He was to be betrayed, Yahshua taught His disciples what the bread and wine of the Torah's offerings really signified—His own body and blood: **"Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant [called "the new covenant in My blood" in Luke], which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."** (Matthew 26:26-29; cf. Mark 14:22-25) When He said these words, the disciples had no idea what He was talking about. For all they knew, Yahshua was talking in esoteric riddles, in mystical allegory. It didn't matter that He had told them plainly that He would be betrayed, that men would kill Him, and that on the third day He would be raised from the dead (see for example, Matthew 17:22-23). They didn't "get it" any more than most Christians today really comprehend what His return will entail. But by sundown the next day, Yahshua's blood had been poured out as a drink offering upon the ground—and before the morning dawned on the third day His resurrection would prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that He was indeed the Son of God.

All of that would conspire to invest Yahshua's sad, strange words with stunningly literal relevance. This was something that had been rehearsed innumerable times in Torah rituals over the previous millennium and a half: the blood of the perfect Lamb had now been **"poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."** And at last, the disciples were in a position to sort out what **"the new covenant in My blood"** meant. They understood the "old" covenant well enough. The contract of Deuteronomy 28—either heed the precepts of the Torah and receive God's

blessing, or violate them and endure His wrath—had been played out with unerring precision since the days of Joshua. This “new” covenant wasn’t so much *new* as it was renewed, solidified, and restated in eternal terms. In the “old” covenant, temporal blessings and curses had been in view, but it was now clear that the blessings and curses would extend beyond one nation, beyond the mortal realm, and beyond the constraints of time. It was finally clear: The Torah Code did have a key, and His name was Yahshua. Everything Moses had said was true, though encrypted in mortal circumstance and cloaked in symbol and imagery. But now, with the resurrection of God’s Messiah, the significance of the covenant became clear—*so* clear, in fact, that the eyes of evil cannot endure its brilliance.

Yahshua Himself had restated the conditions of the covenant, but in terms that were calculated to reveal its “new” eternal ramifications—which, of course, rendered it all but incomprehensible to those who assumed they had the Torah down to a science, those who had worked a lifetime getting the steps down, so they could get through their days without even *thinking* about what the Torah meant. **“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.’”** (John 6:53-55) *Oh good grief. Here He goes again, asking us to engage, to react, to respond, to think about what it all means. All we really want is a nice, tidy list of rules to follow, so we can get God off our backs. Sorry, guys: the covenant of the Torah is anything but tidy. It was designed to encourage us to ponder its meaning. But even stated this way, the covenant between God and man is still a legal contract, with both parties responsible for keeping up their part of the bargain. Yahweh, for His part, promises to “abide in us,” nourish us with His truth, and imbue us with eternal life. So what do we have to do to get these good things? We have to “feed on His flesh and drink His blood.” Huh? Goofy Catholic superstitions like transubstantiation notwithstanding, this obviously isn’t meant to be taken literally, but metaphorically. We are to assimilate Christ, make Him part of us, allow Him to repair, restore, and build up our souls, just as food and drink do for our bodies. Is that really so hard to understand?*

The fact that wine is produced by crushing grapes in order to extract the juice from them is, quite obviously, the origin of the symbolic connection between wine and the blood of life. Wine (like bread and olive oil) begins with Yahweh’s miraculous gift of life, but is delivered to us—is made available for our use—only through violence and crushing pressure. That God would subject *Himself* to this

kind of brutality for our sakes was so subtle in the Torah's rites that nobody (I suppose) really understood this part of the picture at first—though in twenty-twenty hindsight, we can see it written between every line.

So among the “curses” promised for failing to heed Yahweh’s instructions, we read this warning: **“You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them.”** (Deuteronomy 28:39) The people who were unwilling to honor the God who instructed them to (among other things) pour out wine as a drink offering would find themselves with no wine to pour out. The Prophet Haggai would later look back on the literal fulfillment of the curse—confirming that Israel had indeed been disobedient to the voice of Yahweh: **“You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares Yahweh of hosts. Because of My house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.”** (Haggai 1:9-11) Our priorities matter to Yahweh: He insists that we put His kingdom before our own. Granted, this whole “Me first” attitude would sound ludicrous coming from anybody else. But in Yahweh’s case it’s the only course of action that makes sense: when we place Yahweh first in our lives, it benefits *us*, not Him—and because He loves us, He wants us to prosper. So the grain, the oil, and the wine (and all the rest) were removed from Israel because they had refused to honor Yahweh with them as instructed: as rehearsals of our redemption, the Torah’s picture-prophecies. It matters not that the people didn’t comprehend the prophetic significance of the Torah’s precepts. This was an exercise in trust: Yahweh said to “do it,” and they didn’t. I’m not picking on Israel, here: we’re no more obedient than they were, in many cases—even though we’re better informed. We’re *so well* informed, in fact, that we (unlike Israel) have no excuse for failing to see (and heed) the warnings latent in the symbols. Specifically, since wine is clearly a euphemism for one’s life-blood, we should perceive that in the end, rebellion will do more than compromise our prosperity. It will crush our very lives.

Remember, the Torah uses temporal symbols to teach spiritual truths, but those spiritual lessons are no less literal, no less real, just because they encompass more than our fragile, fleeting mortal existence. The symbols help us bridge the gap in our minds. They point out the continuity between what we can see with our waking eyes, and what is still over the spiritual horizon. Wine is no exception. If Yahweh allowed His own Messiah to be crushed like a grape to atone for our transgressions, it should come as no surprise that His anger toward those who choose to spit on His sacrifice will manifest itself in the same symbolic terms—the “grapes of wrath.” So just as Yahshua prayed, **“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.... My Father, if this cannot**

pass unless I drink it, Your will be done,” (Matthew 26:39, 42) we later read of a similar cup being thrust into the hands of Yahweh’s unrepentant enemies: **“God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of His wrath.”** (Revelation 16:19) If we aren’t willing to allow Yahshua to take the wine of God’s wrath for our sins, we’ll have to drink it ourselves.

“Babylon” is generally used in scripture as a metaphor for systematic, organized idolatry. It appears that “Babylon bouillabaisse” comes in three flavors—religious, political, and commercial—and they all smell mighty fishy. This is what happens when “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” take on corporate proportions. Several times in scripture, we are told what to do when we encounter Babylon’s power, but the instructions may not be what we’d expect: we are *not* told to fight her, reform her, try to influence her, or encourage her to “do better.” No, we are told to *flee*—run away, hide, find shelter from her insidious influence. We are told to be holy, for Yahweh our God is holy. The reason we’re instructed to flee should now be apparent: Babylon—in all its guises—is going to experience the wrath of God. She’s not just going to “taste” it, either, but will **“drain the cup of the wine of the fury of His wrath.”**

You may be saying, “That’s a relief: I’m not all that organized, so I guess I’m not part of Babylon.” Sorry; you’re not off the hook yet. All it will take to incur God’s wrath, in the end, is to “look out for Number One” (which is sort of what Haggai was talking about, above), to do what conventional wisdom says you have to do to survive: compromise with the world. Here’s the specific warning to those living during the Tribulation: **“If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”** (Revelation 14:8-11) I realize that this particular scenario will be in place only for a very short, specific period of time—mostly during the last three and a half years of the Tribulation—when the “beast,” the Antichrist, will wield undisputed control over the earth. Those who buy into his scheme (which will involve overt Satan worship, one way or another) will **“drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger.”** But what if you’re living *now*, before the Tribulation begins? What if the beast hasn’t shown his face yet? Are you therefore “safe” from God’s wrath? Not necessarily.

I don’t want to get bogged down in the minutiae of predictive prophecy (*been there, done that, wrote a 900-page book explaining it*). I merely want to offer some sobering observations about those who will be asked to “worship the beast and receive his mark.” First, doing so will both “seem reasonable” and be

required by law. System 666 will ostensibly facilitate commerce, ensure peace, and prevent crime. Second, refusing to comply will bring a death sentence down upon your head. You'll be an outlaw, ostracized from society, forced to live off the grid, hunted like an animal, and hated by all the "normal" people. Third, the only real reason you'll have for your "rebellion" against the system will be a nagging conscience—you'll know, deep down inside, that this is just *wrong*.

My point is that although the actual "line-in-the-sand" system isn't here yet, the attitudes that will drive it are in evidence already, and have been for as long as we can remember. Anywhere in the world today, anyone who unabashedly, unapologetically honors Yahweh and His Messiah is looked at by the majority of his neighbors as "a bit off," disturbingly out of step with polite mainstream society. Oh, it's still socially acceptable to attend church and celebrate religious holidays (as long as they bear no resemblance to what Yahweh actually ordained). But to get serious about your relationship with God, to study His word and heed the lessons you find within its pages, to pray when there's nothing in particular you want, to love your neighbor with no ulterior motives, to choose not to participate in the pointless dissipation of the world—these are the sorts of things that will get you labeled an unbalanced fanatic, someone to be shunned. Compromise with the world will effectively deflect this antagonism, but it will also separate you from the God who called you out of it. As John advised, **"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."** (1 John 2:15-17) We have to live in the world. We don't have to let it live in us. Today, compromise with the world is a slippery slope; tomorrow, it will be the Slip-n-Slide to hell.

The imagery of the winepress of God's wrath only gets squishier as we dig deeper into prophetic scripture. Isaiah asks, **"Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like his who treads in the winepress?"** And Yahweh (in the persona of Yahshua) answers, **"I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me; I trod them in My anger and trampled them in My wrath; their lifeblood [there's the definition of the "wine" metaphor] spattered on My garments, and stained all My apparel. For the day of vengeance was in My heart, and My year of redemption had come. I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold; so My own arm brought Me salvation, and My wrath upheld Me. I trampled down the peoples in My anger; I made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood [there it is again] on the earth."** (Isaiah 63:2-6) Twice here God contrasts the "drink offering" that was poured out with the Levitical sacrifices—prophetic of Christ's blood, spilled for our redemption—with the lifeblood of the rebels destined to be destroyed in Yahweh's wrath.

John saw the same thing: **“And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, ‘Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.’ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for 1,600 stadia.”** (Revelation 14:18-20) It’s Armageddon, and the angels are seen “feeding” the winepress of God’s wrath. I don’t know why people call it “the *Battle* of Armageddon.” This is no battle. Satan’s sadly deluded minions, up to and including the Antichrist himself, are not even *participants*; they’re mere cannon fodder, grapes for the press, a feast for the birds. They came hoping to destroy Yahweh’s people, Israel, once and for all. But they ended up facing Yahweh’s Champion, His Messiah, King Yahshua.

John was the faithful prophetic witness to all these things: **“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.... He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God.... From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”** (Revelation 19:11, 13, 15-16) Yahshua had begun His first-advent ministry demonstrating His power by turning water into wine at a wedding—celebrating relationship, love, and life. He will begin His *second*-advent ministry demonstrating His power by personally “treading the winepress of the fury of the wrath of Almighty God”—“celebrating” (if one can use that word) what happens when the world *turns its back* on relationship, love, and life.

So, does our exploration of wine as a symbol end with bloodshed and wrath? No. There is life beyond Armageddon—abundant, vibrant life, beginning with Israel and flowing out like sweet wine upon the rest of redeemed humanity. **“Then Yahweh became jealous for his land and had pity on his people. Yahweh answered and said to His people, ‘Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.... The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.... You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of Yahweh your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And My people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am Yahweh your God and there is none else. And My people shall never again be put to shame.’** (Joel 2:18-19, 24, 26-27) I’ll drink to that!

FAT

❧ 3.1.4 ❧

The Best One Has to Offer

To hear some people talk today, fat is the kiss of death, something that must be outlawed forthwith. Cooler heads realize that in moderation and balance, it is an essential part of a healthy diet. For our purposes, however, none of this is relevant. Our job is to track down how fat is used as a metaphor in God's word—what it means, and what our course of action, in light of the symbol's application, should be.

From an anthropological point of view, body fat once signified prosperity or good health, for it implied a steady, secure supply of food, while those who were thin were presumed to be either ill or underfed and overworked. (Amazing how our perceptions change, isn't it? Two thousand years ago, *I would have been in style.*) All I know is, from the very beginning, fat was a scriptural euphemism for "the very best." **"Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to Yahweh an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And Yahweh had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard."** (Genesis 4:2-5) Although there's almost certainly more going on here than meets the eye, the lesson transmitted to us is simply this: Abel presented his best to Yahweh—a living animal, "the firstborn of his flock, the fat portions." And as we would come to understand millennia later, the fact that life was surrendered in the act of sacrifice was symbolically essential to the story. I have no doubt that Cain's veggies and fruit were really nice, but their harvest didn't transmit the picture of blood sacrifice that Yahweh required.

Was Cain *unable* (by virtue of his agricultural area of expertise) to provide an animal offering? Apparently not (though the conversation is admittedly cryptic): Yahweh asked Cain, **"Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door."** (Genesis 4:6-7) The word translated "sin" here is the same word used to describe the "sin offering" over fifty times in Leviticus alone (Hebrew: *chatta'ah*). I read into this (though I can't be dogmatic) that there was a lamb or goat within arm's reach that would have sufficed for a proper sacrifice, but Cain still refused to offer it—hence his guilt, frustration, internal conflict, and the eventual rage directed against his brother. Seems to me, man's failure to acknowledge the Sacrifice that Yahweh considers perfect *still* produces the same result. Does a sin offering still "crouch at the door?" Yes, in principle, but now He's *standing*. The risen Yahshua says,

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me. The one who overcomes, I will grant him to sit with Me on My throne.” (Revelation 3:20-21)

We all remember how God showed Joseph’s Pharaoh in a dream that there were going to be seven good years by showing him seven fat cattle (followed by seven years of famine, symbolized by thin, gaunt specimens). Once again, well-fed and healthy animals are called “fat,” while being lean and bony is an indicator of their ill health, hunger, or relative poverty. After Joseph’s God-given insight had saved Egypt from starvation, the Pharaoh showed him the gratitude he deserved: **“And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Say to your brothers, Do this: load your beasts and go back to the land of Canaan, and take your father and your households, and come to me, and I will give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you shall eat the fat of the land.’”** (Genesis 45:17-18) It’s not that Goshen was dripping with lipids. “Fat” had simply become a metaphor for “the very best.” A grateful Pharaoh wasn’t going to “thank” Joseph by giving his family a worthless hunk of desert to live in. The least he could do was give them the best land Egypt had to offer: fertile, well watered, and productive. It’s worth noting, however, that within a few decades, this paradise would become a prison. If I may read between the lines a bit, it appears that as Israel got used to the good life in Goshen, they forgot all about the God whose foreknowledge and provision had made it possible. So for the next four centuries, they were made to toil as slaves. The point? God’s bounty will be a blessing only as long as we acknowledge the Source. Without Yahweh, wealth can be a curse; the “fat of the land” can become a gilded cage.

I don’t know how significant this is, but New Testament references to “fat” are very few, and found only in parables. The parable of the marriage feast mentions the “fattened cattle” that were killed as part of the preparations for the wedding feast (see Matthew 22:4). Though the King (Yahweh) was “pulling out all the stops” to make the marriage of His Son (Yahshua) a spectacular celebration, the intended wedding guests (the Jews) treated the King’s efforts with contempt and antagonism, so He shut them out and invited others (the gentiles, “both bad and good”—who would form the *ekklesia*—the “called-out”) to the party instead. The fattened cattle here represent the very best Yahweh had to offer in fulfillment of His plan of reconciliation (in the end, Christ Himself). For almost two millennia now, the church has been feasting on God’s goodness—the “fattened cattle” of rejoicing, while Israel has been (for the most part) relegated to the role of outsiders, or worse, enemies of the King and His anointed Prince, Yahshua. Fortunately, however, there’s hope for Israel as well. They have only to repent. The prophet even tells us *when* they will do so: **“Come, let us return to Yahweh; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days [read: two thousand years] He will revive us; on the third day He will**

raise us up, that we may live before Him." (Hosea 6:1-2) In case you haven't noticed, that two thousand year mark (since Yahshua's passion) is almost upon us.

The story of the prodigal son also mentions a "fatted calf." **"And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son [that's us gentile Christians] said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"** The Father knows this, of course, but He's so happy we've returned to Him alive, He doesn't care. **"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."** (Luke 15:20-24) Though seen from a different angle, the point of the story is identical to that of the marriage feast we just saw. The (formerly) prodigal son represents the gentiles of the church—those called out of the world to return to the Father in humility and repentance. Once again, we see that the killing of the fatted calf (ultimately representing Christ) was an essential prelude to the celebration of our restoration.

"Now his older son [representing Israel] was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in." Israel, for the most part, refused to celebrate with the redeemed gentiles, and thus received no benefit—no nourishment or joy—from the killing of the "fatted calf" (Christ). **"His father [Yahweh] came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command."** Well, that wasn't quite true, was it? Israel's "obedience" was mostly in their own eyes, not in true symbiotic harmony with the will of their Father, Yahweh. **"Yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!..."** What the older son didn't understand was that killing the fatted calf wasn't a *reward* for his brother having led a profligate life (only to return to the Father when he got desperate). But it *was* inextricably linked to his repentance—something the older son (though not quite so *obvious* a rebel) had never been willing to do, because of his delusions of self-righteousness. The Father, however, knew the score.

"And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." This lesson is sometimes lost on the church, but it's one of the central themes of Biblical prophecy: Israel will, in the end, be restored, honored, and be given the inheritance due the eldest son. The church has *not*—as some insist—come in and taken Israel's rightful place. God's promises have not been abrogated. But Israel

can't take their rightful place either until they stop pouting and make peace with the Father. **"It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."** (Luke 15:25-32) There's plenty of love to go around. For my part, I'm thrilled to at last be "found," after having been "lost," but I'm also aware (and delighted) that Israel's glory days are before them. I have feasted on the fattened calf, the best my Father had to offer. I have put on the robe of undeserved righteousness He provided for me. I have accepted the ring of relationship and responsibility from my Father, and my feet are now shod with the preparation of the good news of peace. If I were never to receive one more good thing from the Father's hand, I know I have already received more than I deserve, and I am eternally grateful. So Israel, my brother, you really need to get over it.

The popular Old Testament caricature of God's "wrath and retribution" is a skewed and unbalanced view. Yahweh's judgment, while perfectly factual, is invariably seen (in context) contrasted with what Yahweh would *prefer* to be doing: showering us with blessings—beginning with Israel but extending as well to the rest of us. Typical is this passage from Asaph: **"Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies and turn My hand against their foes. Those who hate Yahweh would cringe toward Him, and their fate would last forever. But He would feed you with the finest** [Hebrew *cheleb*: literally, the fat] **of the wheat** [as in the English idiom, "the cream of the crop"], **and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."** (Psalm 81:13-16) The odd idea of purposely enduring dour, joyless religiosity in this life in hope of being rewarded with "pie in the sky when you die," is foolish, and more to the point, unscriptural. Yahweh earnestly desires to "feed us with the finest" *in this life*. However, I would (once again) point out that the blessings and cursings being discussed here are *national* in scope: the *nation* that listens to Yahweh and walks in His ways will be blessed—and vice versa. God is not offering individuals a celestial bribe here, a prosperity gospel guaranteeing earthly riches to "true believers." That would be tantamount to trying to "buy our love," and Yahweh knows that although you may be able to buy loyalty or obedience, you can't buy love.

As if to confirm what I've been saying, the word translated "finest" here is actually "fat," the Hebrew *cheleb*. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*, *cheleb* means: "1. lipid tissue of an animal, a part of an animal's body as a sacrifice; 2. bounty, i.e., a figurative extension of fat as a sign of prosperity; 3. the finest, best part, i.e., the figurative extension of fat as a choice portion, pertaining to olive and wine products and other products as choice, as the feature of an object; 4. a callous heart." As we shall see, all of these

seemingly diverse definitions really boil down to the same consistent symbol: “fat” is the best one has to offer—no matter whether the “one” doing the offering is God or man.

The majority of *cheleb* sightings in scripture are found in the Book of Leviticus, for this is where the Levitical sacrifices and offerings are described in detail. But before the Torah’s sacrifices could even begin, the priests themselves had to be consecrated—set apart to Yahweh for ministry on behalf of the people. That procedure is enumerated in Exodus 29, where in several places the issue of what to do with a sacrificial animal’s fat is addressed. After cleansing the candidates with water, dressing them in the appropriate (and symbol-rich) priestly garb, and anointing their heads with oil, Moses was to first sacrifice a bull—symbolic of the endeavors of man, which must be subordinated to Yahweh’s will before anything else can happen. God wasn’t overseeing the invention of a new religion here; the rites, rituals, and precepts He was instituting would, in their totality, prophetically define how (and through whom) He would reconcile the estranged human race back to Himself. Naturally, the “bull” of man’s efforts and schemes was the first thing that had to go.

So Yahweh told Moses, **“You shall take all the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and burn them on the altar.”** (Exodus 29:13) The bull’s carcass was to be burned outside the camp, like so much useless rubbish (which, after all, is what most of our manmade ideas about God are). But these fatty portions were to be ceremoniously offered to Yahweh upon the altar. As always, we must ask ourselves *why*. If fat represents “the very best,” then Yahweh is telling us something quite remarkable here. He’s telling us that man’s efforts toward reaching out to Him aren’t *completely* pointless. We aren’t just smart animals. We are, rather, made in the image and likeness of God. There is something within us that, when brought into focus, accurately reflects Yahweh’s presence in our lives—and this is a proper, even essential, offering if we are to function as priests, as intercessors between God and man. Yahweh (if I’m seeing this correctly) won’t respond to our half-hearted efforts, our half-baked schemes, or our half-witted religious prevarications. But He *is* receptive to the very best, most honest, most pure impulses of our nature, for those impulses emanate from His own Spirit.

It bears mention that Yahweh wasn’t asking His priests to become master butchers (although I’m sure they quickly came to know their way around a carcass). They didn’t have to strip out every last shred of subcutaneous body fat or marbling and offer *all* of that upon the altar. The organs He specified are where the fat is concentrated—in short, where it would serve as an unmistakable picture or parable: “The fat—the very best you have to offer—belongs to Me.” And why was this so important a concept? Because it works both ways: His plan was to

sacrifice, on our behalf, the very best *He* had to offer. This too is presented in the rites of ordination: **“You shall also take the fat from the ram and the fat tail and the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and the right thigh (for it is a ram of ordination), and one loaf of bread and one cake of bread made with oil, and one wafer out of the basket of unleavened bread that is before Yahweh....”** If you’re looking for symbols, this is indeed a “target-rich environment.” But for now, just note that the ram represents Christ: a fully mature male “lamb” (the picture of innocence) with horns (i.e., authority)—as John would put it, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Once again, only the obvious, easy to identify fat bits were specified. These instructions were designed to teach a very clear lesson.

“You shall put all these on the palms of Aaron and on the palms of his sons, and wave them for a wave offering before Yahweh. Then you shall take them from their hands and burn them on the altar on top of the burnt offering, as a pleasing aroma before Yahweh. It is a food offering to Yahweh.” (Exodus 29:22-25) Waving (or lifting into the air) the offering before placing it on the altar signified its dedication to Yahweh alone. I find it significant that the word translated “aroma” (the Hebrew *reyach*) is closely related to *ruach*—spirit. Yahweh enjoys the spirit we display when we fulfill the symbols presented here. By the way, the ESV’s translation “food offering” here and sixty other places in the Torah is erroneous (though virtually every other English translation gets it right). The Hebrew reads: “an offering by fire,” (Hebrew: *’ishshah*) making the symbology quite different. This speaks of purification and separation, not nourishment.

When we get into the actual Levitical animal offerings, the special handling of the fat portions remains a constant theme. There are five distinct types of blood offerings (*five*, not coincidentally, being the number of grace). Four of these specifically mention the disposition of the fat. (In the fifth type, the *bekor* or firstborn offering, the emphasis is placed on the distinction between clean and unclean, the concept of a substitutionary death, and the idea of paying a ransom for unclean firstborn animals, including people. So the *bekor* is clearly a parable predicting the sacrifice of Yahweh’s own Firstborn Son, Yahshua.)

The voluntary “burnt offering” (Hebrew: *olah*) was to be completely consumed on the altar—a picture of the Messiah’s total commitment to our redemption, not to mention His total obedience to the Father. And yet, the fat of the sacrifice is *still* to be handled separately: **“And Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, an offering by fire with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 1:8-9) Though the entire animal would be consumed in the flame, the division and separate mention of the pieces reminds us of the multifaceted nature of what was

offered up on Calvary—what God did, felt, thought, and achieved on our behalf. The fat emphasizes that Yahweh’s very best was given up for us.

The “guilt offering” or “trespass offering” (the *asham*), follows suit. Normally, a female lamb or goat was specified, but there was provision for less expensive substitute offerings if the worshipper was poor. **“This is the law of the guilt offering. It is most holy. In the place where they kill the burnt offering they shall kill the guilt offering, and its blood shall be thrown against the sides of the altar. And all its fat shall be offered, the fat tail, the fat that covers the entrails, the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. The priest shall burn them on the altar as an offering by fire to Yahweh; it is a guilt offering.”** (Leviticus 7:1-5) The meat of the sacrifice was to be eaten by the priest doing the work (a definition that normally includes his dependents, his family). But as usual, specific fatty portions were singled out to be removed and burned upon the altar, for they belonged to Yahweh.

The theme is continued with the “sin offering,” or *chata’t*. Sin offerings and guilt or trespass offerings were very similar. The primary functional difference seems to be that whereas the sin offering covered lapses in behavior, the trespass offering was meant to atone for lapses in holiness. The *chata’t* was brought by the guilty party, when he became aware of his transgression, to the priest to be sacrificed. The animal varied (sheep, goat, or bull, male or female), depending on whose sin was in view. In this example, a bull is the prescribed offering—indicating that either the priest himself or the nation as a whole was the guilty party: **“And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys (just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings); and the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering.”** (Leviticus 4:8-10) A sin offering was to be eaten only by the priests, and then only if they themselves were not culpable in the sin for which the *chata’t* was being offered. As with the *asham*, the meat belonged to the individual priest who performed the offering. The fatty parts, as always, were removed and burned on the altar in homage to Yahweh, but the carcass was taken out of the camp and burned there. Blood from the sacrifice was to be sprinkled seven times before the veil (that is, outside the door of the sanctuary), or applied with the priest’s finger to the horns of the altar.

All blood sacrifices speak of atonement for sin, for the life is in the blood. Ultimately, Christ’s sacrifice is in view, but the specific animals for the *chata’t* to be brought by the different classes of Israelites are instructive of how our position in this world relates to our sin and its consequences. Bulls (brought by the priests or by the congregation at large) indicate the false doctrines of man that lead to sin and death. Male goats (to be offered by the king) represent the sins of those in

positions of temporal authority—who exercise human governance in this world—surrogates for the coming King. And female goats or sheep (brought by ordinary citizens) speak of failure to heed the counsel of the Holy Spirit.

The “sin offering” passage refers to its similarity to something called a “peace offering.” This *selem* was made as a spontaneous expression of praise to Yahweh, as a way to express one’s thanksgiving for answered prayer, to underscore the seriousness of a vow the worshipper was taking, or as a freewill offering to show one’s devotion. The instructions for offering cattle are as follows: **“If his offering is a sacrifice of peace offering, if he offers an animal from the herd, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish before Yahweh. And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering [symbolically associating the animal with the worshipper’s purpose] and kill it at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall throw the blood against the sides of the altar. And from the sacrifice of the peace offering, as [an offering by fire] to Yahweh, he shall offer the fat covering the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. Then Aaron’s sons shall burn it on the altar on top of the burnt offering, which is on the wood on the fire; it is an offering by fire with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 3:1-5) The *selem* was to be eaten by the worshipper and his family, and shared with the priest, because our homage and thanksgiving to Yahweh nourishes us as it pleases God. But the fat portions (as always) were exclusively set aside for Yahweh, burned on the altar, as if to say, “Our best belongs to You, O God, for Your very best was given for us.”

Because lambs’ anatomies were a bit different from that of cattle, the definition of what constituted their “fat” parts was also a bit different: **“If his offering for a sacrifice of peace offering to Yahweh is an animal from the flock, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish. If he offers a lamb for his offering, then he shall offer it before Yahweh, lay his hand on the head of his offering, and kill it in front of the tent of meeting; and Aaron’s sons shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. Then from the sacrifice of the peace offering he shall offer as an offering by fire to Yahweh its fat; he shall remove the whole fat tail, cut off close to the backbone, and the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. And the priest shall burn it on the altar as an offering by fire to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 3:6-11) The principle is identical: the “very best” was reserved for Yahweh.

The same idea (that fat is where you find it) applies to goats: **“If his offering is a goat, then he shall offer it before Yahweh and lay his hand on its head and kill it in front of the tent of meeting, and the sons of Aaron shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. Then he shall offer from it, as his offering for an offering by fire to Yahweh, the fat covering the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the**

kidneys. And the priest shall burn them on the altar as an offering by fire with a pleasing aroma....”

The bottom line is now flatly declared: **“All fat is Yahweh’s. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, in all your dwelling places, that you eat neither fat nor blood.”** (Leviticus 3:12-17) Stated like this (“You shall eat neither fat nor blood”) we are perhaps being given a bit more insight into Yahweh’s purpose. Fat and blood are symbolically parallel, it appears. Blood (as we are reminded over and over in scripture) is where the life is. The principle is that life is Yahweh’s exclusive domain, His privilege and prerogative. He alone has the authority to give life or take it away. So we may take a life—whether animal or human—*only* on Yahweh’s explicit instruction. It is significant, then, that the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9: 1-7) authorized mankind both to kill animals for food and to execute murderers.

That being the case, what can we learn from God’s prohibition of our consuming fat? Based on what we’ve seen so far, it seems reasonably clear: we are not to seize the “best” for ourselves, but are rather to dedicate it to Yahweh. How? There is only one practical way to show our love for Yahweh: by loving our fellow man. **“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”** (I John 4:7-8)

And precisely what does it mean to “love one another?” Actually, Yahweh spelled it out, in practical terms, in the Torah: **“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am Yahweh your God.”** In other words, provide for people less fortunate than yourself—without robbing them of their dignity. **“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by My name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am Yahweh.”** Be honest, transparent, and trustworthy. **“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am Yahweh.”** Consider the needs of others before your own, pay your debts promptly, and don’t scheme and deal underhandedly to gain an advantage. **“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am Yahweh.”** Be just and merciful, evenhanded, fair, and non-prejudicial. **“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly [that is, reprove, correct, discipline, and reason together] with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear**

a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am Yahweh.” (Leviticus 19:9-18) Vengeance is God’s prerogative; it is our job to caution and instruct our brothers when they’re on the wrong path.

So the “fat” of our lives—the good parts that come our way—should not be dedicated to enriching our own circumstances but rather to enhancing the lives of others, especially people in need: in a word, *loving* them. Does this mean we are to utterly impoverish ourselves in the service of others? Actually, it doesn’t. Remember, there is plenty of “meat” in the peace offering to be shared between the worshipper, his family, and the priest (the one who intercedes with God on his behalf). Only the “fat” is reserved exclusively for Yahweh. But anyone who’s ever eaten a good steak knows that some of the fat is impossible to separate out from the meat. Here too a lesson can be implied: if “*all* fat is Yahweh’s,” we can hardly go through life *without* being blessed in some way with what belongs to God. I’ll leave it up to you to decide what’s “marbling” in your steak and what constitutes the “fatty lobe,” the portion reserved exclusively for Yahweh.

With the original Passover still fresh in the minds and memories of the Israelites, Yahweh told them, “**You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of My feast remain until the morning.**” (Exodus 23:18) We have already established the principle that the fat of the sacrifice was Yahweh’s portion. It was to be completely consumed on the altar—a picture of the judgment Yahshua endured. This was a restatement of His instructions concerning the night of Passover: “**And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.**” (Exodus 12:10. Verses 14-20 go on to explain the reference to “anything leavened.”)

We are thus reminded that the Messiah’s “judgment,” that is, His sojourn in sheol while he endured the wrath of God on our behalf, took place on the Feast of Unleavened Bread. By the morning of the next day (Sunday, the Feast of Firstfruits), Yahshua had already resurrected Himself from the dead. “**Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.... The angel answered and said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.’**” (Matthew 28:1, 5-6) It hardly bears mentioning that Yahshua was the “very best” Yahweh had to offer—He personified the “fat portions” of the Passover sacrifice. Note, then, that here at the tomb, the “fat of God’s sacrifice” had *not* “remained until morning.” It had not

continued under judgment, constrained by death, one moment longer than the Torah had required.

Yahshua was the best offering Yahweh could have presented on our behalf. This explains why the “fat” of the sacrifices (characterized as the very best part of the offering) was reserved for Yahweh alone: it’s a picture (just like everything else in the Torah) of what God was in the process of doing for us. What happens, then, when we ignore (or flout) Yahweh’s instructions about reserving “the fat” for Him? What is the result of giving the best to yourself? (Does the commandment “You shall not steal” ring any bells?)

Job’s “miserable comforter” Eliphaz pronounced the following imprecation, as if to accuse Job of having done that very thing (thus explaining his predicament): **“Because he [the wicked man] has stretched out his hand against God and defies the Almighty... because he has covered his face with his fat and gathered fat upon his waist... he will not be rich, and his wealth will not endure, nor will his possessions spread over the earth.”** (Job 15:25-29) Job’s wealth had indeed fled (at least temporarily). But does that (in itself) define him as “wicked?” Let us not forget: Yahweh Himself called such accusations “darkened counsel” and “words without knowledge.” (Job 38:2) Further, it’s obvious that Yahweh *doesn’t* automatically impoverish everybody who keeps the “fat” of life for themselves, not in the short run, anyway. If He did, the world would be a very different place. And if having “gathered fat upon his waist” was a sure sign of antipathy toward Almighty God, I, for one, would be in deep trouble.

Where Eliphaz’ rant missed the point, David’s prayer identifies the heart of the problem. You can’t identify the enemies of God by looking at their temporal circumstances—especially in the case of once having had wealth and lost it, as in Job’s case. But you *can* recognize the wicked by their actions and attitudes, their eagerness to “seize the fat” for themselves. **“They close their hearts [*cheleb*] to pity; with their mouths they speak arrogantly.... Arise, O Yahweh! Confront him, subdue him! Deliver my soul from the wicked by Your sword, from men by Your hand, O Yahweh, from men of the world whose portion is in this life.”** There’s the key: those whose hearts are “fat” and closed to the needs of others live only for what they can get from this mortal life. The “blessings” they gather to themselves are actually *stolen*—from God. They’re the “fat” of the sacrifice. **“You fill their womb with treasure; they are satisfied with children, and they leave their abundance to their infants.”** This has nothing to do with being a loving parent and good provider. It’s an observation that men whose “portion is in this life,” instead of honoring God with their possessions, assume (since they can’t take it with them when they die) that they can leave their ill-gotten gains to their progeny. David’s own personal attitude is now set in sharp contrast to this: **“As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with Your likeness.”** (Psalm 17:10, 13-15) Ironically, David ended

up filthy rich in this world. But he reckoned his only *real* wealth to be the heavenly sort. His children weren't left penniless, of course, but all he could think about in his old age was honoring Yahweh by building the temple. David found value in righteousness, not worldly treasure. And his focus was always upon the face of Yahweh.

Back in the Torah, the lessons continue. What about eating meat in non-Levitical settings? Do the principles concerning fat still apply if the animal in question isn't a sacrifice, but merely dinner? Yes, but with an interesting twist. **"Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel, saying, You shall eat no fat, of ox or sheep or goat. The fat of an animal that dies of itself and the fat of one that is torn by beasts may be put to any other use, but on no account shall you eat it. For every person who eats of the fat of an animal of which an offering by fire may be made to Yahweh shall be cut off from his people.'**" (Leviticus 7:22-25) The stated "exceptions" provide insight into Yahweh's mindset here. The focus of the prohibition is always on *eating* the fat, not using it in other ways. Under no circumstances could one eat the meat of any animal that wasn't on the "clean" list, hadn't been specifically killed for the purpose, and hadn't been properly drained of its blood. And of such animals, eating the fat portions (as defined, species by species, in the Levitical instructions) was never allowed. But revealingly, the fat of certain animals that weren't lawful for food *could* be used for other purposes—like making soap or candles. Yahweh's point, it appears, is that what belongs exclusively to Him is *not* to be used to nourish our own bodies—even if this "fat" is not found in a cultic or sacrificial setting. We are *never* to usurp the place and privilege of Yahweh, whether we're "in church" or not.

That being said, whatever belongs to Yahweh can—if and when He wills it—be utilized for our benefit. Notice, however, the circumstances under which we are specifically authorized to use this fat (at least here in Leviticus 7): mortality, disease, or some other untimely catastrophe. I think what God is saying here is that times of misfortune and mayhem can be opportunities to receive unexpected blessings directly from His storehouse—insight, cleansing, and fresh perspective concerning His provision. The next time a tornado hits my house, I'll try to keep that in mind.

You may be thinking, "There's no temple today, and nothing is being sacrificed to Yahweh on any altar, so why do I have to pay attention to all this obscure minutiae about *fat*?" Fair question. Yahweh makes it clear that in the end, it *isn't* the strict literal adherence to the rites and rituals of the Torah He's concerned about, but rather their underlying principles—the reality behind the symbols, fat being one of them. Performing the Torah's "laws" faithfully was Israel's job, for these precepts, acted out as if in pantomime, were intended to reveal Yahweh's purpose and plan to the whole world. But to communicate this

plan accurately, Israel had to perform the Torah with the right spirit, an attitude of reverence and love for Yahweh. So in apparent frustration, He asks, **“What to Me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required of you this trampling of My courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.”** (Isaiah 1:11-13)

He asks, “Who told you to do all of this?” And we shuffle our feet and stammer, “Umm—*You* did... didn’t *You*?” The point is that the Torah *means* something—something larger than (and external to) its own individual precepts. It is not an end unto itself, but a symbolic message informing us how to reach that end (hence the title of this study, *The Torah Code*). Therefore, Christians who assumed they were “off the hook” because God fulfilled the Torah through Christ’s sacrifice (and then physically dismantled the temple and priesthood so Israel could no longer participate) need to think again. Oh, we’ve been released from the penalty of death that once loomed over our heads alright, but the responsibilities and attitudes, the foundational concepts and fundamental truths underlying every precept of the Torah are still very much in force, and as significant than ever. Just because there is no more “solemn assembly” in Israel, it doesn’t follow that Yahweh no longer has a problem with “iniquity.” So when Moses said, **“Every person who eats of the fat of an animal of which an offering by fire may be made to Yahweh shall be cut off from his people,”** we are being *required* to sort out the symbols and heed the admonition they present. There are no fewer than *five* of these symbols in that one short sentence.

In God’s eyes, for Israel to have observed its “solemn assemblies” like this—going through the motions like mindless zombies for centuries on end, all the while harboring iniquity in their hearts—was tantamount to making their sacrifices to some other god. *Maybe it was Ba’al or Molech they were honoring. It sure wasn’t Me.* So for the moment (“*moment?*”—it’s been almost two thousand years now) Yahweh has sidelined the nation, just as He had promised to do. But Moses (the first to warn them about it) also predicted their eventual restoration. It’s a good news/bad news story, I’m afraid: **“For Yahweh will vindicate His people and have compassion on His servants when He sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free.”** The prophecy is: Israel won’t repent, nor will Yahweh rescue them, *until* their backs are against the wall. **“Then He will say, ‘Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices and drank the wine of their drink offering? Let them rise up and help you; let them be your protection!’** Though blessed with the oracles of Yahweh, Israel has served false gods for much of their history, whether gods of wood and stone, money and influence, or pride and intellect. But they are about to be reintroduced to the One

True God—the One to whom they had been instructed to render the “fat” of their sacrifices all this time. And finally, they will **“See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of My hand.”** (Deuteronomy 32:36-39)

Daniel saw the same truth. The angel charged with explaining Israel’s future to him **“swore by Him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end all these things would be finished.”** (Daniel 12:7) If you put the pieces of the prophetic puzzle together, you’ll find that this particular three and a half “years” is the same as the 1,260 days of Israel’s flight into the wilderness, described in Revelation 12:6. Satan will be running about loose, his puppet the Antichrist will be in charge of the whole planet, and everybody else will be either grumpy or terrified. God’s people will have no power at all—which is apparently what it’ll take to finally get their attention.

What, then, does it mean for “all these things to be finished?” Daniel had been told of Yahweh’s objective concerning Israel: **“Seventy weeks [sevens, i.e., 7-“year” periods—the second half of the last of which is in view in Daniel 12:7] are determined for your people and for your holy city [Israel and Jerusalem], to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy.”** (Daniel 9:24) Note that the very last thing to be accomplished is to “anoint the Most Holy,” that is, to introduce Yahshua the Messiah (read: Anointed One) as King of kings and Lord of lords. Yahweh, in the person of His Messiah, will at last be accorded the “fatness of the earth” that is His due.

Even then, Yahweh will not be quite done with this particular symbol. During Yahshua’s thousand-year reign of righteousness upon the earth, fat will once again be recruited as a symbol to teach the Millennial mortals what He has done for them. Speaking of the service of the Millennial temple, Ezekiel reports, **“The Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the charge of My sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from Me, shall come near to Me to minister to Me. And they shall stand before Me to offer Me the fat and the blood, declares the Sovereign Yahweh. They shall enter My sanctuary, and they shall approach My table, to minister to Me, and they shall keep My charge.”** (Ezekiel 44:15-16) One last time, we encounter scripture’s seemingly ubiquitous symbolic parallel between fat (the very best one can offer) and blood (the vehicle for life). Every day for a thousand years this dual parable will be retold and memorialized by the sons of Zadok: Yahshua the King is Life itself—the very best gift Yahweh could possibly have given us.

SALT

❧ 3.1.5 ❧

Preservation, Purification & Flavor

In Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, "The Last Supper," Judas Iscariot (the one with the money bag) is pictured having tipped over a container of salt, which was supposedly a sign of broken trust (and, perhaps *because of* the painting, was later seen as an omen of bad luck). I don't know what Leonardo really thought about the symbolism of salt, but it shows up often enough in scripture (though *not* in the Last Supper narrative) to warrant a closer look.

We know it best as a flavor enhancer and preservative, which is primarily why Yahshua described his followers as "the salt of the earth," rhetorically asking, "What good are you if you don't do what salt does—making the world a better place?" But salt, as we shall see, also has a negative, destructive side: sterilizing or preventing growth—which, if you think about it, is actually *how* salt preserves food, by inhibiting bacteria that would ordinarily make it go bad. It all depends on your point of view, I guess: salt is destructive if you're *Staphylococcus aureus*, but it's an angel of preservation if you're beef jerky.

Salt played a small but significant part in the Levitical offerings: **"Every offering of your grain offering you shall season with salt; you shall not allow the salt of the covenant of your God to be lacking from your grain offering. With all your offerings you shall offer salt."** (Leviticus 2:13) It's not clear whether "all your offerings" is meant to include every *type* of sacrifice, or merely every form of *minha*, the grain offering. Considering the larger context here, the latter would seem to be the case; but perhaps it doesn't much matter, because grain offerings were to accompany most blood sacrifices (Numbers 15:1-4). It seems salt was always in the picture somewhere, but it's not specifically mentioned in reference to sacrifices other than the *minha*.

We encounter this phrase "season (or seasoned) with salt" several times in scripture. Paul counseled his readers to take on the attributes of salt as they interacted with the world: **"Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person."** (Colossians 4:5-6) Dour, legalistic religiosity does nothing to make life "taste better," and flippant, shallow "fire-insurance Christianity" does nothing to preserve our world from corruption. But if our conversation is "seasoned with salt," we will fall into neither of these traps, but will rather love without prejudice, discern without hatred, empathize with

understanding, and communicate with compassion. Our “answers” to those who demand to know why we live hopefully in a hopeless world must be both realistic and encouraging. Our hope is in Yahweh’s Christ, the “author and finisher of our faith.” When the chips are down—when you finally realize you have to rely on *something*—it only makes sense to place your trust in One who has never broken a promise or proved Himself inadequate in any way. Anything else *is* hopeless.

Our “speech” need not be restricted to our fellow humans, of course. We may also converse with God, in prayer. The Mosaic metaphor for prayer was incense, and—no surprise here—salt was an ingredient in the “exclusive recipe” for the incense the priests were instructed to offer within the tabernacle: **“Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy.”** (Exodus 30:34-35) We’ll track down what each of these components mean later in this chapter. For now, just notice that preservation, purification, and enhancing the “flavor” of one’s mortal life are all part of prayer’s “formula.”

Literally, the phrase “seasoned with salt” might be rendered *salted* with salt, since both words are virtually identical in Hebrew—the noun and verb are spelled the same; the phrase is *malach melach*. As if to paint a word picture for us, *malach* also means “to vanish, be dissipated, i.e. to spread thin and scatter and so eventually disappear and no longer be seen” (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*). It’s a picture of the way salt “vanishes” when sprinkled on food, becoming one with it. The word is used in this sense in Isaiah 51:6—**“For the heavens vanish [*malach*] like smoke.”** Like salt disappearing into your soup, the heavens will one day “melt with a fervent heat” (as Peter puts it)—at the very least, a poetic description of the results of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. So it’s worth noting that Isaiah goes on to point out what *won’t* vanish like this: **“...But My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will never be dismayed.”**

This concept of salt “vanishing” or “dissipating” may help us to understand the ramifications of the “covenant of salt.” This was a custom in which two people, having agreed upon something, would exchange a pinch of salt. Everyone carried a pouch of salt with them back then, so Party A would put a little of his salt into Party B’s pouch, and Party B would reciprocate. The point was that once my salt was mixed in with yours, it would henceforth be impossible to separate them out again. The covenant of salt was thus a picture of unity of purpose, of inextricably linked destiny or fortune. Salt’s potential for preservation through total absorption made it a natural symbol for a relationship’s permanence or a covenant’s binding nature—and the harm that would result if it was broken. A covenant of salt was thus characterized as being perpetual, irrevocable, and serious.

A few examples will illustrate Yahweh's use of the covenant of salt. It was first used to confirm God's alliance with the priesthood of Israel. **"All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to Yahweh I give to you [Aaron], and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual due. It is a covenant of salt forever before Yahweh for you and for your offspring with you.'** And Yahweh said to Aaron, **'You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel.'**" (Numbers 18:19-20) Since Aaron (in this context) is symbolically representative of Yahshua (the One who stands before God on our behalf), and his "sons and daughters" ultimately refer to those who follow Him in faith, what's being promised here is stunningly significant: Our fortunes are being inextricably blended with Yahweh's—what's His belongs to us; what moves Him motivates us as well. We have no life at all apart from what Yahweh provides; His Spirit is what quickens us. It's sort of the mirror image of holiness: our separation from the world is becoming complete through our absorption into His will. Once our "salt" has been mixed with God's, *nothing* ("neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation," as Paul put it in Romans 8:38-39), can separate it back out again.

Another example: **"Then Abijah stood up on Mount Zemaraim that is in the hill country of Ephraim and said, 'Hear me, O Jeroboam and all Israel! Ought you not to know that Yahweh, God of Israel, gave the kingship over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?'"** (II Chronicles 13:4-5) Only one of David's "sons" matters, of course—his descendant (physically through Mary and legally through Joseph): Yahshua of Nazareth, who was also the Son of God, and thus capable (not to mention *worthy*) of reigning "forever," just as the covenant decrees. For a Jew today looking for his Messiah, this is more significant than it appears at first glance: Yahweh asserts that His fortunes are permanently linked to the *biological* family tree of David the king. So if somebody shows up touting messianic aspirations (*is there an Antichrist in the house?*), the first thing you need to do is require him to trace his lineage back to David (as Yahshua did). Good luck with that: doing so has been impossible since the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

A subset of the salt covenant bound a subject to his king, exemplified in this obscure reference from the Book of Ezra: **"Now because we eat the salt of [i.e., receive support from] the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king [in this case, the Persian King Artaxerxes], in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers."** (Ezra 4:14-15) The concept of "being under obligation" was rendered with the phrase *melach hekal melachna*, 'literally, to "eat salt of the palace.'" It implied a subject's unshakable loyalty to the interests of the king, since he was in the king's debt. So when Yahweh (*our* King) commanded that "with all of your offerings you shall offer salt," He was telling us that because every *minha* grain sacrifice was a

reflection of His own commitment to His provision of redemption of mankind, the addition of salt duly demonstrated our obligation to be loyal and thankful.

But there's more. In what would seem a strange twist of fate (but *isn't*, really), the Artaxerxes to whom Ezra owed his loyalty ("eating the salt of the palace") was the same Persian king by whose decree we are able to calculate the prophesied date of first advent of the Messiah—so we too find ourselves under a certain "obligation of salt" to Artaxerxes. Daniel's prophecy (in 9:25) tells us that the coming of the Anointed Prince would be sixty-nine "sevens" from "the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem." This very command, issued by Artaxerxes, is recorded in Nehemiah 2, giving us the historically verifiable starting gun: Nisan 1, 444 BC. The "sixty-nine sevens" are counted in "prophetic" or schematic "years" of 360 days—a unit of time common in prophecies relating to Israel. Precisely 483 of these (i.e., 173,880 days) brings us to the 10th of Nisan, or March 28, 33AD. It was Palm Monday, the very day Yahshua rode into Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey amid the adulation of the throng—the triumphal entry, something so critically important it was recorded in all four Gospels (Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19, John 12). Coincidence? *Gimme a break.*

Salt played a major role in Elisha's very first miracle—performed just three days after his mentor Elijah was "raptured." **"Now the men of the city [Jericho] said to Elisha, 'Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees, but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.' He said, 'Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.' So they brought it to him. Then he went to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, 'Thus says Yahweh, I have healed this water; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.' So the water has been healed to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke."** (II Kings 2:19-22) It is not clear if the salt had anything *physically* to do with healing the spring. Since the "fix" was permanent, I rather doubt it. Rather, this seems to be one of those instances where the symbol—what salt *represents*—was allowed to get up and walk on all fours, so to speak. If salt speaks of preservation, purification, and enhancing taste (all things that Yahweh does for us) then using it to sweeten "bad" water is a metaphorical miracle. The record says nothing about the *salt itself* being efficacious in healing the spring. Rather, Yahweh says, "I did it." The salt was merely a visual aid, something to prove that this was Yahweh's purposeful act, not merely a bit of timely good luck.

Note too *where* this took place—Jericho. This, you'll recall, was the city overlooking the Jordan Valley that Joshua's armies had taken by following Yahweh's counterintuitive instructions to march around it, shout, and blow their

shofars. Joshua placed a curse upon whoever rebuilt the city (Joshua 6:26), a curse that came to pass exactly as promised (I Kings 17:34) only a few years before Elisha showed up and healed the spring.

If I may chase a theological rabbit for a moment, it seems there is a plethora of circumstantial evidence connecting Jericho with the rapture. First, shouting and blowing the shofar (the ram's horn trumpet) are images inextricably linked to *Yom Teruah*, the Feast of Trumpets. This appointment with God, the fifth of Yahweh's seven holy convocations, is next in line for prophetic fulfillment (since the first four were all fulfilled in order in 33 AD). "*Yom Teruah*" literally means the "day of blowing (as of a trumpet) or shouting." These very images are used several times in the New Testament (e.g., I Corinthians 15:52, I Thessalonians 4:16) to describe the instantaneous transformation of the ekklesia from the mortal state into the immortal. Second, Jericho is the neighborhood where Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire—without dying—making him one of only two Bible characters to experience something akin to the "catching up" of I Thessalonians 5:17 (Greek: *harpazo*; Latin: *rapiemur*, thus "rapture" in common parlance). Third, once Jericho (assuming it represents the world that will experience the rapture) was destroyed, there was a curse placed upon it—a curse that will be echoed in the carnage of the Tribulation, which will surely follow closely on the rapture's heels. Fourth, Elisha was a witness to Elijah's "translation," making him analogous both to the "left-behind" Church of Laodicea and to Israel—both of whom will come to know their Messiah only *after* the Church of Philadelphia (represented by the raptured Elijah) is taken.

So what does all this have to do with salt? Like the inhabitants of Jericho, those on earth during the Tribulation will have a "water problem." The third trumpet judgment states: **"The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star [Greek: *aster*—read: asteroid] fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter."** (Revelation 8:10-11) And then, a bit later: **"The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, 'Just are You, O Holy One, who is and who was, for You brought these judgments. For they [the inhabitants of earth, the objects of Yahweh's wrath] have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!'"** (Revelation 16:4-6) Although I have no doubt that literal plagues are being described—with real causes and equally real effects)—remember what water as a scriptural symbol signifies: restoration and cleansing. Then factor in Elisha's cure for cursed Jericho's bitter water: he threw in *salt*, taken from a "new bowl."

We should discern from this (if I'm not hallucinating) that the successful restoration and cleansing needed by a thirsty, filthy world will come about—if at all—through what salt represents: purification and preservation. And where must this “salt” come from? Elisha told us: from a new bowl, a new vessel. Paul explains: **“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show His wrath and to make known His power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom He has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”** (Romans 9:20-24) Yahweh has the right (as our Creator—the “Potter”) to squash us and start over if we're not turning out as He wished. He can't (or at least *won't*) make use of “salt”—purification and preservation—from “vessels of wrath.” But the repentant multitudes, both Jews and Gentiles, will have allowed themselves to be “re-formed” by their Creator on the potter's wheel of adversity—the Tribulation. They will therefore be new, fit vessels from which to dispense Yahweh's “salt,” making possible the cleansing and restoration of pure water—while the unrepentant world continues guzzling wormwood, bathed in blood.

On a more prosaic note, will the repentant souls living through these terrible times be able (as Elisha did) to sweeten their tainted drinking water by adding salt from a new bowl? I have no earthly idea. If you find yourself in that particular pickle, give it a shot. Realistically, of course, the chances of my crazy ideas being read by *anyone* after the rapture are vanishingly remote, and who *else* would broach such a theory? My suggestion: if you haven't done so already, receive Yahshua as your Savior and Messiah *now*—and render this whole theoretical discussion moot.

As a symbolic attribute of salt, purification is a two-edged sword. We usually view purification as a good thing, but if we happen to be the *problem*—the thing that needs to be scrubbed off—our viewpoint changes. Yes, salt also has its negative, destructive side. It has the ability to make land barren and infertile—worthless for any productive purpose. For instance, we read: **“And Abimelech fought against the city [Shechem] all that day. He captured the city and killed the people who were in it, and he razed the city and sowed it with salt.”** (Judges 9:45) The idea was to make it sterile, incapable of fostering life and growth. When Vespasian and his son Titus destroyed Judea in 67-70 AD, they killed or enslaved millions of Jews and tore down entire cities, but they left the soil alone. The land wasn't so “fortunate”

a generation later, however, when Emperor Hadrian (in 135 AD) drove out all the Jews and sowed the fields with salt in the wake of the revolt of Bar Kochba—the brutal warlord touted as Israel’s Messiah by the influential Rabbi Akiba. Hadrian (or was it Yahweh?) was so angry with Israel (whose leaders had rejected the true Messiah a century before this) that the “glorious land” was rendered barren with salt, and its name changed to Palestina, in an effort to permanently sever the Jews’ ties to it. And it worked (on a political level if not an emotional one) for eighteen centuries. In order to purify and preserve the land for future generations of Jews, Yahweh had used salt to purge it of their ancestors—making the land as barren as their souls. Now *that’s* what you’d call irony.

Jeremiah was warning Judah—if not Bar Kochba and Akiba directly—when he reported this: **“Thus says Yahweh: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from Yahweh. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.’**” (Jeremiah 17:5-6) “Trusting in man” instead of God was the sin that precipitated Israel’s eviction from the land. But notice the precise nature of the curse: he would carry his barrenness with him to “the wilderness.” In other words, though *eretz* Israel had been rendered sterile, the rebellious Jews could not expect to find contentment *outside* the land, either. They were to be a “valley of dry bones” (in every conceivable sense) until Yahweh decreed their return—a process that has now begun.

Nor is this the first admonition to Israel that their land would be destroyed with salt if they abandoned Yahweh. Moses warned them in the most vivid of terms before they even crossed the Jordan: **“Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’”** That, in case you missed it, is tantamount to what Jeremiah had cautioned against—“trusting in man and making flesh his strength.” **“This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. Yahweh will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of Yahweh and His jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and Yahweh will blot out his name from under heaven....”** This is a heavy-handed hint that the curses endured for failing to trust Yahweh might be more than temporal: one’s name (Hebrew: *shem*—his identity, reputation, glory, or character) follows him into eternity; if one’s name is “blotted out,” so is he.

The curse wasn’t just personal, either, but also national (as Israel was to learn the hard way). **“When they see the afflictions of that land and the sicknesses with which Yahweh has made it sick—the whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which Yahweh overthrew in His anger and wrath—all the**

nations will say, 'Why has Yahweh done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of Yahweh, the God of their fathers.'" (Deuteronomy 29:18-25) Note two things here. First, the curse upon the land was to serve as a witness: it is evidence of Yahweh's anger. A witness to whom? To the gentiles, who might be expected to say, "If God is willing to chasten His own chosen people like this, we would be wise to repent, while there's still time." Second, the reason for the curse is said to be "abandonment of the covenant of Yahweh." This, of course, is the mirror image of the way it was stated above—trusting in man rather than in God. The crux of the covenant is trust in Yahweh and His Messiah—not in ourselves. We cannot earn our own redemption: we must receive it as a free gift from Yahweh.

Another prophecy equating "salted land" with barren, sterile waste speaks of the ultimate fate of modern Jordan: "**As I live,' declares Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Moab shall become like Sodom, and the Ammonites like Gomorrah, a land possessed by nettles and salt pits, and a waste forever. The remnant of My people shall plunder them, and the survivors of My nation shall possess them. This shall be their lot in return for their pride, because they taunted and boasted against the people of Yahweh of hosts.'**" (Zephaniah 2:9-10) This is the exact converse of what the Arabs of Jordan (whom the world refers to as "Palestinians") would do to Israel if they could: plunder them, possess their land, and boast proudly in their conquest over Israel's God (whose name, ironically enough, most Israelis don't know yet). Israel has no designs on Jordanian territory; they merely want to be left alone in peace. And yet, although the lands east of the Jordan River will never be distributed as tribal territories (see Ezekiel 47:13-23), Yahweh has promised (here and elsewhere) that a severely depopulated Jordan will serve sort of as the Israeli "outback" during the Millennial Kingdom—forever a wasteland, a monument to the Palestinians' arrogant covetousness toward the land of Israel.

It's interesting that Zephaniah mentioned Moab and Ammon as the progenitors of salt-cursed lands. These two groups are descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, who had personal history with salt curses. But before we look at what happened to him, let us avail ourselves of the lesson Yahshua chose to teach us about him: "**Just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all—so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed....**" He had just made the same sort of comparison with the days of Noah. His emphasis is not (as we might have expected) on the heinous overt debauchery of the populace, but merely that they were living their lives oblivious to the word of God. They didn't know Him, they didn't *want* to know Him, and they were studiously unaware of His impending visitation, no matter how much Noah and Lot had tried to get their attention.

That's the situation; here's the lesson: **"On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife."** (Luke 17:28-32) We're warned that the Son of Man will be revealed (by taking His people out of harm's way, as both examples demonstrate) quite suddenly, without warning. Further, we won't be able to cling to anything pertaining to this world when we're whisked out of danger: the rapture (the event to which Yahshua was referring) will be a "come-as-you-are" party.

So what are we to remember about Lot's wife? The record states, **"Then Yahweh rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from Yahweh out of heaven. And He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."** (Genesis 19:24-26) This is such a cryptic description, it's hard to say, forensically, what actually took place. The word translated "pillar" is the Hebrew *netsib*, denoting a garrison or outpost—a guard or governor standing watch over a place. It's derived from the verb *natsab*: to stand upright, to take a stand, which makes the derivative "pillar" a bit easier to comprehend. The point seems to be that because Lot's wife looked back longingly at the life in Sodom she was leaving, she was engulfed in the destruction of the place, perhaps encased so suddenly she remained standing upright in the sulfurous salt that accomplished the destruction of the city. As bizarre as this sounds, it wouldn't be the strangest curse ever described in the Bible (see Zechariah 14:12). Whatever actually befell Mrs. Lot, she became a silent sentinel, a mute monument to the foolishness of people who cling to the comfortable familiarity of an evil world, out of fear of the unknown country of God's grace.

Whereas Lot's wife became a shrine to sterility and lifelessness (taking upon herself the role of whatever it is that salt destroys in its role as an agent of preservation), we are instructed to be salt in the world—the agent itself, the substance that inhibits corruption and spoilage in people's lives, making their existence "taste good." Yahshua said, **"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."** (Matthew 5:13) Luke's recounting is similar: **"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away."** (Luke 14:34-35)

The salt we know is usually pure, processed sodium chloride, a chemical substance that can be expected to remain unchanged pretty much forever. But in the first century, salt was liable to contain any number of impurities or contaminants. So under certain conditions, salt could become less "salty," making it worthless for its intended purpose. Yahshua has made several important points here: (1) We are supposed to be what brings flavor and preservation to the world,

purifying it by discouraging the growth of corrupting influences. (2) We, like salt, can lose our effectiveness if we become compromised by foreign contaminants—doctrines and distractions that dilute or compromise our purpose. (3) Once we have become thus corrupted, it is impossible to regain our former place of service (at least, without a whole lot of “processing”). One’s ministry, reputation, and usefulness can be irretrievably lost in the blink of an eye. So (4) if we have lost our ability to season and preserve our world, we will be retasked to some other function, something that requires less integrity of us, with less responsibility, less effort, less reward. Note that Yahshua isn’t saying we’ll lose our salvation; we’ll merely lose our opportunity to serve Him in any significant way. To any serious disciple of Christ, that ought to be a terrifying prospect.

I get the feeling that Yahshua used His “salt” illustration in several different contexts. Mark remembers it this way: **“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”** (Mark 9:49-50) What does it mean to be salted, or seasoned, with fire? Fire, if you’ll recall, is a symbolic agent of purification through separation. And the Hebrew concept of “salting” something, as we saw above, is a picture of the “salt” vanishing or being absorbed into that to which it was applied. So “being salted with fire,” in the end, is symbolic of the Holy Spirit’s convicting and purifying presence within the life of every believer—becoming part of us, changing us from within, and being absorbed as salt permeates our food. This also explains the equivalence between “having salt in yourselves” and “being at peace with one another.” The *same* Spirit indwells us all. As long as we’re in harmony with the Spirit, we’ll be at peace with each other.

Note that “everyone” here (Greek: *pas*) doesn’t necessarily mean every single human being on the face of the earth. The word is often used as poetic hyperbole in scripture (as in Acts 2:5—“Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from *every* nation under heaven.”) Yahweh was speaking to His disciples here. The meaning is clearly “*all of you guys* will be salted with fire.” We are thus reminded of John the Baptist’s prediction: **“I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”** (Matthew 3:11-12) That baptism is the “salting with fire” of which Yahshua spoke. Through it, we will be preserved and made pure. And what of salt’s other property, that of enhancing flavor? That too is part of Christ’s baptism. It is through us, the “salt of the earth,” that the world may do *this*: **“Oh, taste and see that Yahweh is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!”** (Psalm 34:8)

LEAVEN/YEAST

❧ 3.1.6 ❧

Corruption & Sin

The freedom from Egyptian tyranny gained by Israel under Moses will be forever linked in their national memory to one substance—unleavened bread. We all remember the story of the tenth and final plague: the Messenger of Death slew all the firstborn of Egypt, but passed over the houses of the Israelites who had been indemnified by the blood of the Passover lambs, painted on their doorposts. In their terror and anguish, the Egyptians reversed their policy on the Israelite slaves. Instead of stubbornly refusing to let them go, they now insisted they leave Egypt—*immediately*. **“So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders.... And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, because they were thrust out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.”** (Exodus 12:34, 39)

It wasn't merely the suddenness of their exit, of course, that had left the Israelites with unleavened bread dough. Before the Passover took place, Yahweh had *instructed them* to remove all the yeast from their homes—a condition that would last for a whole week. This was to be the inaugural celebration of an annual convocation: **“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast [*chag*, a festival or celebration] to Yahweh; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread [Hebrew: *matsah*]. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel....”** So this wasn't quite the “accident” it appears to be at first glance: Yahweh *engineered* it so that the fleeing Israelites wouldn't have any leaven handy to put in their bread dough. The absence of yeast was suppose to *mean* something.

“On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days.” As we'll see in a bit, the “work” image has a great deal to do with leaven, more than meets the eye. **“But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you. And you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day, throughout your generations, as a statute forever....”** Like each of Yahweh's seven holy convocations, the meaning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread extends far beyond whatever historical significance the day might have held. In point of fact, the last five have no memorial

connection to the exodus at all. These aren't "Jewish" holidays, no matter what they look like: they're the *feasts of Yahweh*. Every one of them is prophetic of something earth-shakingly significant in His plan of redemption.

"In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening." *Chag Matsah* was thus to commence at the end of the day on Passover (the day the lamb was slain), and last for a whole week. **"For seven days no leaven is to be found in your houses. If anyone eats what is leavened, that person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a sojourner or a native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwelling places you shall eat unleavened bread."** (Exodus 12:14-20) As Passover was defined by the slaying of the lamb and the application of his blood, the Feast of Unleavened Bread is defined by the removal of whatever it is that leaven represents—and because it's a seven day feast, we can safely infer that its *complete* removal is indicated. Beyond this, it is evident that God has symbolically linked the two things, though they have no natural connection. We are being told that the Passover sacrifice achieves—it leads to—the "absence of leaven." So because the Torah says eating it during *Chag Matsah* will get you "cut off from the congregation," it behooves us to figure out precisely what leaven signifies in Yahweh's dictionary of symbols.

It should be noted first that leaven or yeast was an ordinary part of the Israelite diet, just as it was for everybody else, and is to this day. Bread made without yeast is hard, flat, and heavy. But some clever soul, thousands of years ago, figured out that if you added yeast to your bread dough and allowed it a little time to do its thing, the resulting bread would be lighter, airier, and softer. But it's kind of like what they say about sausage—you may want to eat it, but you don't really want to know how its made. Yeast, after all, is a fungus, a single-celled eukaryotic micro-organism, similar to the molds that cause your food to go bad. Though the fungus *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* has been used in baking (and brewing beer) for millennia, it wasn't until 1857 that microbiologist Louis Pasteur proved that yeast's effects were caused by a living organism, and not merely a chemical reaction.

Historically, leaven was made from bran, vetch, or barley, ground fine, mixed with water and allowed time to rot. The fermentation process made leaven an apt picture of corruption in our lives, since a little bit of it permeates the whole loaf, or the whole *life* as the case may be, changing it from within. In bread, of course, there's nothing particularly harmful about the presence of yeast. Leavened bread wasn't forbidden as food in the Torah's dietary guidelines. But because of the insidious way leaven operates, invading and altering the character of a loaf of bread from within, it was recruited by Yahweh as a metaphor for what sin can do in our lives, corrupting us from the inside out.

But there's more to it, if we're attuned to its symbolic significance. One doesn't just sprinkle a little yeast on top and pop the loaf into the oven. It has to be thoroughly mixed into the dough, and given time to work, in order to do its job. Gases will be created as the yeast permeates the mixture, but the bread dough needs to be elastic in order to capture these gasses, to stretch as the bubbles form in the dough, to expand and rise. Without this elasticity, bread wouldn't have the open texture we've come to prefer. So how is it achieved? Two important proteins, glutenin and gliadin, are contained in the endosperm of the wheat. When wheat flour is mixed with water and physically manipulated by kneading, these two proteins begin to link with the water molecules and crosslink with each other. As the kneading continues and these molecules create stronger bonds, gluten is formed, and this gluten is what gives the dough the elasticity it needs to allow leaven's fermentation process to change the character of the bread.

The point is that corruption—sin—doesn't just happen. We have to work at it, we have to *choose* to do it, to *knead* the leaven into our lives. And sin's effects aren't (always) apparent immediately—they usually take time to make themselves apparent. Opportunities for sin don't guarantee corruption in our lives. The mere presence of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden didn't make sin inevitable: Eve had to *choose* to reach up and pick the forbidden fruit. She had to *choose* to eat it. And she had to *choose* to give it to Adam (whose choice to believe her word over Yahweh's what got us into the mess we're in). So James concludes, **"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."** (James 1:12-15) That's the way leaven works (sort of): it enters the dough because the baker "desires" a certain effect. This desire is "conceived" as he kneads the dough with the yeast, giving it time to rise, so when it's baked, it "gives birth" to light, open-textured bread. Just as with baking bread, sin doesn't happen by accident. It's the result of choice and volition—which is not to say it doesn't become habitual. Bakers add yeast because "that's the way bread is made." We sin because we're sinners—it seems natural to us. God's point is that it's *not* natural, and we don't have to be defined by it.

It may seem odd for God to have chosen a substance that is seen as a good thing in our ordinary lives to symbolically represent something bad. The key, I think, is leaven's ubiquity. It's expected; it's normal—even if it *is* an insidious fungus. Yahweh, however, would have us know that it's possible to bake bread without leaven—sin doesn't have to characterize us or permeate our lives.

But let's face it: sin (now that we're sinners) is second nature. We find falling short of Yahweh's perfect standard the easiest thing in the world. It takes effort, determination, even sacrifice, to rid our lives of something that—like yeast—is as common to us as breathing air or drinking water. The question is: *whose* effort? Ours? No. As anyone who's ever tried to do this can attest, we're invariably unsuccessful when we attempt to become sinless on our own, because we're *already* contaminated. The only way for us to rid ourselves of this insidious curse is to become "new creatures," and the only One who can bring that about is the One who made us in the first place—the Creator, Yahweh. It's *His* effort, determination, and sacrifice that can remake us into leaven-free loaves.

That's the picture painted by the Feast of Unleavened Bread: **"On the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened bread to Yahweh."** Remember what happened on the *fourteenth*? The Passover lamb was slain. There is a connection, a progression, a cause-and-effect scenario: the sacrifice of the Lamb, Yahshua, is what *achieves* the removal of leaven—sin—from our lives. **"For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work. But you shall present an offering by fire to Yahweh for seven days. On the seventh day is a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work."** (Leviticus 23:6-8) Here's where the symbol catches up with reality: just as no amount of work will enable us to remove leaven from bread dough once it's there, we can't rid ourselves of the sin in our lives through our own efforts, either. In every facet of this (and throughout the Torah, for that matter), what the Israelites were told to do was a picture, a pantomime, of what Yahweh was doing for us. When they sacrificed their Passover lamb, it meant Yahweh would sacrifice His son. When they rid their homes of leaven, it meant God would rid our lives of sin. (Note that the deadline for the removal of yeast was *the same* as for the sacrifice of the lamb: sundown on the fourteenth of Nisan. The two things are spiritually equivalent.) When they met in holy convocation on the first and last days of the feast, it meant that from beginning to end, Yahweh would meet our needs. And when they refrained from working, it meant that Yahweh would achieve for us what we could not do for ourselves.

The Passover/Unleavened Bread convocation wasn't the only place leaven was absent from the Levitical rites. **"You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of My feast remain until the morning."** (Exodus 23:18) Leaven, of course, was ordinarily associated with bread (and beer, but that wasn't enlisted as one of God's symbols). So the "grain offering" (the *minha*) that accompanied the blood sacrifices was where the prohibition applied. Moses addresses this in more detail in the early chapters of Leviticus: **"This is the law of the grain offering. The sons of Aaron shall offer it before Yahweh in front of the altar. And one shall take from it a handful of the fine flour of the grain offering and its oil and all the frankincense that is on the grain offering and burn this as its memorial portion on the altar,**

a pleasing aroma to Yahweh. And the rest of it Aaron and his sons shall eat. It shall be eaten unleavened in a holy place. In the court of the tent of meeting they shall eat it. It shall not be baked with leaven. I have given it as their portion of My offerings made by fire. It is a thing most holy, like the sin offering and the guilt offering. Every male among the children of Aaron may eat of it, as decreed forever throughout your generations, from Yahweh's offerings made by fire. Whatever touches them shall become holy." (Leviticus 6:14-18)

Generally speaking, then, leaven was to be conspicuously absent from the Levitical rites. The whole point, after all, was to reveal how Yahweh planned to rid us of our corruption. Rare indeed are the times when leaven is allowed (or even specified) in the Torah, so we can expect to learn something significant from these exceptions. The first has to do with the peace offering, the *selem*, which was to be offered as a voluntary and spontaneous expression of praise to Yahweh, as a way to express one's thanks for answered prayer, to underscore the seriousness of a vow to Yahweh, or as a freewill offering to demonstrate one's devotion. Moses defines it: **"This is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings that one may offer to Yahweh. If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened [Hebrew: *matsah*] loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil."** So far, this is what we might have expected: the grain offerings are to be yeast-free. But then he says, **"With the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving he shall bring his offering with loaves of leavened [Hebrew: *chametz*] bread." *Leavened* bread? **"And from it he shall offer one loaf from each offering, as a gift to Yahweh. It shall belong to the priest who throws the blood of the peace offerings."** (Leviticus 7:11-14)**

Loaves of leavened bread were to be presented along with the unleavened offerings. The unleavened part we understand well enough: it's a symbolic indication that Yahweh graciously accepts our sincere thanksgiving as being untainted with sin. So why the addition of *leavened* bread? Doesn't that indicate the presence of sin? Yes, it does. The prophet Amos reports Yahweh's cynical disgust at the insincere religiosity being practiced in Israel: **"Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days [or years—see Deuteronomy 14:28]; offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving of that which is leavened, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel!" declares the Lord Yahweh.**" (Amos 4:4-5) Yes, they had the "leavened" part of the peace offering down to a science. Even as they went through the motions of "keeping the Torah," Israel's Northern Kingdom did not revere Yahweh in the least: this was nothing but religious pretense. So He declared, **"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer Me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."** (Amos 5:21-24)

Thirty years later, Samaria (having failed to heed the prophet's warning) was swept away by the Assyrian hordes, never to be seen in one piece again.

Was Yahweh, then, merely engaging in bitter irony when He specified a leavened element to the peace offering? No. It may help to know that the adjective *chametz* (leavened) is derived from a verb that can mean to be sour, embittered, or grieved. This is a component of the proper attitude of someone offering thanksgiving to Yahweh—being grieved at the sin he knows is a part of his life, and will be as long as he walks this earth as a mortal man. True repentance, which would have been evidenced by justice and “righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” was conspicuously absent from Israel's mindset. Don't get me wrong: Yahweh doesn't want us to feel as if we must somehow achieve a state of sinlessness before we can offer our gratitude and thanksgiving. He knows our condition. That's why He provided for our redemption. But He wants us to confront our sins head on, to examine our lives, admit where we've failed, and rely upon Him for atonement and cleansing. Our mere participation in a religious ritual or formula was never what He intended. The Torah's rituals are there for only one reason: to teach us, by symbol and example, about what God is doing.

So notice something else: the *worshipper* doesn't eat the leavened bread; the priest does. The point: we cannot benefit or profit from our own sin, but Christ (our High Priest) *does* benefit, in a way. Our acknowledgement of His redemption is what reconciles us to Him—which was the whole point of His sacrifice. At the very least, the Messiah has “eaten” our sin; He has absorbed its poisonous curse into Himself. So the leavened bread is “waved” or “heaved” in symbolic dedication to Yahweh, as if to say, “I acknowledge my sin before You, and I thank You for rescuing me from its inevitable disastrous consequences.”

The only other precept that specifies leavened bread is this notice concerning the fourth of the seven “feasts” or convocations of Yahweh—the Feast of Weeks, also known as Shavuot or the Day of Pentecost. **“You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath [i.e., the Feast of Unleavened Bread], from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to Yahweh. You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, as firstfruits to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 23:15-17) Those familiar with the second chapter of the Book of Acts will immediately recognize the significance of the Day of Pentecost. It represents a major paradigm shift in the way Yahweh interacts with His people, as individuals. Falling as it did seven weeks (read: *completion* multiplied by *perfection*) after the resurrection of Yahshua from the dead, Pentecost marked the initial indwelling of the called-out assembly of Christ by Yahweh's Holy Spirit—it was the birthday of the Church, for the Spirit's quickening is what defines us.

As with the peace offering, *two* leavened loaves were required. Why two? The answer is patently obvious: the Church (more properly, the *ekklesia*, literally, the “called-out” assembly of the Messiah that came into being on the Day of Pentecost) would be comprised of two distinct groups: those who were physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and those who were not—gentiles. On the day of Pentecost, every single participant in the *ekklesia* was an Israelite (as far as we know). But, largely due to the apostasy of the Rabbis over the next century—culminating in the treachery of Rabbi Akiba, something that *still* permeates Orthodox Judaism—the racial makeup of the church shifted. It became predominantly, almost exclusively, a gentile demographic. The last nail in the coffin of Jewish Christianity was hammered in by Emperor Constantine early in the fourth century, under whose watch “all things Jewish” became an anathema in Christendom. This, to my mind, ranks up there in the top five most disastrous blunders of all time. In their enthusiasm to rid themselves of rabbinical myths and heresies, the “church” threw out the Torah as well, and with it, all remembrance of the identity of the God who had manifested Himself in flesh—Yahweh. It’s the classic example of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

In both cases (that is, with both the peace offering and the Feast of Weeks) the two loaves were to be made with leaven because *sinful people* (gasp!) were being invited to be at peace with Yahweh—to be reconciled to Him by virtue of His sacrifice and the subsequent indwelling of His Holy Spirit. As we saw above, however, there’s a logistical problem to overcome, one revealed by the symbol God used: it is *impossible* to remove the leaven from a loaf of bread already permeated with it. Leaven changes the character, the nature of the dough—permanently.

And there’s another problem: Yahweh has (if you’ll pardon the dumb analogy) a *yeast allergy*. (Or perhaps that might be better stated, “Sin has an allergy to God.” In any case, Yahweh and sin, like light and darkness, cannot coexist.) How then can sinful people like you and me possibly attain peace with God? In these sinful bodies, with these sinful natures, we cannot. As we read in Romans 3:23, we have all fallen short of God’s *doxa*—His opinion, His assessment of how things ought to be. But the new birth—the birth from above that we may experience in Yahweh’s Spirit—changes everything. Paul explains it: **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”** (II Corinthians 5:17) The remarkable thing is, the transformation begins *now*, while we still inhabit these mortal bodies. But our new identities, permeated with the Holy Spirit, cannot be corrupted by sin any more than gold or silver can be corrupted by yeast.

Again, it’s Paul who tells us how it works: **“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.”** Or, in the imagery of our

present topic, what is leavened cannot become unleavened. So the solution to the problem is *change*—the fundamental transformation of our very natures. **“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.”** There’s the “new creation” of which he previously spoke. It’s not just a spiritual phenomenon (that which happens the moment we trust in Yahweh), either. We’re also told to expect a physical, bodily “new creation” in the future. **“For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.”** It doesn’t matter to God whether a believer’s body is living or dead. This “trumpet transformation” of which he speaks (an event I firmly believe will be fulfilled on the Feast of Trumpets—Yahweh’s fifth scheduled holy convocation—in some future year) will complete the “new creation” process. We who are Yahshua’s are to be given immortal, incorruptible bodies designed to accommodate the spiritual life that now resides within our souls. **“So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin [just as the corruption of bread is leaven], and the strength of sin is the law.”** (I Corinthians 15:50-56)

I should pause and address that last statement, because it’s very easy to misconstrue. Three words need definition here. (1) “Strength” is *dunamis*: the power inherent in something by virtue of its nature. (2) “Sin” is *hamartia*: to err or be mistaken, miss the mark, wander from the path, or go the wrong way. And (3) “Law” is *nomos*: anything established by usage, custom, law, or command (which would, by definition, include the Torah). When we read, **“The strength of sin is the law,”** we might conclude that Paul is claiming that the Torah forces us to sin (implying that the Torah is therefore evil). But that’s not what he’s saying at all. This the same thing he explained in Romans—that **“by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (3:20); that **“where there is no law, there is no transgression”** (4:15); that **“apart from the law, sin was dead”** (7:8). In other words, we can’t violate what we don’t perceive. This isn’t limited to specific Torah precepts, however. “Sin” might merely be the violation of our own conscience or even common sense. So (in the broadest possible terms) whatever inherent power our mistakes hold over us is dependent on what we know—the instruction we’ve been given, or the knowledge we’ve gained through experience or insight. If Adam had eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil *before* Yahweh had instructed him not to, it would not have been sin. It would merely have been lunch.

What does all of this have to do with leaven? We have seen that our vulnerability to corruption is bound up in our mortal nature, but when we’re born anew in Yahweh’s Spirit, our resulting immortal nature cannot be touched by sin as our old one was. So put **“The strength of sin is the law”** into these terms. The

power of leaven (sin) is its ability to corrupt “bread” (the life that God has provided and revealed in the Law). So conversely, the inherent power of becoming an “unleavened” new creation is that sin and corruption are no longer compatible with our nature. The consequences of violating the law (whether Torah or conscience) do not apply. The penalty for sin was eternal estrangement from Yahweh, but now we have been reborn, remade, created anew in the incorruptible image and likeness of God. And just as the leaven of sin once permeated our old life, the Spirit of Yahweh now saturates the new.

New Testament references to leaven invariably focus on its ability, like sin, to permeate the whole loaf—or *life*—after introducing what might seem a very small amount of it. Paul, for instance, applies the principle to false teaching: **“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”** (Galatians 5:7-9) Paul was talking about roughly the same thing Amos had (as we saw above). Pre-captivity Israel was cynically going through the motions of keeping the rites of the Torah, while stubbornly refusing to perceive what God’s Law *meant*: that in emulation of Yahweh’s character, we are to love our neighbors as we do ourselves. Amos’ Israelites, of course, couldn’t have been expected to know how the Torah’s precepts would be fulfilled on Calvary’s tree, but nevertheless, for failing to value what they *had* been shown, they were hauled off to Assyria. Paul’s audience was laboring under no such handicap: they had the key of Christ’s passion to unlock the Torah’s secrets. And yet, they had been infiltrated by some who insisted that their salvation depended as much on their literal performance of the rites of the Torah as it did on their belief in Christ. If treating God’s word like any other dumb religion wasn’t a good thing for Amos’ Israelites, how could it possibly be a good thing for Paul’s Galatians?

Paul knew that even a little falsehood was enough to sink the boat. His opponents were saying, *“Yes, Yahshua died for your sins, so you have to believe in that. But the Torah is God’s word, too, so you have to perform its precepts as well. Well, not all of ’em—that’d be silly, and besides, we know it can’t be done. But at least you have to have your males circumcised.”* Really? The minute you add *one thing* to the finished work of Christ, you’ve added “leaven” to the loaf of your relationship with God. And a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Besides, as he noted a few verses later, **“The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”** (Galatians 6:8) The Torah must be performed in the flesh if at all. But our new creation is a spiritual phenomenon—based on love, faith, and trust in God’s

promise and Yahshua's finished work. In the end, mortal flesh will be found to be incompatible with immortal Spirit.

Am I saying that we *shouldn't* keep, observe, and revere the Torah? No, not at all (nor did Paul). We should, insofar as it's possible (though ninety percent of it *isn't* possible, depending as it does on the existence of a temple and priesthood). Am I saying it's obsolete or has been abrogated? Absolutely not. The Torah serves *exactly* the same purpose today as it did when Yahweh delivered it to Moses. All I'm saying is that we must not *rely on our own performance* of its literal precepts to achieve reconciliation with Yahweh. The only way that can be done is through reliance upon the sacrifice of Yahshua—the One who personally fulfilled everything the Torah signifies. Nor is the Torah just for Jews. We should all, even today, *observe* God's Law—study it, apply it, ponder it, and meditate on it in order to perceive what Yahweh was telling us through its timeless symbols.

Paul used the same truth—that a little corruption engulfs its entire environment—when cautioning against immorality. Somebody in the Corinthian Church was living in open, blatant, sexual sin, and the assembly—instead of admonishing him to repent—was congratulating itself on how tolerant they were, how forgiving, gracious, and liberal. So he writes, **“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.”** (I Corinthians 5:6-8) Once we embrace the wrong-headed idea that we're free to live like Caligula because Christ's sacrifice has atoned for our sins, our “loaf is as good as leavened”—you might as well stick a fork in us, 'cause we're *done*. The church shouldn't have been proud of their open-mindedness; they should have been horrified at the results of their one-sided teaching. Yes, we're under grace, but grace leads to liberty, not license. Under grace, we become free to follow Christ in word and deed, not to lead lives of dissipation and rebellion, contradicting everything He ever taught us. Yahshua didn't *legalize* sin; He eliminated it from our lives—He didn't just remove sin's penalty; He removed its presence.

“Legalizing sin” (in other words, finding loopholes in the Law that could be exploited) was the game being played by the movers and shakers of Christ's day—and ours. So He warned His disciples to be cognizant and wary of those who would bind us hand and foot with the red tape of legalistic religiosity. **“When the disciples reached the other side [of the lake], they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, ‘We brought no bread.’ But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?’”** As usual, while we are fixated on the

things of this world, Yahshua would have us broaden our outlook to include heavenly things, eternal things. **“Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”** (Matthew 16:5-12)

The “leaven” of the Pharisees was their teaching that one could earn favor with Yahweh by strict outward adherence to the Torah. I find it fascinating that although God obviously wants us to heed the Torah, learn from it, and live by it, Yahshua’s harshest criticism—*by far*—was for those who viewed the Torah as a burden to be carried, one that would prove your worth before God if you kept it, or crush you if you failed. The Pharisees were a party from whom sprang the rabbinical traditions that bind Judaism to this day, a group that gained the upper hand in the century following Christ’s death, finding their “greatest” spokesman in Rabbi Akiba. Yahshua explained a bit more in another place: **“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”** (Luke 12:1) “Hypocrisy” is literally play-acting, pretense; it implies duplicity or insincerity. It’s what an actor does on stage: playing a part that may be believable to the audience, but isn’t really true (or if it is, it’s somebody else’s truth). The “leaven of the Pharisees” is an insidious, pervasive character trait that, given time, can permeate one’s entire life.

The leaven of the Sadducees was a bit different. This was the party of the powerful priestly class (including, for instance, Annas and Caiaphas, so familiar from the passion narratives). These were the “liberals,” the politically correct religious apostates, those who made a living out of “having a form of godliness but denying its power.” They didn’t believe in miracles, prophecy, the existence of angels (or demons), heaven, or hell. God, if He existed at all, was little more than a theory, a philosophy, a distant and disinterested “Great Spirit.” What the Sadducees really believed in was earthly power and prestige dressed up in feel-good quasi-religious robes. Their “leavened” teaching was, in effect, that this mortal life is all there is, so grab what you can now, while the getting’s good. And don’t worry about the little people you have to step on to reach the top: there’s no God to defend them: “no hell below us, above us only sky.” Yahshua warned us to beware of these attitudes.

Another “party” that warranted a “leaven alert” was the Herodians—the supporters of Herod, the secular ruling authority. So we read, **“Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”** (Mark 8:15) Herod and his party, unlike the Pharisees or Sadducees, made no pretense of religious interest. They didn’t try to “teach” anything. They merely wanted to exercise dominion as the ruling elite, subjugate those they viewed as being “beneath them” (i.e., most

everybody), and get rich collecting usurious taxes. The Herodians' "holy grail" was the attainment of personal power at the expense of others; the mantra was pride, greed, and self-aggrandizement. Citizens of Judea who espoused the Herodian cause were—like some who support political candidates today—in it for what they thought they could get out of it: favors, contracts, advantage. They were the collaborators, the quislings, the ones who compromise for profit. So "to beware of the leaven of Herod" is to hold true to your values and convictions; it's to love without expectation or hope of reward; it's to live your life openly and honestly in the sure knowledge that God is sovereign.

It's pretty obvious that each of these three types of "leaven" still exist in today's world. It seems you can't get half a dozen people together in one room without one of these symptoms making its evil presence felt, and you don't have to be a literal Pharisee, Sadducee or Herodian to personify one variety of "leaven" or another. In their simplest terms, they boil down to self-righteous hypocrisy, the counterfeiting of God's truth, and arrogant avarice. Not only are we to be wary of these traits in others, we are to be vigilant against allowing them to creep into our own lives unawares. Remember, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump."

One more mention of leaven deserves our attention: **"He [Yahshua] told them another parable. The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."** (Matthew 13:33) This chapter records a whole series of parables comparing things in common experience to "the kingdom of heaven." Surprisingly, most of them describe how the "kingdom" is going to get screwed up—the message is going to be lost, ignored, and abandoned; false teaching will grow alongside truth; the Kingdom will grow so large, predators will find homes within it; the poisonous and putrid parts will eventually have to be separated from the good. All of this, He says, will get sorted out at the end of the age, when the good will be gathered but the evil will be destroyed. So what are we to make of the "leaven in three measures of flour" reference? (1) A "kingdom" must have a king, so He must be talking about events subsequent to His own first-century advent. (2) During the Age of the Ekklesia, there was "neither Jew nor Greek," so God apparently views the Church as but one of these "measures." The restored remnant of Israel during the Millennium would then be the second. And the "nations," the progeny of the gentile Tribulation converts, will form the third "measure," I'm guessing. (3) The disturbing truth is that "leaven" (sin) will be hidden in all three groups (as we unfortunately know to be true of the Church). The bottom line: as long as mortals walk the earth, as long as we are "leavened," Yahshua's saving grace, our "new creation" in God's Spirit, will be essential. In other words, mortal man will *never* attain perfection on his own.

INCENSE

3.1.7

Prayer

Like many of Yahweh's chosen symbols, what incense was meant to signify was overtly spelled out a couple of times in scripture: **"Let my prayer be set before You as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice."** (Psalm 141:2) Or, if that's a little too poetic for you, we always have John's Revelation to fall back on: **"And when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints."** (Revelation 5:8) Incense is prayer—and specifically, the prayers of the "saints"—not the Roman Catholic variety of course, but the *hagios* (in Greek), those who are holy (i.e., set-apart), dedicated and consecrated to God: the redeemed, those whose covenant of familial relationship with Yahweh is ratified by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit.

That's not to say that prayer *itself* will never be heard by God if you're not already one of His children. Prayer, in point of fact, is the only vehicle in which we may arrive at this happy state of affairs at all—invariably, the one that says "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" But incense *as a symbol* apparently doesn't include this initial cry for help. Rather, it's a picture of intimate communication between Yahweh and His children—a parable of private, personal inter-family communication. You have to be Yahweh's child before you can sit on His lap and whisper in His ear.

Incense is seen in scripture not only *as* prayer, but also *with* prayer—the vehicle for it, as if to remind us never to substitute a picturesque religious rite for the reality it represents, like spinning some sort of mindless Tibetan prayer wheel. **"When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake."** (Revelation 8:1-5) The imagery is right out of the Torah's tabernacle, but *this* scene is in heaven, the abode of God. It is intimated here that the "tent" Moses was instructed to build in the wilderness was modeled upon a heavenly prototype, not so much in physical form as in symbolic purpose. (And

we're told as much in plain English in Hebrews 8 and 9.) The elements are all there: the altar, the censer, the smoke, and the throne.

But here in John's vision, the "prayers of the saints" are petitions to Yahweh to finish the job He had started—judgment. Remember, this is the *seventh* seal—the last of the series. Previously, in the fifth seal, these saints had asked how long it would be before their martyrdom was to be avenged, and God told them to be patient just a little longer. Now, we see the fire from the altar being "thrown onto the earth"—the end of the Tribulation's terror is at hand; the prayer is at last being answered. (I realize the seals, trumpets and bowls of John's apocalypse can be confusing, but it's essential to understand that the three series are *not* consecutive; they overlap to some extent. They're not like a banana—to be consumed from one end to the other; they're more like the layers of an onion, one inside the other: each one provides greater detail, a more focused view, than what was revealed in the previous series.) So under the seventh *trumpet* judgment (Revelation 11:15-18) we see the response of the twenty-four elders (whom we met in Revelation 5:8, above) to *God's* response (in the seventh seal) to the saints' prayer (in the fifth seal). As God answers this prayer, we see that the events of the seventh trumpet judgment (Revelation 11:19) coincide precisely with those of the seventh bowl (Revelation 16:18). Confused yet?

Sorry about that. All I really wanted to do here was demonstrate the symbolic role of incense and how it relates to prayer. When we see incense in scripture, we should perceive communication between the saints and their God—always initiated by man and heard (not to mention *answered*) by Yahweh.

Because hearing from us is really important to Yahweh, He made incense a big part of the ritual worship of the tabernacle and temple. As we saw with the table for the bread of the presence, the sheer volume of instruction concerning the altar of incense gives us a hint as to how important its function was—and how critical it was that we understood what Yahweh was telling us through its symbols. **"You shall make an altar to burn incense on; you shall make it of acacia wood."** As before, something living had been cut down to provide the structure of the altar. **"A cubit shall be its length and a cubit its width—it shall be square—and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it."** It wasn't very big or impressive, about a foot and a half square and three feet tall, about the size of the average bedside nightstand. The "horns" at the corners were to be "anointed" with the blood of sacrificial animals by the priests (e.g., the peace offerings, Leviticus 4:7). **"And you shall overlay its top, its sides all around, and its horns with pure gold; and you shall make for it a molding of gold all around...."** Though made of wood, the altar was to be completely covered in gold. The lesson: what is alive but mortal in this world must be covered with immutable purity if it is to stand before God.

“Two gold rings you shall make for it, under the molding on both its sides. You shall place them on its two sides, and they will be holders for the poles with which to bear it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold.” As with the table of showbread and the ark of the covenant, human hands were not to touch the altar of incense when it had to be moved. Rather, four golden rings would receive two gold-covered wooden poles, with which the Kohathite Levites would carry the altar of incense from place to place. **“And you shall put it before the veil that is before the ark of the Testimony, before the mercy seat that is over the Testimony, where I will meet with you.”** The altar of incense stood directly in front of the “holy of holies,” the small veil-partitioned room that housed the ark of the covenant (above which the Shekinah glory of Yahweh was said to dwell). The imagery is hard to miss: until and unless we can stand in the physical presence of Yahweh Himself, our prayers are the way He has provided for us to commune with Him, to petition Him, to draw close to His presence. **“Aaron shall burn on it sweet incense every morning; when he tends the lamps, he shall burn incense on it. And when Aaron lights the lamps at twilight, he shall burn incense on it, a perpetual incense before Yahweh throughout your generations.”** (Exodus 30:1-8) The incense was to be burned here morning and night, something of a Torah euphemism for “praying all the time.” (As I read Deuteronomy 6:7, the instruction to meditate on the Torah “when you lie down and when you rise up” doesn’t mean you’re supposed to forget all about it at noon—it means its precepts are essential *continuously*.) Or as Paul put it, **“Pray without ceasing.”** (I Thessalonians 5:17) This picture of remaining in God’s presence through prayer was also intended to endure “perpetually,” and “throughout your generations.” In other words, as long as the human race inhabits these mortal bodies, it is Yahweh’s plan and desire that we come before Him in prayer. Of course, this should be second nature if Yahweh’s Spirit is dwelling within us.

The altar of incense stood directly before the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy. One day a year, on the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippurim*), the High Priest was to enter the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of certain sacrifices upon the mercy seat—the “lid” of the ark of the covenant. But before he could do this (since this was symbolically tantamount to walking right into the presence of Almighty God) he had to “cover himself” with prayer: **“And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before Yahweh, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before Yahweh, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die.”** (Leviticus 16:12-13) The lesson was that one may not approach Yahweh with any attitude other than total reverence and respect—even when acknowledging the sacrifice He made on our behalf. The High Priest was, for all intents and purposes, *insulated* from Yahweh’s glory by prayer—represented by the cloud of incense. In light of the events of Christ’s

passion, the definitive Passover, this takes on earth-shaking significance. If you'll recall, as Yahshua was dying, a great earthquake tore the heavy veil of the temple from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), symbolically indicating that access to the Most Holy Place—the very throne of God—was henceforth available to everyone. But the truth remained: we are to approach Him only with reverence and respect, with prayer (as before) the critical matrix enabling us to stand before Him.

It should come as no surprise that Yahweh specified the exact formula by which the incense was to be compounded. Each of the ingredients means something significant, and even the *number* of them is meaningful (five, if “sweet spices”—the Hebrew noun *sam*—is, as it seems, a catch-all phrase describing the entire recipe). Five is the number of grace. **“Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Take sweet spices: stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy. You shall beat some of it very small, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you. It shall be most holy for you....”** Note first that as with grain, olive oil, and wine, the incense ingredients had to be crushed before they could be useful. Christ’s sacrifice (as He was “wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities”—Isaiah 53:5) is once again in view. *Where* the incense was to be used—“before the [ark of the] testimony in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you”—is also extremely significant: our access to Yahweh in prayer was literally achieved by Yahshua’s sacrifice before God. As the veil of the Holy of Holies in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom at His death, our admittance into Yahweh’s presence was thereby achieved and assured—forever.

As with the anointing oil, the formula for the holy incense was exclusive: **“And the incense that you shall make according to its composition, you shall not make for yourselves. It shall be for you holy to Yahweh. Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from his people.”** (Exodus 30:34-38) The bottom line here is to all intents the same as that of the first three Commandments: prayer to anyone other than Yahweh is an abomination—and that includes ourselves. Self-reliance is just as pointless and destructive as reliance upon false gods like Ba’al, Allah, or Mammon. The ingredients, then, mixed in equal proportions (except for the last one) are symbols indicating what the character of our prayer should be.

(1) Stacte is derived from myrrh, but the Hebrew word (*natap*) stresses its form: a *drop* of this ingredient. Stacte is the liquefied resin or gum derived from pressing fresh myrrh, or from a more complex process that extracts drops of oil

from it. The Greek botanist Theophrastus notes: “From the myrrh, when it is bruised, flows an oil; it is in fact called ‘stakte’ because it comes in drops, slowly.” And Dioscorides, a Greek physician, describes how stacte was made: “having bruised the myrrh and dissolved it in oil of balanos over a gentle fire, they pour hot water on it; and the myrrh and oil sink to the bottom like a deposit; and as soon as this has occurred, they strain off the water and squeeze the sediment in a press.” Myrrh (one of the three symbolic substances presented in homage to the infant Messiah by the Magi—Matthew 2:11) was used widely as a balm, a healing ointment. It was valued as an astringent, an antiseptic, antispasmodic, stimulant, and it had strong painkilling properties. It was also used to treat gum disease and mouth ulcers, menstrual and circulatory problems, wounds, bruises, boils, and pressure sores.

Healing power? The prophecy, “**By His stripes we are healed**” (Isaiah 53:5) springs to memory. And *squeezing* or *bruising*, producing stacte drops? I am immediately reminded of Dr. Luke’s account of Yahshua’s intense prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He reports, “**And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. And His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.**” (Luke 22:44) Stacte, then, implores us to pray passionately to the One who was bruised for our transgressions, healing us in the process.

(2) Perhaps the most surprising ingredient on the list is “onycha,” the Hebrew *shacheleth*. This is the “processed claw-shaped closing flap of certain types of mollusks...of the genus *Mollusca* with a pungent odor when burned.” (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*) One source I consulted defines the biblical Onycha as “the dried and processed secreted lids of a group of mollusk opercula found primarily in the Red Sea.” An “opercula” is the rounded plate that seals the mouth of the shell of certain gastropod mollusks when the animal’s body is inside—a seal secreted around the shell opening as a natural defense against dehydration. So the onycha (itself the Greek word for “fingernail,” recalling the shape of the mollusk’s shell) speaks of God’s design for a miraculous self-preservation mechanism for a lowly shellfish—the kind of thing that—a billion times over—prompted Him to call His finished creation “very good.”

What’s surprising about the inclusion of onycha is, first, that this ingredient is fauna—not flora—in origin. But beyond that, the animal from which it comes is (according to the Torah’s dietary rules) ritually *unclean*. It’s as if Yahweh is telling us, “I know you’re not perfect. I know you’re defiled. I know you have “unclean lips.” Let’s talk anyway. I have provided a miraculous means through which you, like this dumb shellfish, can maintain life. My Spirit, living within you, knows just what to say in prayer, even if you don’t.” So Paul informs us, “**The Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we**

ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” (Romans 8:26)

(3) Galbanum is an aromatic bitter gum resin from the *Ferula* plant family—fennel. This dark amber-colored substance exudes a powerful, complex, fresh, earthy, spicy, woody, balsamic-resinous fragrance, and it is highly prized as fixative in perfumes. Discharged from the roots or stem of its source plant, this milky substance quickly stiffens to a thick, honey-like consistency. It’s Hebrew name is *chelbanah*—derived (notes *Strong’s*) from a word with which we’re now quite familiar: *cheleb*—fat. As we saw earlier, *cheleb* denotes “the best one has to offer.” And unless I’m mistaken, another component of the word might be *anah*, the central requirement of the Day of Atonement, which means both to mourn, lament, or groan—to “afflict one’s soul”—and to meet, answer or respond. This is turning out to be a “complex fragrance” indeed. Galbanum, it seems, symbolizes the concept that the best we have to offer Yahweh in our sinful state is our bitterness of soul—and our subsequent response to His grace, in a word, repentance. We have nothing of value with which to come before a holy God in prayer, other than our brokenness and contrition.

Once again, I am compelled to refer to Isaiah’s prophetic description of our Messiah: “**He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.**” (Isaiah 53:3-4) That’s the very picture painted by *chelbanah*—galbanum—if I’m not mistaken. Yahweh *wants* to carry our sorrows—not to mention our worries. He understands our grief.

(4) The fourth ingredient on Yahweh’s list, frankincense, is one that carries so much scriptural baggage with it, I’d like to defer its discussion to the next section of this chapter. But in a nutshell, frankincense is symbolic of purity through sacrifice. Again, we can easily see how this would be an essential component of prayer: if someone were not pure, he could not stand before a holy God, even in prayer—at arm’s length, so to speak. But let’s face it: in our own strength, we are *not* pure, and cannot become so (the lesson of leaven, if you’ll recall)—which is where sacrifice comes in. The positional or conceptual purity we attain through the sacrifice of Christ is the *only* thing that qualifies us to communicate with our Creator. Of course, it is entirely up to us whether or not to avail ourselves of the opportunity we have to do so—to clothe ourselves in the righteousness imputed to us through His grace. God will not force us to do anything of the sort. But make no mistake, there is no other way to stand in His presence.

With the introduction of frankincense, we may note that *all three* gifts presented by the “wise men” to the infant Christ—gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11)—are represented in the Torah’s instructions for the burning of incense, symbolic of our prayer to Yahweh. (1) The altar of incense was

completely overlaid with gold, indicating that our prayers are covered with—or presented upon—Christ’s immutable purity. (2) Frankincense was used in the formulation of the incense itself. It’s symbolic of the purity—attained through the Messiah’s sacrifice—that qualifies or authorizes us to come before a holy God in prayer. And (3), in an equal amount, myrrh (processed and pressed in the form of stacte) was also present in the incense recipe—reminding us that prayer would be impossible were it not for the pressure Yahshua endured on our behalf. The prayers of the saints, represented by incense, are thus intimately associated with the sacrifice—beginning with the advent—of Christ. And beyond that, it is clear that we are specifically authorized to pray *to Yahshua*—something of an epiphany if you’re used to thinking of Him merely as God’s anointed representative and not God Himself in human form. Only when we comprehend what it means for Yahshua to be our High Priest—the ultimate fulfillment of the picture of the Chief Intercessor presented in the Torah—does it become apparent that our prayers are pointless without His life, death, and resurrection.

(5) Salt, the last incense ingredient named, symbolically added flavor and acted as a preservative, which is why Yahshua called believers (i.e., the “saints” whose prayers incense represents) “the salt of the earth.” Salt wasn’t supposed to be added to the incense formula in amounts equal to the other four ingredients. Rather, the mixture was only to be “seasoned with salt,” i.e., tempered or influenced by those attributes salt represented. Prayer’s “formula” was thus to embrace or enhance the preservation, purification, and “flavor” of one’s mortal life. I’d take that to mean that we would be ill advised to petition God for things that are not in our own long-term best interests, both physically and spiritually. And since we seldom have the foresight or mental acuity to identify these things with any degree of accuracy, we should couch our requests in terms of God’s sovereignty—asking Yahweh to reveal His will, or asking Him (as Solomon did) to give us the wisdom we need to deal with the challenges of life.

We discussed salt at length earlier in this chapter, so I won’t start over from scratch—I’ll merely bring a few salient points to remembrance. Paul counseled us, **“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”** (Colossians 4:6) That, I’d say, goes double for our prayers to Yahweh. When our incense-prayers are “seasoned with salt,” they’ll be “gracious”—the Greek *charis*: “that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness, good will, and loving-kindness.” (*Strong’s*) We normally think of these attributes as gifts showered upon our unworthy carcasses by God, and they are, but there’s no reason our responses and entreaties to Him can’t be rendered in the same sweet tone. Somehow I get the feeling that our usual pious “lectures toward heaven” aren’t exactly the sort of communication Yahweh was hoping for.

Remember the concept of the “covenant of salt” we discussed? The idea was that salt “vanishes” or “dissipates” into whatever it’s mixed into, making our “salt”—our agenda, our value system, that which we hold dear—indistinguishable and inseparable from that held by the one with whom we are entering into the covenant. So when we’re told to add salt to our incense, God is telling us that in our prayers, our mindset and purpose should be impossible to differentiate from His own: we are to be “on the same wavelength.” This, of course, requires us to become familiar with what Yahweh has revealed about what He wants and what He values. Where can we find such revelation? In His written word. It’s all well and good to consult with preachers or pundits (including me), but *don’t trust us*. Do your own homework. I endeavor to be helpful and informative, but you’re not required to concur with me. It’s really dumb, however, to disagree with Yahweh.

And do you remember the phrase *melach hekal melachna*, literally, to “eat salt of the palace”? It means “to be under obligation” to the ruling authority upon whom you depend. It implied a subject’s solemn oath of loyalty to the interests of the king, since he was in the king’s debt—the “king,” of course, ultimately being Yahweh, in the persona of Yahshua. So by adding salt to the holy incense, we are demonstrating our obligation to be loyal and thankful in our prayers.

Since incense is symbolic of “the prayers of the saints,” it behooves us to look into what scripture has to say about prayer itself. It may come as something of a surprise, but personal prayer, as a scripturally mandated principle, is a rather late development. It seems to have come into its own as the authorized way of communication with Yahweh with the advent of the Torah—delivered to us, ironically enough, by a man who spoke to Yahweh face to face (mostly through the Shekinah). I’m not unaware that in the days of Enosh (Seth’s son), “men began to ‘call on’ the name of Yahweh” (Genesis 4:26), but the verb here is *qara*—to call, recite, or proclaim: the point seems to be that Yahweh had distanced Himself from sinful man; He had ceased routinely appearing among men as He had with Adam (or even with Cain)—as a theophany. Rather, Yahweh had relegated Himself, for the most part, to the role of Legend—the “God of our fathers.” Men no longer talked *to* Yahweh; they only spoke *about* Him. If you look hard enough, you can find pre-Mosaic instances of prayer (e.g. Genesis 24:12-14). But before Moses (as far as we’ve been told) God communicated with man mostly through theophanies or in dreams and visions.

Our attitudes toward prayer are largely shaped by the Psalms. David pleads, “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in

distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!" (Psalm 4:1) Remember a few pages back, when I offered evidence that the efficacy of our prayer *depends* on the life, death, and resurrection of Yahshua? The question left unanswered was, "What about prayers made *before* the Messiah showed up? Were they therefore pointless?" No, they weren't, for the simple reason that our redemption and reconciliation to Yahweh, through Yahshua, were a prophetic *fait accompli* from the dawn of time. From Adam's faith in Yahweh's remedy for his sin, to John the Baptist's hopeful proclamations concerning the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, those who died prior to Yahshua's passion believing God's promise (to whatever extent He had revealed it) were redeemed under the same covenant of grace as those of us who live in the shadow of Calvary. So David calls upon the "God of my righteousness." His own goodness, he knew all too well, was insufficient to reconcile him to Yahweh. But he felt he could pray in confidence anyway, because God was his righteousness.

The kind of two-way communication we now enjoy with Yahweh is described (somewhat poetically) by the sons of Korah: **"By day Yahweh commands His steadfast love, and at night His song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life."** (Psalm 42:8) God seldom speaks to us in an audible voice anymore. Rather, the "commands" of Yahweh are recorded in His word, and the greatest of these (as both Yahshua and Paul confirmed) is love. But as night follows day, our verbal response to His command to love is a "song" (to be precise, it's *His* song) acknowledging that Yahweh is "the God of our lives." Notice too that the song is, in fact, a prayer. That is, the One to whom the message is ultimately addressed is Yahweh Himself, even if it's not worded in the second person. As I said, whatever we say *about* Yahweh is heard *by* Him.

The reason God commands us to love is that He Himself is love personified. He wants us to fulfill our destiny as people who are "made in His image and likeness." David (whose name, not coincidentally, *means* "love") wrote Psalm 109 about his own experiences, but in hindsight, we can see that this is actually a prophecy describing his descendant, Yahshua the Messiah, and His accusers. I have therefore taken it upon myself to capitalize the personal pronouns: **"They encircle Me with words of hate, and attack Me without cause. In return for My love they accuse Me, but I give Myself to prayer."** (Psalm 109:3-4) As God cloaked in human flesh, Yahshua did the only thing He could do—He "gave Himself to prayer" (as we read time after time in the Gospels). Don't look now, but that's really all *any* of us can do.

To be of any value, of course, prayer has to connect us to God. That is, when we pray, it would be of no use if there were nobody on the receiving end of our praises or petitions. The Psalms make it clear that Yahweh *does* hear us: **"For Yahweh builds up Zion; He appears in his glory; He regards the prayer of the destitute and**

does not despise their prayer." (Psalm 102:16-17) **"O You who hears prayer, to You shall all flesh come."** (Psalm 65:2) The problem is, at the moment, "all flesh" *hasn't* come to Yahweh. Literally billions of people pray to figments of their own imagination. For example, some Buddhists, knowing intuitively that there's no one there to receive the prayers they nevertheless feel compelled to offer, compromise with reality by automating the process—spinning a prayer wheel. They instinctively know their prayers are a waste of time, so they waste as little time as their consciences will allow.

Orthodox Jews at Jerusalem's Wailing Wall refuse to pray alone or offer unrehearsed, unauthorized prayers to Ha-Shem (i.e., "the Name," so-called because they refuse to use the *actual* name by which Yahweh identified Himself seven thousand times in the Tanach. What's wrong with this picture?). So they wait around until they have a quorum (called a *minyan*—ten or more adult males) and then recite a canned, rabbinically approved prayer. This (no less than the Buddhist method) is precisely what Yahshua warned us against: "vain repetitions" in prayer (Matthew 6:7), something the heathens are wont to do. The word is the Greek verb *battologeo*: to stammer, repeat the same things over and over, babble or prate. How the Black Hats expect this sort of thing to impress a God who's name they won't even utter is beyond my meager powers of comprehension. Do our children refuse to talk to us by themselves, or without a script? Do we demand eloquence from them? Of course not.

Not to be outdone, Muslims for the past thirteen centuries have felt compelled to endure a complicated obeisance ritual, bowing toward Mecca five times a day, offering pre-approved "prayers" to Allah. (Actually, according to the "Night's Journey" account, Allah originally demanded *fifty* prostrations a day. But Muhammad negotiated the number down to five. Well, what's a prophet for, anyway?) Considering the fact that over all those centuries, Allah has never answered a single prayer—from anyone, *including Muhammad*—Muslims ought to at least be a little suspicious, it seems to me.

And where did they get the idea of a *qibla*—of bowing toward a sacred place? Actually, they got that from Solomon. (Whatever Muhammad didn't borrow from Arabian pagans, he got from the rabbis of Yathrib, from the Talmud—except, of course, for his deep-seated hatred.) Muhammad, learning that the temple was located in Jerusalem (and apparently not aware that it had been destroyed over half a millennium before he was even born) set his first *qibla* toward Zion. But then he got miffed at the Yathrib Jews for failing to appreciate his "messianic" qualities, so he switched the *qibla* to his hometown (the very place he'd been run out of at knifepoint a few years before). Mecca was the home of the Qa'aba, an ancient pagan shrine where the black rock representing Allah was kept (along with about three hundred other rock gods. So much for monotheism).

So what does Solomon have to do with it? At the dedication of the temple, he prayed, **“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Yahweh my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day, that Your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that You may listen to the prayer that Your servant offers toward this place. And listen to the plea of Your servant and of Your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven Your dwelling place, and when You hear, forgive.”** (I Kings 8:27-30) There was nothing magical about praying “toward this place,” of course. Bodily facing a certain direction in prayer, as if God could be contained within the walls of the holy of holies, was the last thing Solomon had in mind—and he made that perfectly clear. But he realized that the temple, like the tabernacle that preceded it, *meant* something: its design and service were intended to symbolically convey Yahweh’s plan for mankind’s redemption. When one “faces the temple” in prayer, then, he is communicating with Yahweh in the context of His love and provision—no matter which direction his nose is pointing.

Solomon offered some examples of what sort of thing might be prayed “toward this place.” I guess Solomon really *was* a “wise man”—the list is heavily slanted toward the people’s recurring need for forgiveness. He asks Yahweh to heed his people’s pleas and forgive them, **“if a man sins against his neighbor”** (verse 31), **“when Your people Israel are defeated before the enemy because they have sinned against you”** (verse 33), **“when heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you”** (verse 35), or **“if there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates”** (verse 41). All of these curses and more had been *promised* to Israel if they refused to heed Yahweh’s precepts. But the door of repentance was always open. Yahweh’s response to Solomon’s prayer is recorded elsewhere: **“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people [all things Solomon had been worried about], if My people who are called by My name humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place.”** (II Chronicles 7:13-15) Both factors—the symbolic significance of the temple toward which Israel was to pray and God’s stated conditions for “healing their land”—boil down to the same thing: our reconciliation with God through His sacrifice and our subsequent reliance upon its efficacy. And the doorway to this reconciliation was prayer.

Was this restoration restricted to Israel? No. Solomon also prayed for repentant gentiles: **“Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for Your name’s sake... hear in heaven Your dwelling place and do**

according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by Your name.” (I Kings 8:41, 43) He’s describing the largely-gentile Church. Unfortunately, most gentiles remain just as clueless as Israel has been. But Solomon’s point—and prayer—is that when we *do* come to Yahweh, He will receive us.

Isaiah predicts this very thing: **“And the foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh, to minister to Him, to love the name of Yahweh, and to be His servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast My covenant—these I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”** (Isaiah 56:6-7) Israel’s job was to tell the world of Yahweh’s Salvation: Yahshua. The world’s job was to receive this Good News. And the temple—that is, what it represents—was to be “a house of prayer for *all* peoples.” It should go without saying (but I’ll say it anyway) that “keeping the Sabbath,” “holding fast to Yahweh’s covenant,” and making “burnt offerings and sacrifices on God’s altar” are all *symbolic* of Yahshua’s finished work; they’re not rules we must slavishly perform in order to earn our salvation. Yahshua *is* our rest, He *is* the covenant, and He *is* the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Nothing we can do is remotely good enough to be “accepted on God’s altar.” Only Yahshua can—and did—do that.

As if to make my point for me, Solomon tied all the pieces together: **“Now as Solomon finished offering all this prayer and plea to Yahweh, he arose from before the altar of Yahweh [that speaks to the offerings and sacrifices of which Isaiah spoke], where he had knelt with hands outstretched toward heaven. And he stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice, saying, ‘Blessed be Yahweh who has given rest [that’s the Sabbath] to His people Israel, according to all that He promised [and *that’s* the covenant—we’re three for three]. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which He spoke by Moses His servant.”** (I Kings 8:54-56)

While Solomon’s examples of what we should pray for were heavily weighted toward our need for forgiveness, Yahshua would later fine tune that a bit: since (with His advent) we have been forgiven, we need to pray that others—even *our enemies*—will find the same forgiveness we have been granted. So He taught: **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ [This was the basic rabbinical view, though not one fostered in the Torah.] But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”** (Matthew 5:43-45) Luke records the sentiment like this: **“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”** (Luke 6:27-28)

A couple of elements in this formula require clarification. First, what does it mean to “love my enemy” or “bless someone who curses me”? Does it mean I should *assist him* in perpetrating his hateful agenda against me? If he wants me dead, am I to oblige him by slitting my wrists? No. Love has nothing to do with surrender or compromise or feeding your antagonist’s hatred. It has everything to do with selflessly helping him—not according to *his* standards, but according to God’s. I’ll take it as a given that your enemy’s hatred is unfounded and unfair. (If it’s not—if *you’re* at fault—then job number one is restitution, apology, and repentance—providing justice for your antagonist.) What does someone who hates you unjustly (especially because of your faith) really need? He needs *the truth*, or failing that, a loving, compassionate heart—something only a relationship with the living God can provide. So the best thing you can do for someone who hates you is to demonstrate Yahweh’s love toward him in your own life. He still has to make his own choices, of course, but at least you can show him the difference between good and evil.

Second, who is my enemy? How do I define him? I realize I don’t get out much, but I can’t think of a single person I’d call my “enemy” in any personal sense. But there are billions of people who would count *me* as an enemy (if they knew me) because of my pro-Yahweh, pro-Israel, and pro-life proclivities. To my mind, we must learn to differentiate ideas from the people who hold them. There are *concepts* I hate with every fiber of my being. But with very few exceptions, the people who espouse these concepts—even those who may count me as an enemy—are (in my view) merely mistaken, misled, deluded: they’re victims of satanic prevarications. We can’t really divide the world into “friends” and “enemies” based on the details of what we know and believe. It has, in the past few years, become a rather disconcerting personal reality for me that virtually no one—even among my closest Christian friends—agrees with me about *every* nuance of doctrine and scriptural interpretation. Why? Because I continue to learn new things all the time. For that matter, *I myself* probably don’t completely agree with the “me” from three or four years ago. Points of disagreement do not define one’s list of enemies. I love my children with all my heart, but I don’t *agree* with some of them about very much at all.

Another “loaded” concept is *tolerance*. Scripture makes it quite clear that while we *are* to forgive people who sin against us, we are *not* to tolerate or condone sin itself. I realize that the distinction is lost on most folks. But it’s not quite as counterintuitive as it sounds. We should not tolerate bad, worthless, or destructive *ideas*, but we should remain (as much as possible) charitable toward the *people* who hold them. A few examples to illustrate the point: (1) Palestinian Arabs derive their hatred for Israel directly from Islam. If we were smart, we would condemn Islam for its unabashed political agenda of total world domination, while safeguarding the personal human rights of individual Arabs.

(Those “rights,” of course, do not include murdering Jews, or anybody else. Israel has a right—even a responsibility—to defend itself against Muslim terrorists.) And (2) Evangelical Christians tend to be conservative in their outlook, believing in individual liberty under God, financial responsibility, the fundamental right to life, and even in reaping what you’ve sown. Liberals, meanwhile, believe it’s government’s proper role to fix every problem, real or imagined, no matter whose fault, and no matter how many individual freedoms must be suppressed in order to achieve the goal. While it is no doubt a good thing for us to condemn insanity like Keynesian economics, state-funded abortion, special privileges for homosexuals, and the replacement of God with government, we need to remember that Christ died for people who believe in such things. We should uphold them in prayer—not that they might be successful, but that they might be enlightened.

Perhaps the best way to get a handle on this is to analyze how Yahshua related to the people He encountered—*all of whom* were sinners (and thus by definition “at enmity” with Him, since He was God incarnate), but very few of whom He *counted* as “enemies.” He never condoned adultery or usury, and yet He was gentle and forgiving with the prostitutes and tax collectors He encountered who, confronted with His holiness, repented of their sins. In short, He embraced sinners, but did not tolerate sin. He clearly perceived the difference between the prisoner and the chain that bound him.

And yet, there *were* those whom Yahshua considered enemies. Although He never bothered defending Himself (since His *job* was to be “bruised for our transgressions”), He did count as enemies those who actively worked to prevent honest seekers from entering the Kingdom of Heaven—something He characterized as “murder” in the eternal sense. They pursued the agenda of their spiritual father, Satan (see John 8:39-59). The Pharisees and their allies the scribes (lawyers) only pretended to honor God by keeping the Torah’s precepts. In reality, they were honoring themselves. This became evident in their ostentatious public prayers. So Yahshua taught His disciples, **“When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward....”** Their reward wasn’t a relationship with Yahweh, but the deference of men. It was all an act.

But remember the layout of the tabernacle: the incense was burned *inside* the holy place—not out in the courtyard, and certainly not outside the camp. One had to encounter the altar of sacrifice and the laver of cleansing, and experience God’s illumination and provision, *before* he could offer the incense—the prayer of a saint. The incense represented intimate communion with Yahweh. **“But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”** Our “reward” for praying in secret to God

is close, personal, one-on-One fellowship with the very Creator of the universe. In comparison, it makes being invited to the White House for a serious two-hour closed-door discussion with the president seem trivial. **“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him....”** God is not impressed with our eloquence, nor is He swayed by flattery or attempts at bribery. Like a father with his children, he knows what we need *and* what we want. But what *He* wants is for us to come to Him, sit on His lap, and whisper into His ear—even if it’s only to tell Him how much we love Him.

Yahshua then proceeded to tell His disciples precisely what God expected to hear in our prayers. He said, **“Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’** We should preface everything with acknowledgment of Yahweh’s relationship with us, His deity, holiness, and authority. Our first petition is to be that *God’s* purpose is brought to fruition in our world. It may seem strange to pray for what God wants (rather than what we want) but the reason is self-evident: what Yahweh “wants” is by definition beneficial to us. He desires to meet our needs, to love us, and to maintain a close personal relationship with us. These things are all to our eternal advantage. Yahweh is not our adversary; He is our Father. He’s on “our side.” We need to get that fact through our thick skulls. Only then are our personal petitions to be presented: **“Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation [that is, testing or trial], but deliver us from evil....”** We are to ask God for provision, forgiveness, guidance, and deliverance.

But there’s a caveat: **“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”** (Matthew 6:5-15) God’s forgiveness of our sins depends on our willingness to forgive others in turn. He made this abundantly clear in the parable of the king and his unforgiving steward (Matthew 18:21-35). Yahweh has forgiven us a great debt—one we could never have paid. He wants us to show our appreciation by forgiving any and all affronts against us. If God doesn’t hold His grudges, we certainly shouldn’t either. But there are parallel propositions left unstated here. I’ll therefore phrase this in the form of a question: if we are to forgive others their trespasses as God has forgiven us, then are we not *also* to provide for others as God provides for our needs? Are we not *also* to be careful to avoid subjecting our brothers to any sort of temptation or trial? Are we not *also* to shelter from evil (to whatever extent we can) the people we meet in our walk through life? Beside defining the golden rule all over again, all of these things are either implied or stated outright in the Torah. If we are unwilling to supply, forgive, and shelter others, why would we expect God to do these things for us? Yahweh’s response to our prayer, then, depends in part upon our

willingness to follow His instruction and example. He is not a celestial Santa Claus: His gifts are designed to improve us, not amuse us.

Another factor is our faith—our deep seated belief that God is actually capable of doing what we ask of Him. **“Jesus answered them, ‘Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and thrown into the sea,” and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”** (Mark 11:22-24) The context here is important, for this would be easy to misconstrue. It’s Yahshua’s cursing of the fig tree on the road to Bethany. On Tuesday, He had found it barren of fruit, though it had plenty of leaves, so (as a prophecy of what would happen to Israel, who would prove their own barrenness by crucifying Him before the week was out) He told the tree, **“Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.”** (Mark 11:14) By Wednesday morning, the tree was dead—it would no longer be allowed to masquerade as a “fruit tree.”

He used the occasion to teach on the efficacy of faith: if He had not had sufficient confidence in Yahweh’s ability to do what He had asked, nothing would have happened to the tree. But the context reveals several conditions that temper His remarks. (1) What we’re asking “in faith” must be in alignment with Yahweh’s plan, purpose, and character. It was not Yahshua’s intention to place a loaded spiritual gun in the hands of a child. Though our belief is necessary, it’s not the *only thing* that’s necessary. (2) The point of the example He chose is that there is no limit to what God can accomplish. The “impossible” is not necessarily out of bounds—whether healing the sick, raising the dead, or moving mountains. (3) The mode of our prayer’s fulfillment, and its timing, is strictly at Yahweh’s discretion and under His authority. Example: I have a grown daughter who suffers from post-polio syndrome and Huntington’s Chorea (for starters). From time to time, godly well-meaning people have earnestly prayed for her complete healing, “not doubting... believing that it will come to pass... certain that they have received it” for all I can tell, just as Yahshua’s words indicate. And yet, she remains confined to her wheelchair or hospital bed, losing ground by the day, though thankful for every new sunrise. I do not pray in terms of her body’s healing, for I know that she will be given a glorious new immortal body—completely free of the ravages of her diseases—soon enough. What *I* pray for in total faith is that her mother and I will continue to have the strength, patience, wisdom, and resources needed to care for her as long as Yahweh desires. And *that* prayer has been granted.

One more thing. It would seem at first glance that Yahshua’s extreme example—of praying for mountains to be thrown into the sea—is mere hyperbole, exaggeration for effect. But this more likely refers to a prophecy that will come about in the waning days of the coming Tribulation—an actual prayer and its

literal fulfillment: **“When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before You will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”** There’s the prayer, along with God’s admonition for patience. But without pausing to take a breath, the narrative continues: **“When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake.... Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”** (Revelation 6:9-17) The seventh bowl judgment describes the same “great earthquake” in terms that should be hauntingly familiar to those conversant with Yahshua’s instruction concerning praying in faith: **“And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.”** (Revelation 16:20) So much for hyperbole.

Admittedly, our prayers normally need not always be quite so “earth shaking” as this one. Rather, like the smoke of the incense filling every nook and cranny of the Holy Place, they should be an ever-present feature of our daily lives. This was certainly true of Yahshua’s mortal life: **“Those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray.”** (Matthew 14:21-23) The miracles, the good works, and the preparation were all well and good, but what Yahshua Himself found valuable and useful was His time alone with the Father. As His “popularity” increased—as His power and reputation became more and more compelling to folks—He did precisely the opposite of what we might expect: He ignored the adoring masses in order to spend more time with God. **“But now even more the report about Him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear Him and to be healed of their infirmities. But He would withdraw to desolate places and pray.”** (Luke 5:15-16)

Because of the miracles Yahshua performed, we tend to think of Him as God among men, and we should, because His identity and Yahweh’s are the same. But what we tend to overlook is that in becoming fully human, He had divested Himself of any and all *intrinsic* power He might have had as “God.” In other words, the only miraculous power Yahshua wielded (and He wielded *a lot*) was due to the Holy Spirit operating through Him—the same Holy Spirit that indwells and empowers each of us believers, and has since the Day of Pentecost. How did Yahshua feed the multitudes, heal the sick, and raise the dead? By using precisely the same “power source” that spiritually quickens us. Why, then, have we not

emptied the hospitals and depopulated the graveyards? It's not that these things are impossible for Christ's followers, for Peter did them (see Acts 9:32-43). But such miracles are strictly the prerogative of God, and are granted only on His schedule and for His purposes. That being said, few of us can truly say we've accessed the full power of the Holy Spirit that's available to us. What's missing? Why have we failed in this regard? If Christ's life is any indication, the answer would seem to be our lack of "face time" with Yahweh: we don't pray as we ought. We don't make communication with God a priority.

One of the most important lessons we might do well to learn about prayer is that God will grant our petitions *only* according to His own perfect will. Our flesh—let's face it—doesn't always have a very good handle on what's best for us, never mind for the guy down the street we don't even know about. Yahweh, however, factors in *everything* and provides what's best for all concerned (being careful not to abridge our privilege of free will, of course). The classic example of this principle is the agony of Yahshua's prayer just prior to his crucifixion. **"Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane [literally, "the oil press"], and He said to His disciples, 'Sit here, while I go over there and pray.' And taking with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then He said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with Me....'"** I find it touching that Yahshua (who had always preferred to pray by Himself) wanted his companions with Him, nearby, in His hour of deepest trial, even though He knew there was nothing they could do to help. For Immanuel to ask for "moral support" from weak and clueless men is, I think, one of the most remarkable displays of divine empathy in the entire Bible. The simple fact is, Yahshua loved these guys. What would you do if you found out the island your house was on was about to be swallowed by a giant tsunami? Would you want your kids with you when the end came, in your arms—or up in their rooms playing video games?

Yahshua's petition, as we now know, was doomed to being rejected. **"And going a little farther He fell on His face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will....'"** Just because Yahshua was willing to die for our sins, it doesn't follow that He was looking forward to it. He would have preferred to find another way, if such a thing were possible. Yahweh had established from the very beginning, however, that the only way to reconcile the guilty with the holy was to sacrifice the innocent.

What does it mean to die for someone? In December, 2001, I visited Israel, doing research for a novel I was co-authoring (*Tea With Terrorists*). One unforgettable afternoon, we interviewed several *bona fide* blood-on-their-hands Islamic terrorists. But one of them stood out from the rest: rather than fancying himself a "freedom fighter" or "soldier of Islam," this young man was in preparation to become a suicide bomber. He had bought the lie, hook line and

sinker: there was, in his twisted mind, no greater glory (or reward) than to kill oneself in the act of murdering Jews. He was honestly looking forward to his pointless death. The insanity was palpable—fidgeting hands and twitchy eyes, nervous laughter, and every question answered (a bit too loudly) with a quote from the Qur'an or Hadith—whether it made contextual sense or not. (I later learned that the IDF killed this fellow in a gun battle before he could do much real damage, thank God.) The contrast between this Muslim wannabe suicide bomber and Yahshua couldn't be more striking. The Muslim wanted to be a martyr; Yahshua wanted to be our Savior. The Muslim pursued death for himself and others; Yahshua reluctantly but obediently surrendered Himself to death so that others could live. The Muslim's driving motivation was blind hatred; Yahshua's incentive was pure love. The Muslim chanted canned prayers to Allah, counted out on prayer beads (sort of like a Catholic's rosary); Yahshua engaged in intense personal dialog with Yahweh. The Muslim expected to be rewarded with lustful virgins in paradise; Yahshua knew His death would rescue His bride, the Church, by making her clean, spotless, and pure. The Muslim had been duped by imams too cowardly to put their own lives on the line; Yahshua's resurrection established His own divine authority. Nobody made Him do anything.

As if to prove that we were incapable of helping—much less saving—ourselves, Matthew reports the failure of the disciples: **“And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And He said to Peter, ‘So, could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’”** We let God down time and again, but although He never excuses our weakness, He always encourages us to do better—to “Go and sin no more.” He, having been a man Himself, knows how hard it is for us. **“Again, for the second time, He went away and prayed, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, Your will be done.’ And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, He went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.”** (Matthew 26:36-44) Yahshua asked three times for the burden of the passion, if possible, to be removed. Paul also asked three times for his “thorn in the flesh” to be relieved (II Corinthians 12:8). The precedent seems to have been established back in the Torah: the Israelites were to appear before Yahweh *three times* during the year. The point, I believe, is that the proper pattern for personal petition in prayer is persistence without impertinence—or, if you will, perseverance without petulance. Asking Yahweh for the desires of your heart is an important privilege: we may do so more than once. But God isn't deaf. If He hasn't granted your request after the third mention, it's safe to say the answer is either “no” or “wait.” In any case, His grace is sufficient for us. His perfect will is *perfect*, after all.

James (the half-brother of Yahshua and leader of the Jerusalem Church) had some advice of his own concerning prayer: **“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him**

pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” (James 5:13-16) In any healthy local assembly of believers, these things go on all the time. Note that as with Yahshua’s admonition that **“If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses,”** (Matthew 6:14-15) James too stresses forgiveness—the first step of which is confessing your sins, admitting your guilt, to the one you have wronged.

James continues: **“The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”** None of us is completely “righteous” in our own power, of course. Our righteousness before God is borrowed. But the word (the Greek *dikaios*) used here means “him whose way of thinking, feeling, and acting is wholly conformed to the will of God, and who therefore needs no rectification in the heart or life.” (*Strong’s*) An example of just such a man is offered by way of explanation: **“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.”** (James 5:16-18) Interestingly, the record (I Kings 17:1) doesn’t actually say that Elijah prayed at all—he merely announced Yahweh’s word to King Ahab. His “prayer” consisted of being perfectly in sync with Yahweh’s purpose—the result of being “conformed to the will of God.”

There is a right way and a wrong way to utilize any of Yahweh’s metaphors, and the burning of incense is no exception. In post-Horeb Israel, the censer quickly became a potent image of the wielding of God’s power—which, if you think about it, is part of what prayer is. Thus Aaron, the brother of (and spokesman for) God’s prophet Moses, the one appointed and anointed as the High Priest of Israel, seemed to represent the very definition of cultic power and prestige in the infant nation. (At least he dressed the part.) Aaron alone was authorized to burn the holy incense (see Exodus 30:7-8).

For his part, Aaron seems to have understood that his role was symbolic—that performing it as directed would serve Yahweh’s greater purpose, even if he didn’t fully understand what that purpose was. But who knows? Maybe I’m being overly charitable: scripture doesn’t record a single original thought from Aaron, good *or* bad. Even when he got into trouble (which he did on occasion), it always seems to

have been at somebody else's instigation. I would not be surprised to learn that Aaron was fully aware of his own personal limitations, and realized that Yahweh had chosen him as His priest—and all of his male heirs through him—not because of their worthiness or abilities, but simply because he was available and willing. His eldest sons, however, assumed that since they *were* his eldest sons, they were something special—and that their privileged position put them above the law. **“Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before Yahweh, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before Yahweh and consumed them, and they died before Yahweh. Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what Yahweh has said, ‘Among those who are near Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.’” And Aaron held his peace.”** (Leviticus 10:1-3)

The lessons here are numerous and obvious: (1) Don't pervert or “adapt” Yahweh's precepts in an attempt to elevate your own status. This, unfortunately, is a core tactic of religious practice in the world today. (2) The penalty for doing so is death by fire—itsself a picture of the separation of the impure from the holy by means of destructive force wielded by God. (3) Prayer (that which incense represents) is not meant to impress the “eavesdroppers” in the congregation of the saints. It is to be, rather, meaningful communication with God, including intercession, petition, and praise. (4) Yahweh requires a proper attitude when we pray—literally, when we “come before His face.” First, He must be regarded as holy. “Sanctified” here in the ESV is a misleading translation. The Hebrew word is *qadash*—set apart, consecrated, hallowed, honored, and treated as sacred. Second, He insists on being “glorified” (Hebrew: *kabad*)—literally, “to be heavy or weighty,” that is, honored, promoted, distinguished, glorified, or considered great. (This same word—and principle—is used in the Fifth Commandment: “Honor your father and your mother,” which is a thinly veiled way of saying “Honor Yahweh,” of whom your earthly parents are symbolic.) And (5) We needn't mourn the demise of those who have chosen to rebel against Yahweh. It's one thing to be mistaken, to hold erroneous views, to be confused or misguided: none of us perfectly understands everything God has to teach us, and no one is faultless in his behavior before Yahweh. But it is another thing entirely to *choose* to revolt, to mutiny against God—to purposely attempt to usurp His place and authority in the lives of men. Such rebels' demise is no loss to the world.

A little later, a fellow named Korah led a rebellion designed to remove Moses and Aaron from “office” and replace them with “better” people. From a human resources point of view, Korah may have had a point. We've already seen how Aaron was weak and suggestible: he didn't display a lot of courage or moral certitude, but tended to drift with the tide. And Moses? He was a spoiled-brat rich kid, turned murdering fugitive, turned mumbling loser who had apparently spent too many years out in the desert sun tending somebody else's sheep—hardly

“leader” material. Korah’s cadre, by comparison, would have done great in the Iowa caucuses. They were proven talents, including 250 of the most qualified men in Israel, leaders whom scripture itself calls “men of renown.” The story is recorded in Numbers 16. Korah’s challenge (verse 3) was that Moses and Aaron had no particular right to lead Israel, since the whole congregation had been set apart, and Yahweh was among them. What he had missed, of course, was that *Yahweh* had chosen Moses and Aaron—they had not “exalted themselves” or “taken too much upon themselves,” as Korah alleged. In fact, Yahweh had had to twist Moses’ arm to get him onboard; Aaron, true to character, simply did as he was asked—he was just along for the ride. As Moses himself said, “What is Aaron, that you murmur against him?” (v. 11) *Gee, thanks, bro.*

Moses “suggested” that both Aaron and Korah’s company take censers and burn incense before Yahweh, and God would choose who’s prayer to accept. At the same time, he prayed (v. 15) that Yahweh would *not* receive Korah’s petition, for the rebellion was not really against Moses’ leadership at all, but against Yahweh’s will. **“Moses said to Korah, ‘Be present, you and all your company, before Yahweh, you and they, and Aaron, tomorrow. And let every one of you take his censer and put incense on it, and every one of you bring before Yahweh his censer, 250 censers; you also, and Aaron, each his censer.’ So every man took his censer and put fire in them and laid incense on them and stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. Then Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the glory of Yahweh appeared to all the congregation.** (Numbers 16:16-19) Because the rebels represented the whole congregation, Yahweh now intimated that He was willing to wipe them all out (v. 21), but Moses frantically interceded for them (v. 22). That, in case you missed it, is *prayer*—the very thing that the Levitical incense was designed to represent. And Yahweh heeded his prayer not to destroy the congregation.

But Korah and his merry men? They (like Nadab and Abihu before them) were doomed to destruction—and for roughly the same reason: they had not regarded Yahweh’s revealed will as holy, nor had they honored Him. The ringleaders, again in an answer to Moses’ prayer (v. 29), were swallowed alive by the earth. The 250 “men of renown” were subsequently consumed in flame (v. 35), just as Aaron’s two sons had been. But in the aftermath, something strange and unexpected happened. **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Tell Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest to take up the censers out of the blaze. Then scatter the fire far and wide, for they have become holy. As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they offered them before Yahweh, and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the people of Israel.’”** Yes, the incense-prayers of the 250 usurpers had been rejected, and their rebellion against Yahweh and His anointed crushed. That much makes sense, from a divine retribution point of view. But then their censers—the

implements by which their prayers had been offered—were declared to be “holy” (*qadash*—set apart, consecrated, hallowed, honored, and treated as sacred) simply because they had been presented before Yahweh. **“So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned had offered, and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar, to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before Yahweh, lest he become like Korah and his company—as Yahweh said to him through Moses.”** (Numbers 16:36-40) We (or at least I) might tend to see something that had been used as an implement of evil intent, of rebellion against God, as irredeemable—rendered forever polluted and unholy. So why did Yahweh declare the censers holy?

The answer lies in the symbol: a censer is an implement for burning incense, symbolic of prayer. But what is the *actual* implement through which our prayers are offered to God? It is our mortal bodies—flawed, sinful, polluted, and rebellious vessels though they are. Yahweh is telling us something remarkable here: although we were formerly at enmity with Him, our bodies can be retasked, set apart for Yahweh’s honor as we were once used against Him. But in order for this to come about, four things must happen. (1) Our old “owner” must be judged, consumed in the flame of separation. That owner, of course, is sin itself, something that was separated from us (if we’ll choose to accept it) through Yahshua’s sacrifice on Calvary. (2) We must be re-formed, hammered into an entirely new shape with an entirely different function. As you might imagine, this can be a painful experience: change is difficult. But we are not expected to change ourselves, any more than a censer can flatten itself into a sheet of metal by sheer force of will. No, the reshaping is done by the hand of God. Like the familiar illustration of the potter with his clay, it is our job to be receptive to Yahweh’s touch upon our lives. The more we resist, the more force it will take to transform us into something useful. (3) We are destined to become “a covering for the altar.” Our transformed lives are to be intimately associated with the altar of sacrifice, where the blood of atonement was shed. When people look at God’s implement of atonement, what they’ll see is us. *No pressure or anything.* And (4) our reshaped lives are henceforth on display, a testimony to the world. I may be misreading this, but perhaps the most remarkable thing about all of this is that we (the people whose lives have been transformed by having been separated from our sin through the judgment endured by Yahshua—in other words, the Church) are to be **“a reminder to the people of Israel.”** I realize that “Israel” normally symbolizes the world for whom Christ died, and “the descendants of Aaron” represent those among them who have been granted access to Yahweh through prayer—that is, believers. But could this mean that the changed lives of Christians are supposed to *literally* be a witness to Israel? To this day they, as a nation, have failed to recognize the Messianic qualifications of Yahshua of Nazareth. It’s the single

most fundamental factor dividing us. But we stand before them, censers reborn and retasked to proclaim the eternal truth: Yahshua is the Lamb of God.

Scripture records one more informative instance of the misuse of incense. Uzziah, who reigned as king of Judah from 790-739 BC, started off in spectacular fashion, seemingly doing everything right. (His name, after all, means “My Strength is Yahweh.”) He was counted among the short list of kings who “did right in the sight of Yahweh.” And yet, one disastrous lapse in judgment later in his reign marred his reputation for all time, tainting every good thing he had accomplished. **“But when he [Uzziah] was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to Yahweh his God and entered the temple of Yahweh to burn incense on the altar of incense.”** The translation “was unfaithful” is a bit off. The word is *shachath*, a verb meaning to be marred, spoiled, corrupted, injured, blemished, ruined or rotted. Uzziah hadn’t turned his back on Yahweh, but he had grasped for more authority than God had given him—in direct violation of the Torah’s clear directive—injuring and spoiling the relationship they should have shared. God had appointed him king; He had never made him a priest. Those two functions would remain separate until Yahshua fulfilled all of their inherent imagery.

“But Azariah the priest went in after him, with eighty priests of Yahweh who were men of valor, and they withstood King Uzziah and said to him, ‘It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to Yahweh, but for the priests the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense.’ God had instituted the original “separation of powers” form of government. **“Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from Yahweh, God....”** The High Priest was perfectly correct, of course. At this point, Uzziah should have immediately stopped, repented, retreated from the temple, and prepared to make a *chata’t*, or sin offering, of a male goat as prescribed by law.

But alas, his pride got the better of him: **“Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of Yahweh, by the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because Yahweh had struck him. And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of Yahweh.”** (II Chronicles 26:16-21) The one thing Uzziah had hoped to gain for himself by burning the priestly incense was honor—especially before God. But by doing so in violation of Yahweh’s stated instructions, he lost the very thing he had coveted. The lesson is clear: what we do on our own authority is worthless—even counterproductive. Under Yahweh’s direction, authorization, and empowerment, we can achieve great things—as Uzziah himself had learned in his youth. But

when we grasp what has not been given to us, when we seek honor God has not bestowed upon us, we separate ourselves from His fellowship.

However, unlike Nadab and Abihu, or Korah's 250 wannabe leaders, Yahweh did not kill Uzziah on the spot. The distinction is important. Those rebels who were destroyed by fire had attempted to usurp Yahweh's power, and in the process had betrayed a disbelief in His authority—or even His existence. Uzziah, on the other hand, had “merely” sought undue honor from Yahweh by performing the function of the priest, an action that—like Moses' striking the rock at Kadesh to obtain water—destroyed a picture Yahweh had so carefully painted in his Torah. So the proud Uzziah, like the angry Moses, was punished by being denied the one thing he had coveted in this life. God is *serious* about His symbols. Leprosy was symbolic of sin—an outer manifestation of an inner condition. Not only was it socially debilitating, it disqualified one from entering the temple environs. The honor Uzziah had sought for himself was stripped away by the hand of God—and replaced with ritual uncleanness and isolation for the rest of his life.

I might also note Yahshua's role in dealing with both Nadab's type of sin and Uzziah's. The key is their respective punishments. As John the Baptist noted, Yahshua baptizes with the Holy Spirit *and with fire*. Fire symbolizes purification through separation—the dross from the metal, or the chaff from the wheat. Nadab's fate defined him as “dross,” the worthless slag doomed to be despised and discarded by God. But Yahshua also cured the lepers—the *only* one who did so, as it turns out. Though Uzziah's earthly effectiveness and testimony were sidelined because of his sin, his eternal destiny, I'm convinced, is to be cured, cleansed, and readmitted to fellowship with Yahweh. God's mercy endures forever.

Our instructions concerning prayer weren't always couched in symbolic terms, of course. Incense needn't be part of the picture for us to get the message. **“In the hearing of all the people He [Yahshua] said to His disciples, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’”** (Luke 20:45-47) Yahshua had nothing against literacy. The scribes had served an important function in Israel going back to the days of Moses, when Yahweh Himself had instituted the Sanhedrin, to be populated with **“seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and officers over them.”** (Numbers 11:16) The “officers” here were *shoter*, scribes or overseers—officials or clerks who were charged with writing, recording, and interpreting the decisions of the elders. Later, they were the lawyer class who advised the Sanhedrin on the fine points of Torah law—as they viewed it. Today, we'd call them civil servants (a misnomer if ever there was one), those who write the regulations that turn a

simple twenty-page statute into a thousand pages of incomprehensible legal gobbledygook. They're the power behind the throne, the unseen bureaucracy, the ever-growing cancer that can suck the life out of an otherwise vibrant society.

In first-century Israel, these lawyers dealt in religious law, the endless (and totally unnecessary) "clarifications" to the Torah that comprise the foundation of Judaism to this day. The scribes had learned how to "game the system" (a system largely of their own invention), making themselves prosperous while leaving the legitimate poor with no power and no recourse—"devouring widows' houses." Not knowing God, they coveted the praise (or at least the recognition) of men, using their sartorial splendor and the prestige of power to obtain the best of everything for themselves. (Does any of this sound familiar?) The one word that describes them best is "pretense." Their ponderous prayers were performed in public to impress the unwashed masses—*not* to commune with Yahweh.

Yahshua didn't content Himself with merely warning His disciples (and us) about the dangers of this kind of behavior. He wasn't a bit reluctant to directly confront and publically chastise the scribes, along with their allies the Pharisees (a small but incredibly influential sect or party, who made a show of keeping the law as the scribes interpreted it). **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.**" (Matthew 23:13-14) It took Paul half a dozen books to explain what Yahshua stated here in a few words: the door to the kingdom of heaven cannot be pried open by slavishly performing the rites of the Torah, and most certainly not by applying the minutiae of the scribes' "oral law" on top of it. Reliance on your own "goodness," on your own works, alms, penance, and righteousness, will actually *prevent you* from having a relationship with God.

By the Torah's inflexible standard (as presented by the scribes and ostensibly practiced by the Pharisees), keeping the entire thing for a lifetime, but failing in one small point (like, for instance, failing to notice that the blue thread in your tsitzit had come undone one Tuesday afternoon) defines you as a "sinner." *That's not fair!* you may whine. *God's standards are impossible to keep perfectly.* That, my friend, is precisely the point. If we ignore the symbolic significance of the Torah and instead attempt cold literal performance of every precept, we will find ourselves doomed to failure. For that matter, if we forget the Torah altogether and merely attempt to live our lives in total compliance with our own consciences, we will fail there, too. Paul, to my mind, did such a good job pointing all of this out, he is seen as being anti-Torah. But he was no such thing. Speaking as a twenty-first century American Christian, I could wish that the apostle had spent more time explaining what the Torah was *designed* to do, rather than pointing out what

it *couldn't* do—and was never intended to. But I'm aware that he was fighting different errors back then than I am now.

After repeating the charge against the scribes and Pharisees of “making long and pretentious prayers,” Yahshua (again) described the inevitable outcome of such pretense: **“Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.”** It's easy enough to understand why “greater condemnation” would come to one who “devoured widows' houses.” But for *praying* badly? Yes. This is precisely the same situation we saw with Nadab and Abihu, who, you'll recall, offered unauthorized incense before Yahweh, and were promptly toasted for their trouble, God's explanation being, **“Among those who are near Me I will be honored, and before all the people I will be glorified.”** God is not stupid, even though in our “religious fervor,” we sometimes act as if we think He is. When we pray in public just to hear our lips flap, it's not honoring to Yahweh; if we pretend to glorify God in prayer while we're really just demonstrating our eloquence among our peers, it's time to repent. Reality check: we should talk to God in the same tone we'd use talking to our earthly fathers (provided, of course, we love and respect them). If we don't use “King James” English when we order pizza, we shouldn't employ it when we converse with God, either.

God has gone to ridiculous lengths to relate with mankind on a level we can comprehend and appreciate. The symbols in His Torah are there to help us bridge the gap between what we can see and what we need to know is the truth. Incense is one such symbol, designed to teach us that we can, through Christ, come into close, intimate fellowship with Yahweh Almighty. God reached out to us in love. The very least we can do is return the gesture: **“Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”** (Ephesians 5:1-2) In the end, Yahshua is *Himself* the “fragrant offering” required in the Torah—the sweet incense of prayer offered up on our behalf, morning and evening, in the tabernacle of our lives.

The incense of prayer may seem like a poor substitute for the personal presence of Yahweh that we (or at least *I*) crave, though I realize that as long as we inhabit these mortal bodies, it's as close as we can get to God. But during the kingdom age, during the Millennial reign of Yahshua, such prayer will be more universal, and more intimate, than it has ever been. **“For from the rising of the sun to its setting My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to My name, and a pure offering. For My name will be great among the nations, says Yahweh of hosts.”** (Malachi 1:11) May Your kingdom come; may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

FRANKINCENSE

❧ 3.1.8 ❧

Purity Through Sacrifice

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:10-11) As we learned in the previous section, gold, frankincense, and myrrh (in the form of stacte) were all part of the Levitical instructions for the offering of incense, which, as we’ve established, is symbolic of the prayers of the saints. Here is the familiar story of how the magi—those wise men from the East who made a habit of paying attention to the signs in the heavens—brought gifts in homage to the young Messiah. Considered together like this, I’d say the metaphor is firmly established: it is the practice of wise men (and women) to bring their prayers before Christ.

But since frankincense is mentioned so frequently in the Torah, perhaps we should look at it a bit more closely—and by itself. Physically, frankincense is a gum resin obtained from the bark of a tree from the genus *Boswellia*. It begins as a sticky milky-white or amber liquid that flows from the trunk of the tree when it’s injured, healing the wound. As the droplets (called “tears”) of resin dry, a white dust forms, which explains the name. “Frankincense” is the Hebrew *lebana*, derived from the word for “white,” *laban*. The related verb *laben* (to be white) figuratively indicates moral purity, the cleansing by God that makes the sinner “as white as snow.” Finer quality frankincense resins are opaque or semi-translucent white, shading into lemon or light amber tones. The Arabic name (a derivative of the Hebrew *lebana*) is *al-lubān* (roughly translated: “that which results from milking,” a reference to the milky sap tapped from the *Boswellia* tree). It literally means “white” or “cream.” Frankincense is also known as *olibanum*, and its essential oil is often called “Oil of Lebanon.” (*Lebanon*, by the way, means “whiteness.”) The anglicized name, “frankincense,” is said to have originated from the French (Frankish) Knights of the Crusades, who brought it back to Europe with them in large quantities. This precious aromatic resin is referred to only twice in the Greek scriptures, where its name is a transliteration of the Hebrew: *libanos*.

Frankincense, then, is something white obtained by inflicting injury on a living tree. Its symbolic significance is therefore clear (at least to me): it represents purity achieved through pain or sacrifice. This explains a lot about its prescribed role in the Torah’s rites and rituals, which we’ll review in a moment. It’s the very image of the benefit we may derive from the Messianic mission: we

can achieve the purity—the “whiteness”—we need in order to stand before a holy God only through the self-sacrifice of Yahshua. There is no other way.

In most of its Levitical applications, the frankincense was to be burned, either on the altar or in incense: its aroma was described as being “sweet” to Yahweh (e.g. Leviticus 2:2). So although I’m not suggesting the following data is symbolically significant, I find it interesting nonetheless: in May, 2008 the journal of the FASEB (a group of experimental biologists) announced that Johns Hopkins University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem had determined that the smoke of frankincense relieves depression and anxiety in mice. It apparently acts as a psychoactive drug. (If you’re interested, the chemical compound incensole acetate was deemed responsible for the effects.) I’m no mouse, but I do find that knowing I’ve been purified by the sacrifice of Yahshua has a decidedly calming effect on me. And in these stressful Last Days, that’s a very good thing.

Another evocative word picture: **“What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant? Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel.”** (Song of Solomon 3:6-7) Never let it be said that Solomon didn’t know how to make an entrance. The Song of Solomon, of course, is an allegory portraying the torrid love affair between King Yahshua and His bride. In the story, Solomon, the wise prince of Israel’s golden age, is but a stand-in, a “stunt double,” for Yahshua the Messiah. His entourage is “the mighty men of Israel” and the “daughters of Jerusalem.” His *bride*, however, the “Shulamite,” is the church—the most unlikely, least “politically correct” object for the King’s affections we can imagine: not a foreign princess or a wealthy merchant’s daughter, but a country girl, a vinedresser—suntanned, vibrant, and wholesome.

If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to chase this rabbit for a moment. A “Shulamite” is someone from the town of Shulam (or Sulam), a village in northern Israel, a few miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. The town is also known as Shunem. There is a persistent theory that Solomon’s beloved Shulamite was actually Abishag the Shunammite, the young beauty selected as the aging King David’s nursemaid—someone whose job it was to lie beside the King to keep him warm. The whole story is related in I Kings 1 and 2. The record specifically states that Abi was a virgin, and that David did not have sexual relations with her. But because of Abi’s unique relationship with the King, whoever married her after David’s death would be honored and elevated vicariously.

Now Adonijah, David’s oldest living son, would naturally have been considered the front-runner for the throne of Israel, but David had specifically selected Solomon to be his successor. As David’s final days approached, Adonijah attempted to surreptitiously declare himself king, but both Bathsheba (Solomon’s mom) and Nathan the prophet warned the king of the plot. David

quickly summoned Zadok the priest to publically anoint Solomon as King, with God's prophet Nathan as a witness. So Adonijah's ploy failed. Finding himself abandoned by his followers, Adonijah begged for mercy—which Solomon promised to grant if he behaved himself.

And here, as they say, is where the plot thickens. Adonijah, looking all innocent and guileless, came to the new Queen Mum, Bathsheba, and asked her to petition her son the King to grant that Abishag the Shunammite be given to him in marriage (as sort of a consolation prize, one gets the feeling). So Bathsheba, who really *was* innocent and guileless in these matters, and clueless as to Adonijah's true intentions, complied and asked her son the king. Solomon however, wise beyond his years, realized that for his older half-brother to marry Abishag (David's *literal* bosom buddy) would be tantamount to giving him the throne (I Kings 2:22-24). It was an act of treason, one Solomon answered with the sword.

If the theory is correct, if Abishag the Shunammite was indeed the Shulamite of legend in the Song of Songs, we've got the makings of a first-class symbol tsunami here. (1) If Solomon represents Christ, then David (the father) is a metaphor for Yahweh Himself in this parable. (2) Abishag (the Church) was summoned to be the closest of companions to David (Yahweh), and she accepted the offer with enthusiasm and gratitude, warming his heart. But (3) Abi couldn't actually be intimate with Solomon's father: there was too much *reality* separating them. (4) Solomon, being his father's son, couldn't help but notice Abi's beauty, virtue, innocence, and devotion to his father. So (5) like his father, Solomon grew to love her. But unlike David, the son was in a position to bring the love match to fruition. Then (6) Adonijah (read: Satan), in his jealousy and pride, attempted to take Abishag (the Church) for himself, and in doing so usurp the throne. Whereupon (7) Solomon (Christ) defended her (not to mention the throne of his father) by vanquishing Adonijah (Satan). (8) Solomon's passion for Abi, and hers for him, was then allowed free reign, chronicled in the Song of Songs, with (9) Israel's mighty men and the daughters of Jerusalem seen in celebratory support—something that hasn't happened yet, but surely will.

And frankincense? Where does that come in? If you'll recall, Solomon's arrival from the wilderness was heralded by the rich scent of frankincense and myrrh. Remember the recipe for the priestly incense, the symbolic representation of the prayers of the saints: **"Yahweh said to Moses, 'Take sweet spices, stacte [myrrh], and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (of each shall there be an equal part), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy.'" (Exodus 30:34-35)** In other words, if we take the symbols of the Song of Solomon to heart, our prayers will precede Christ's arrival: *Maranatha!*

As with salt, the inclusion of frankincense in the *minha*, or grain offering, ensured that it was a frequently encountered element in the symbolic life of Israel, for bread, then as now, was a staple of the diet. **“When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to Yahweh, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it and bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, an offering by fire with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh. But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of Yahweh’s offerings by fire.”** (Leviticus 2:1-3) As always, we see that what was given to Yahweh was to be utilized by the priests, for they had no inheritance in the land other than Him—when God is honored, His priests prosper. A representative sampling of the grain offering, which included olive oil and frankincense, was to be burnt on the altar to demonstrate that the *minha* actually belonged to Yahweh. **“This is the law of the grain offering. The sons of Aaron shall offer it before Yahweh in front of the altar. And one shall take from it a handful of the fine flour of the grain offering and its oil and all the frankincense that is on the grain offering and burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 6:14-15) After that, the bulk of the offering went to support the priests.

The fine flour (God’s provision of our needs, with no worthless chaff present) and the oil (the Holy Spirit) were shared freely between heaven and earth. But *all* of the frankincense was to be burned on the altar along with the memorial portion. Why? Because the sacrifice that achieves our purity is achieved by God (through Christ) alone. No amount of sacrifice, alms, penance, or self-deprivation will make us pure before God. Yes, we are to wash our hands and feet (our works and our walk) at the bronze laver before we enter the tabernacle, but our bodies—our lives—have been made pure before we ever get there, at the altar. As Yahshua pointed out as He washed the reluctant Peter’s feet during the last supper, **“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.’ Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean.”** (John 13:8-10) The frankincense burned with Yahweh’s memorial portion of the grain offering upon the altar, then, represents the fundamental, positional purity believers enjoy, regardless of their subsequent mistakes.

That is a great comfort to me: I received Yahshua as my Savior as a small child. It is therefore axiomatic that I perpetrated most of my life’s sins *after* I gave my life to God. Over the last six decades, I have become all too familiar with the fact that Christians don’t become perfect, sinless creatures the moment they’re “born again.” (*I didn’t, I can assure you.*) We still need cleansing along the way—early and often. But the frankincense tells us that even with all our blunders and missteps, we are still *pure* in God’s eyes, even when we’re not completely clean. It’s just a theory of mine, but I believe that it is this very purity—the essence of

our salvation—that makes us uncomfortable when we get our hands and feet dirty. If we're Christ's we won't be happy until we're clean again.

The Feast of Firstfruits (the second day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread) required that before you ate any of your grain harvest, you'd bring a sample of what had grown in your field to Yahweh as a *minha*, a grain offering. **"If you offer a grain offering of firstfruits to Yahweh, you shall offer for the grain offering of your firstfruits fresh ears, roasted with fire, crushed new grain. And you shall put oil on it and lay frankincense on it; it is a grain offering. And the priest shall burn as its memorial portion some of the crushed grain and some of the oil with all of its frankincense; it is an offering by fire to Yahweh."** (Leviticus 2:14-16) As with a normal *minha*, all of the frankincense was to be burned with the portion offered on the altar. The only difference (or nuance) here is that for the Feast of Firstfruits, the grain was to be "fresh," gathered straight from the field—it wasn't to be taken from someone's storehouse. There is therefore an immediacy, almost an urgency, about it that's unique to this particular application. Thus the prophetic picture is reinforced: our purity was achieved by the act of Yahshua's sacrifice (that's frankincense) on Passover. But David (speaking for the Messiah) predicted, **"You will not abandon My soul to Sheol, nor let Your Holy One see corruption."** (Psalm 16:10) Yahshua's body had been cut down like a sheaf in the field, but it wouldn't be "stored" in the silo of sheol. After only one day and two nights, He was presented alive and transformed before the throne of Yahweh, as required, on the Feast of Firstfruits.

The imagery of frankincense was also prominent in the presentation of the "showbread" (literally, the bread of the presence), that was to be displayed within the tabernacle's Holy Place. The instructions are as follows: **"You shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it. Two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. You shall set them in two rows, six in a row, on the pure gold table before Yahweh. And you shall put pure frankincense on each row, that it may be on the bread for a memorial, an offering made by fire to Yahweh. Every Sabbath he shall set it in order before Yahweh continually, being taken from the children of Israel by an everlasting covenant. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the offerings of Yahweh made by fire, by a perpetual statute."** (Leviticus 24:5-9)

This "whiteness" is sprinkled onto the loaves "for a memorial, an offering made by fire," telling us that we are to remember the judgment Christ endured in our stead, for it made us pure in God's sight. The setting out of the loaves on the Sabbath reminds us that we cannot work to attain this imputed purity. The showbread was to be eaten by "Aaron and his sons"—in other words, the priesthood, those who minister in God's very presence, interceding between God and man. This today includes all people of faith in Yahweh, for the veil blocking access to the holy of holies has been torn in two—we believers may now boldly

enter His presence in prayer. It's no wonder Yahshua described Himself as being "the bread of life."

In the original symbol, the loaves or cakes were to be arranged in two rows of six each, with the frankincense applied to each row independently. On the theory that Yahweh doesn't instruct us to do things on a pointless whim (but rather, always has a lesson in mind), we should ask why this arrangement was specified. I believe that it's an indication (one of many) that two distinct segments of humanity—Israel and the largely-gentile ekklesia—will enjoy the provision of Yahweh's salvation, each crowned with the purity attained through His own sacrifice. We—biological Israel and the church (with its more democratic demographic)—will stand side by side in the kingdom, bathed in the light of Yahweh's truth (since the bread of the presence was placed precisely where it would be illuminated by the golden lampstand).

As usual, it should be instructive to look at the times when the symbol was purposely left out. As we have seen, frankincense was normally added to any grain offering, specifically to the portion that was to be burned upon the altar. In the case of the *asham*, or trespass offering (the appropriate means to acknowledge our mistakes, our unintentional trespasses against God's perfect standard) a female lamb or goat would normally be sacrificed. But there's a sliding scale: poor people make mistakes too. If you couldn't afford a lamb, then a pair of turtledoves would do; and if you were too poor even for that, then you'd bring an tenth of an ephah (about two quarts) of fine flour, of which a representative handful would be burned upon the altar, just as in any *minha*. But the *asham* is actually a kind of sin offering, so the rules are altered a bit: **"He shall put no oil on it and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering."** (Leviticus 5:11) Why no oil or frankincense? It's because this isn't a normal *minha* (a grain offering): we are not acknowledging Yahweh's provision, but rather our own fault. This is not atonement, but confession. The point is simply that as long as we inhabit these mortal bodies, we will continue to inadvertently stumble into sin. We will never attain absolute purity in these corrupt vessels—which explains why God is planning to replace our bodies with new, incorruptible ones (see I Corinthians 15:35-58). So frankincense, though required when thanking God for His bountiful provision (the heart of which is the purity we gain through His sacrifice), is *not* appropriate for addressing our sins as long as we remain mortals.

Another example: in Numbers 5, there is a goofy-sounding procedure by which a jealous husband could determine whether or not his wife was cheating on

him. An offering was to be made to initiate the procedure: a tenth of an ephah of barley flour, the same thing asked of the poor man bringing a trespass offering, as we just saw. And as with the *asham*, no oil or frankincense was to be offered: **“He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.”** (Numbers 5:15) If you’ll recall, we discussed this whole procedure—and its stunning prophetic significance—earlier in this chapter, when we were exploring when *oil* was not to be used. It turned out to be an indictment, God’s charge of infidelity against both Israel and the church, something that played out historically in the year 1033 AD. So I won’t repeat the details and lessons, but merely focus on the frankincense factor: why was it excluded? It’s roughly the same reason as what we saw above: this offering was not to *atone* for guilt, but to *establish* it.

The “unfaithful wife,” whether Israel or the church, was performing her part of her “marriage with God” just as she had for the last age. She had no concept of her own guilt. It’s not that these religious institutions were *purposely* going out and cheating their Husband, Yahweh. They had no clear idea their flirtations with falsehood were actually adulterous liaisons with Satan. Their dalliances with power, prestige, pride, and prejudice had blinded them to the fact that their Husband wasn’t even living under the same roof anymore. Their cold, loveless association with the God with whom they presumed they were living was in truth a mockery of their marriage vows. They had ignored His provision, grown cold to His touch, and even forgotten His name. So Yahweh said, don’t dignify this “union” with a symbol of the purity I’ve provided for you through My sacrifice. And don’t presume you have My Spirit within you. Wake up and smell the divorce papers. Repent!

How could this have happened? For the church’s part, they had forgotten to heed Peter’s warning about false teachers creeping into their midst: **“These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.”** (II Peter 2:17-19) To put it bluntly, the church had allowed itself to be talked out of the freedom of Christ’s love, replacing it with religious tradition, compromise with the world, and man’s “version” of God’s truth.

And Israel? They had refused to perceive that toward which the symbols of the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets pointed. Yahweh had given them a sign, saying “Home is this way.” But rather than heeding the message and heading for home, they stopped right there and built a shrine to the sign itself. So Yahweh warned them—again. **“Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to My words; and as for My law, they**

have rejected it. **What use to Me is frankincense that comes from Sheba, or sweet cane from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices pleasing to Me.**” (Jeremiah 6:19-20) God’s law points toward the Messiah: to reject Him is to reject it. Performing a burnt offering is pointless if you don’t accept that it’s a picture of Yahweh’s total commitment to our redemption. Burning frankincense with your grain offering or in your incense is an abomination if you refuse to admit that you’re in need of the purity it represents.

Another prophet takes it even further, saying that keeping the literal law, though without humility before God—perfectly performing its rites and rituals, but doing so in one’s own strength and without regard to Yahweh’s purpose—is *in itself* sin, blasphemy, and idolatry. **“But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word. He who slaughters an ox is like one who kills a man; he who sacrifices a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; he who presents a grain offering, like one who offers pig’s blood; he who makes a memorial offering of frankincense, like one who blesses an idol.”** (Isaiah 66:2-3) Ouch! People today who claim to be “Torah observant” just because they follow Yahweh’s ritual calendar or dietary rules have missed the entire point. The Torah isn’t *about* the rules; the rules, rather, are about the Redeemer. Conversely, people who assume the Torah is now worthless and outdated are equally misled: without it, we would have nothing beyond hollow religious tradition to confirm that Yahshua is the promised Messiah. Without reference to—and reverence for—the God of the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets, Christians might as well be worshipping a common criminal with a good P.R. firm. How would we possibly know Yahshua is God’s anointed if He hadn’t told us what to expect? From Rabbi Akiba to Joseph Smith, from Charlemagne to Mao Tse-tung, there are any number of charismatic historical figures who make more compelling “religious leaders” than Jesus did. The future Mahdi (the Gog of Ezekiel 38) and the Antichrist are, between them, destined to fool pretty much the entire world. Isaiah was right: if we don’t approach God’s word with humility, contrition, and utter reverence, our worship is *idolatry*.

Frankincense is such a potent symbol, I find it intriguing that it’s included in a list of “commodities” that will be controlled by “Babylon” in the last days—until her sudden and utter destruction, that is. **“Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.”** As we’ll see in a future chapter, Babylon is God’s metaphor for any form of systematic false worship. There are three “flavors” of Babylon bouillabaisse: religious, political/military, and commercial/financial—and they all smell fishy. The latter is being described here: **“And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil,**

fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.” (Revelation 18:10-13) I freely admit that I could be seeing something that isn't really there, but is it possible that the frankincense on this list indicates a false and misleading view of purity, and how to attain it? Babylon, the world's system of values, wouldn't see purity as God presents it, of course. Yahweh offers us a chance to wash off the corruption that pollutes our souls, making us clean, holy, and good. In Babylon's twisted scheme however, the “purity” of frankincense might be purveyed as an opportunity to rise above the unwashed masses, to become one of the “beautiful people,” the elite ruling class. The Nazi *SchutzStaffel*, or SS, taught us how it works during World War II. This counterfeit “purity” is attained through the sacrifice of *other people's* hopes, dreams, and labors. *You too can be part of the perfumed elite, if you don't mind inflicting a little pain in the name of pride.* What will it cost you? Only your conscience, the last shred of human compassion, and in the end, your very soul.

Of course, I could be wrong. Frankincense here could mean just what it seems to—a rare and expensive luxury item (like so many things on the list), available only to those few who still have money and the arrogance to blow it on such things. On reflection, it kind of boils down to the same thing, doesn't it?

But we can't leave the story of frankincense languishing there in the dark days of the Tribulation's judgments, can we? **“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.”** Yes, it will be dark before the dawn, but there are, for those who are Yahweh's, glorious days ahead. **“But Yahweh will arise upon you, and His glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”** The prophet is talking about Millennial Israel, repentant, redeemed, and restored. Under King Yahshua, they'll be the world's only superpower for a thousand glorious years. *Eat your heart out, Adolph.* **“Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.”** And what will the nations bring in homage to the Messiah-King and His people? **“They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of Yahweh.”** (Isaiah 60:1-6) What does frankincense indicate here? I can tell you this: it's a far cry from the abuse, threats, and antagonism the world heaps on God's people today. Take heart: the peace of Jerusalem is just around the prophetic corner.

HONEY

3.1.9

The Sweet Life

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what honey is all about. Honey tastes sweet, so its literal sweetness is employed in scripture as a symbol for things that can *figuratively* be described as "sweet." We'll find it instructive to track down what these things are—or are not—by God's definition.

About a third of the plants we eat are functionally related to the production of honey. That is, pollination by honeybees is an important (and sometimes essential) step in the growth of many of the fruits, nuts, seeds, and green vegetables that people like to eat. Without these foods, the quality of our lives, at least from a dietary standpoint, would not be nearly as rich and enjoyable as it is. And if we read between the lines, we can see even from the creation account that God intended us to have broad dietary diversity: **"And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food.'** And it was so. Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day. (Genesis 1:29-31) The biosphere of which we are a part is vast, complex, and symbiotic. And honeybees play a disproportionately significant role in how it all holds together.

Thus honey, the sweet product of their activity, is a ready symbol for what is good, sweet, and abundant in this life when things are working as God desires. It represents the "sweet life" that Yahweh intended for us to enjoy as mortal human beings living on the earth—delicious blessings that in scripture are inextricably linked to our heeding His word and walking in His statutes. I realize this flies in the face of some folks' long held traditions of grim religiosity, where poverty and suffering are seen as virtues, and guilt is a weapon used to club our humanity into dour submission, but God *wants us* to be happy, fulfilled, well fed, relaxed, confident, and joyful—in *this life*, not just when we "get to heaven." I'm not saying we shouldn't mourn our sin, seriously consider our shortcomings, and constantly examine what effect our behavior is having on our relationship with our heavenly Father. But having done all that—and having come to terms with the fact that our sins, once confessed, are forgiven, atoned, and put behind us—we should "taste and see that Yahweh is good." We should learn to enjoy His company, giving thanks for the simple pleasures He has bestowed upon us in this life. That is what honey represents.

The sweet life has nothing to do with living in luxury, ease, or frivolous pleasure. It has more to do with learning to appreciate what God has done for us, no matter what our circumstances happen to be. Consider Moses' poetic description of Yahweh's calling and care for Israel (who, if you'll recall, are a metaphorical microcosm of all mankind, those who are invited to share and reciprocate God's love): **"Yahweh's portion is His people, Jacob His allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; He encircled him, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, Yahweh alone guided him, no foreign god was with Him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and He suckled him with honey out of the rock."** (Deuteronomy 32:9-13) God's provision isn't couched in terms of bare subsistence or "survival mode," even when we're going through the wilderness. He knows how to take care of those who are His. Even when Yahweh's blessings are not quite what we expected, or not exactly what we're used to, they still *taste like* honey: remember the miraculous "bread from heaven" God provided for forty years in the wilderness? **"Now the house of Israel called its name manna. It was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey."** (Exodus 16:1) Sweet!

The "honey" metaphor didn't stop at the borders of the Land, of course. The sweet life awaited Israel on the other side of the Jordan: **"For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing."** (Deuteronomy 8:7-9) Moses had never actually seen the Land, of course, but Joshua and Caleb had—decades before these words were spoken. The honey mentioned here indicates a land prepared by God, a land of verdant pastures and agricultural abundance—hints verified by the eyewitness accounts of figs and pomegranates, which rely to some extent on the work of honeybees.

Time and again, the Promised Land is described as "a land flowing with milk and honey," as in this passage: **"You shall therefore keep all My statutes and all My rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. But I have said to you, 'You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.'" (Leviticus 20:22-24)** A proposition—a clear choice—is being presented here, one fleshed out in a dozen similar passages. The objective is the Promised Land, a.k.a. the sweet life Yahweh has in store for us. The Canaanites had had *centuries* (while Israel waited in the wings in Egypt) to turn from their "detestable customs," but they would not. So the land was about to "vomit them out" like a

bad burrito. And Israel was to be given a chance to be proven worthy of the “land flowing with milk and honey.” What was the price of admission to the sweet life, the price of continued occupation in the place of Yahweh’s blessing? It was “keeping His statutes.”

We tend to see this as a contract, a bargain: “Thing A (the Land) is being traded for Thing B (obedience).” But I think the truth may be more fundamental, more visceral. As we have seen, the Promised Land is symbolic of a believer’s walk in faith—his rest in Yahweh’s provision. At the same time, Yahweh’s “statutes” are a complex symbolic picture of the means He planned to use to redeem mankind from our sinful state—a pantomime ultimately fulfilled or performed in the life and mission of Yahshua of Nazareth. Boiled down to their essentials, they instruct us to love and honor Yahweh and love our fellow man as much as—and in the same way that—we love ourselves. Seen in this light, getting the “land of milk and honey” to live in is not so much a barter arrangement with God—an exchange of goods and services—as it is a matter of choosing sides, of forming alliances.

The “sweet life” (as God defines it) is where Yahweh lives, and it’s a package deal: you can’t have the Promised Land without embracing the *promise*. However, nobody’s forcing you to live there. You can remain in Egypt if you like. Sure, it’s bondage, but you were born there, and you’ve grown used to it. Besides, there’s plenty of leeks, garlic, and fish there to make your breath stink—something you’ve rather come to enjoy. *Or* you could wander around in the wilderness until you drop in your tracks. Prevailing “wisdom,” after all, insists there are big, scary giants in the Land. If you’re not convinced Yahweh is able to give you victory, why take the risk? *Or* you could head for Babylon instead, the land of false gods and false hope, where power, sex, and money are there for the taking if you’re ambitious and clever enough to seize them. It’s not exactly the sweet life, of course, but at least there’s enough booze and adrenaline to keep your mind off what you gave up to come here. Who needs honey, anyway? There’s enough artificial sweetener in Babylon to knock the edge off the taste of the wormwood. Just don’t read the warning label—it causes cancer of the soul. Yes, the choice is entirely up to us: **“Those who hate Yahweh would cringe toward Him, and their fate would last forever. But He would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”** (Psalm 81:15-16)

If you *do* enter the Promised Land, however, you’ll find that not *everything* is sweet there. **“No grain offering that you bring to Yahweh shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as an offering made by fire to Yahweh. As an offering of firstfruits you may bring them to Yahweh, but they shall not be offered on the altar for a pleasing aroma.”** (Leviticus 2:11-12) The Torah’s sacrifices represent the price of admission—*our* admission—to the Land of Promise. Though life here is

sweet for us, we must never forget that there was *nothing* sweet about the sacrifice Yahshua endured for our sakes. But His bitterness made our lives sweet; His death bought us life. Isaiah prophetically described Him as “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief...” who was “wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.” Honey is thus entirely inappropriate as part of a burnt offering.

The rather surprising thing, to my mind, is not that we get to enjoy sweetness at God’s expense. It’s that we actually *become* sweet to Him. Solomon’s torrid allegory tells us how Yahshua *really* feels about us: **“How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips drip nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.”** (Song of Solomon 4:10-11) Love (on God’s part, anyway) is apparently not only blind, it’s completely lost its senses—*all of them*. Hallelujah!

We fallen creatures tend to see life as “sweet” when we’re rich and famous, or when our carnal desires are satiated, or even when we aren’t being threatened, coerced, or abused at the moment. But God presents the sweet life (as symbolized by honey) in slightly different terms. For example, **“The law of Yahweh is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of Yahweh is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of Yahweh is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of Yahweh is clean, enduring forever; the rules of Yahweh are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.”** (Psalm 19:7-10) Six interrelated things are described as being “sweeter than honey” here. (1) The law of Yahweh, the Torah—the teachings, instructions, and decisions of God, revealing His plan, His agenda. (2) His “testimony” (Hebrew: *'edut*) is a “statute, stipulation, regulation, i.e., a principle of contingent; a particular point of law, having authority to give consequences for not keeping, with a possible focus that these commands serve as a warning, urging, or witness to the covenant agreement.” (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*) In other words, this is an admonition or warning with legal force—an ordinance. (3) God’s “precepts” (Hebrew: *piqqud*) are directions or regulations that instruct us in what to do. It’s from the root verb *paqad*, meaning to exercise oversight over a subordinate, to attend to, look after, or care for someone. (4) A “commandment” is a *mitzvah*, an order, authoritative directive given as an instruction or prescription to a subordinate. A *mitzvah* specifically includes the written legal conditions that comprise a binding contract. (5) The “fear” of Yahweh (the Hebrew noun *yir'ah*)

isn't restricted to terror or a state of anxiety, as it sounds in English (although the word allows these contingencies). Basically, it means reverence, a state of piety and deep respect toward a superior—even worship, an act or speech displaying profound reference. *Yir'ah* is a confession of awe, that which causes wonder or astonishment. Whether or not literal fear accompanies these responses depends upon someone's relationship (or lack of it) to the One causing the awe. And (6) a "judgment" (Hebrew: *mishpat*) is the act of legally deciding a case, the dispensing of justice, or the rendering of a sentence.

Several factors are common to all six of these "sweet," desirable, and valuable things. Although all of them have potential downsides in the hands of false gods or the men who promote them, they are all seen as positive and beneficial when coming from or relating to Yahweh. They all highlight Yahweh's natural position of authority, lordship, and sovereignty over His subjects: He alone has the right to "order us" to do things. And that "us" includes not only Israel or the household of faith, but the whole human race—indeed, the whole of creation: His rules govern it all. But these precepts are only "sweet" if we obey them. There are *natural* negative consequences for violating God's commandments. He seldom has to go out of His way to punish us when we go astray. You can try all you want to break the law of gravity, but don't blame God for your inevitable downfall—or the hard ground that comprises your "penalty." The precepts commanded in God's word, whether practical or purely symbolic, are all there for our benefit, for our understanding, for our enhanced quality of life—in *this world*. We ignore or flout them at our own peril and to our own detriment.

Solomon too likened the sweetness of honey to wisdom—the beginning of which is the reverence of Yahweh: **"My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off."** (Proverbs 24:13-14) As honey is to the taste buds, wisdom is to the soul—that part of our being that makes our bodies alive. In other words, a life without wisdom is bitter and unfulfilling. As Thomas Hobbes would have put it, the natural state of man (what I'd define as living without the wisdom and counsel of Yahweh) is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

To my mind, it's no coincidence that the longest Psalm—and the longest chapter in the Bible—is the one extolling the benefits of honoring God's Law. So we read, **"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."** (Psalm 119:103-104) Wisdom and understanding are parallel concepts, both of which are as sweet to our souls as honey is to our tongues. And the vehicle of our understanding—how we come to obtain it—is God's own instructions, recorded for us in the Bible.

Moreover, we are in a position to extend the sweetness we've tasted in God's Word to those around us. **"Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body."** (Proverbs 16:24) The word translated "gracious" here has nothing to do with the technical definition of grace (i.e., unmerited favor—the Greek *charis*) we're so familiar with from our New Testament studies. This word (the Hebrew *no'am*) simply means pleasant, kind, delightful, or beautiful. Once again, we see the dichotomy between the dour, judgmental, dismal religion Christians so often practice, and the sweet, pleasant reflection of Yahweh's love that we are *commanded* to display as we walk through this world. Don't worry: God knows exactly what's going on, and He'll deal with it all in His own good time. A harsh, judgmental demeanor on our part won't fix anything. Just because there's evil in the world, we don't have to go around angry all the time. As the saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar. Note also that Solomon also says that these pleasant words are "health to the body." Speaking them does as much physical good *for us* as it does our hearers. Being sweet to people lowers our own blood pressure, wards off our dyspepsia, and generally makes us feel better.

In moderation, honey is healthful for the body, but it's easy to overdo it. As Solomon said, **"It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory."** (Proverbs 25:27) When my kids were little, my wife and I determined that we weren't going to "do" Halloween like everybody else. But we smelled a learning opportunity for our children. We made it a "family night," laid in a supply of good quality candy, and for this one night of the year, the kids were allowed to eat all the sweets they wanted—no limits, no rules. *Make yourself sick if you want: it's your choice. But know this: poor choices carry their own consequences.* It didn't take them long to learn the wisdom of moderation in all things. Sweetness can, under certain circumstances, have a downside.

What starts off sweet doesn't necessarily end up that way. Two of God's prophets, Ezekiel and John, were given very similar instructions (both in visions) telling us that very thing. They were both told to eat something that tasted like honey, but there was a bitter spiritual "aftertaste." In Ezekiel's case, he was told to **"Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and He [apparently a theophany] gave me this scroll to eat. And He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.' Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey."** That's the way the Word of God is: the wisdom it imparts is (as Solomon noted) sweet to the taste. But sometimes—often, in fact—it imparts "bad news," warnings and admonitions that portend disaster if not heeded. And such was the case here. **"And He said to me, 'Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them. For you are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel—not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent**

you to such, they would listen to you [as Jonah discovered]. But the house of Israel will not be willing to listen to you, for they are not willing to listen to Me. Because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart.” (Ezekiel 3:1-7) The message wasn't going to seem so sweet when Israel's stubborn refusal to heed it got their sorry assets hauled off to Babylon in chains. About the only thing about Ezekiel's job that would remain sweet was this fact: **“But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.”** (Ezekiel 3:21)

Exiled on the Island of Patmos, John received very similar instructions in a vision: **“I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, ‘Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.’ And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. And I was told, ‘You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”** (Revelation 10:9-11) John found it “sweet” that Yahweh was—in the vision he was being shown—wrapping up human history, keeping all the promises of the Old Testament prophets, and revealing how the Messiah's kingdom would become reality upon the earth. But at this point in the story, only half the carnage of the Last Days had been described: all the horrific details concerning the Antichrist's reign, the seven bowl judgments, the fall of Babylon, Armageddon, the final rebellion, the Great White Throne, and the lake of fire still had to be recorded. It was a miracle John didn't develop a bleeding ulcer from the stress of witnessing the vision. But that's the way God's Word always is: sweet good news for those who receive it, and bitter bad news for those who reject it.

The ultimate choice between the two things was announced by John the Baptist, of whom it might be said that his diet as a shaggy wilderness prophet mirrored the challenge of his message: **“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of Yahweh; make His paths straight.’ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”** (Matthew 3:1-4) Now *there's* a contrast for you. Honey, like the Word of God, is sweet to the taste, comparable to wisdom for the soul. But locusts, though Kosher (see Leviticus 11:22) are—let's face it—*bugs*, not the kind of thing you'd normally want to eat if you had a choice. The best that can be said about them is that they're an “acquired taste.” So the contrast inherent in John the Baptist's locusts-and-honey diet mirrors the good-news/bad-news scrolls that Ezekiel and John were told to eat in their respective visions.

This observation is borne out in the prophetic passage from Isaiah, quoted by Matthew: **“Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and**

cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from Yahweh's hand double for all her sins." There's the dichotomy again. The tender comfort of knowing your struggle is at an end and your sins have been forgiven is set in stark contrast to a double portion of wrath from the hand of Yahweh. The factor that determines which fate is ours is our willingness (or not) to heed the message of hope and admonition: **"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare [or, A voice cries in the wilderness: 'Prepare....' The punctuation isn't supplied in the Hebrew] the way of Yahweh; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."** Note that John heralded the coming of *Yahweh*, but it was *Yahshua* who physically appeared. Their identities are, well, *identical*. The rest of the prophecy is Millennial in character—things King Yahshua will achieve when He returns to reign in glory over the earth. **"Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken."** (Isaiah 40:1-5) Don't assume it will never happen just because it hasn't happened yet. Whether you consider this news sweet or bitter depends, of course, on whose "side" you've chosen. If you don't really want God in your life, then this is the worst news imaginable. But if you crave his presence with your whole being (as I do) then this sounds sweet indeed.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention one recent honey-related development, for it puts us squarely in the cross-hairs of Last Days prophetic fulfillment. I mentioned earlier in this segment that about "a third of the plants we eat are functionally related to the production of honey. That is, pollination by honeybees is an important (and sometimes essential) step in the growth of many of the fruits, nuts, seeds, and green vegetables that people like to eat." But perhaps I understated the case. There's more to this than what goes *directly* into the normal human diet. We could do without macadamia nuts, watermelons, and zucchini (and dozens of other things, including honey) if we had to, although our quality of life would be diminished with each loss. But most of us eat animals too, and what *they* eat is also affected by the presence or absence of bees—alfalfa, clover, buckwheat, and soybeans, for example. The blessings of the Promised Land, "milk and honey," are related concepts, for even cows depend to some extent on how well honeybees do their jobs.

What does all of this have to do with prophecy? In the Olivet Discourse, Yahshua warned us about what to expect as the end of the age drew near: **"See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray."** Check. **"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you**

are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.” Check. “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.” Check. “And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.” Check, and check. “All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.” (Matthew 24:4-8) Famines? They’re a recurring (or constant) feature of life in much of the world, of course, and we’re used to hearing about them on the evening news. They’re the inevitable result of drought, war, and poor political leadership. (Stalin and Mao killed scores of millions of their own citizens with nothing more sinister than “central planning” based on errant Communist political theories.) But in very recent times (only the past five years, as I’m writing these words) an ominous new threat has begun to emerge, a threat that could bring famine to parts of the world that have never known it. Like America.

I’m talking about the strange and largely inexplicable disappearance of honeybee populations, a phenomenon known as Colony Collapse Disorder, or CCD. Some areas (notably California) have reported up to a seventy percent decline in the number of bees. There are any number of theories as to why CCD is happening, from pesticides, to pollution, to pests, including viruses and fungi. Some of the more creative doomsday theorists have blamed cell phone radiation or the genetic modification of crops. I personally wonder if the earth’s weakening magnetic field (by which bees navigate their way back to the hive) may have something to do with it.

Now factor in this. In John’s apocalyptic vision, he saw this scene: “**Now I watched when the Lamb [Yahshua] opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ ...When He [Yahshua] opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!’**” (Revelation 6:1, 5-6) All sorts of basic foodstuffs are going to be in such short supply, they’ll become horrendously expensive. But what does it mean not to “harm the oil and the wine”? As it turns out, neither olive trees nor grapevines depend on honeybees for the development of their fruit. Could it be that we’ve stumbled upon a central cause of the severe and deadly famine of the Tribulation years—the disappearance of the honeybees? Albert Einstein once famously remarked that if the honeybee were to disappear altogether, mankind would live for only four more years.

One thing is absolutely certain. From rapture day until the prophesied return of Yahshua in glory, earth’s “sweet life” will be gone. No honey, no Holy Spirit, no hope. I beg you: don’t be here when that happens.

All Creatures Great and Small

“Then God said, ‘Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.’ So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ So the evening and the morning were the fifth day....” The creation account presents an orderly progression (if we allow for the obviously symbolic vocabulary) from chaos to order, from darkness to light, and from inert to living. Having created (Hebrew *bara*—created out of nothing) matter, energy, time, space, and physical laws to govern them all, God then introduced the “foundational” sorts of living things whose job it was to prepare the earth for our habitation—primitive plant life to break down rock into soil, exhale free oxygen to build an atmosphere, and provide a nutritional base for the life forms that would follow.

And follow they did. I rather imagine that here, on the fifth “day” of creation, is when Yahweh really started to enjoy Himself, creating animals, relatively simple and aquatic at first, then increasingly complex, eventually inhabiting the land, and even the sky. And the sixth “day” saw a veritable explosion of life: **“Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind,’ and it was so. And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that it was good....”** Reproducing only “according to your kind,” of course, makes evolution from one “kind” of animal into another an impossibility. It’s something scientists universally observe in nature but are philosophically loath to accept. The truth is that Yahweh created an incredible variety of individual kinds of life upon the earth, so many, in fact, that we still haven’t found them all, though we live in awestruck wonder at what we have discovered so far.

Who are awestruck? *We* are—people, human beings, the last, most advanced, and most unique of all the life forms Yahweh is said to have introduced into our world. **“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’”** I get the feeling that lichens and lemurs, bacteria and baboons, don’t spend much time pondering the wonders of creation, their place in the universe, or even their own existence. Only man does that, because we’ve been “made in God’s image,”

whatever that means. So He **“Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”** Everything but other men, it appears. **“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”** (Genesis 1:20-28)

As usual, I find myself asking *why*. God (I suppose) could have made do with a considerably less complicated ecosphere—less interesting, less impressive, less wonderful. Why did He go to all the trouble of making the world so *very* good? During the fourth day, you’ll recall, He invested the heavenly bodies—the sun, moon, and stars—with symbolic significance, giving them to us for “signs and seasons, and for days and years.” Significant to whom? To *us*—to people—those creatures who are made in His image and likeness. And it appears that some of Yahweh’s living handiwork was intended to serve precisely the same function: to symbolize various truths and concepts God wanted us to learn and know, concepts that conspire to reveal His nature and His plan. In the previous chapter, we looked at God’s symbolic use of things we ingest, taste, and smell—things that nourish us, that flavor our lives. In the next one, we’ll study the metaphorical meaning of the plants and trees that populate our common experience. But for now, let us consider the symbols of the sixth day: animals, the living creatures with whom we share the earth. As before, Yahweh has chosen to invest a select few of them with special symbolic significance, referring to them over and over again in scripture.

LAMB

3.2.1

Innocence

“The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because He was before me.’”” (John 1:29-30) Why did John call Yahshua the “Lamb of God,” and not the “elephant of God” or the “aardvark of God?” And more to the point, how could the people within earshot be expected to understand what he meant? It’s (obviously) because the “lamb” was a well-established scriptural symbol, a central part of Torah ritual established fifteen hundred years previously—the codification of sacrificial images going all the way back to Eden. Nor was the idea of such a lamb “taking away sin” a foreign concept to the Jews (though doing so for the *whole world* might have seemed a stretch, if they hadn’t thought it through).

The Israelites, from the very beginning, had been a sheep-herding people, a pursuit as common among nomadic bronze age families like Abraham’s as computer technology or health care careers are in our society today. A man’s wealth was measured not in money, but by the size of his flocks and herds. And society—even those who weren’t shepherds themselves—depended on them for food, clothing, and often even shelter. As might be expected of a society that was so dependent on the flock, there are many words in Hebrew used to denote lambs or sheep, words with slightly varying shades of meaning that are largely lost on us today. (To get a picture of what I mean, imagine trying to sort out the vocabulary of our present car culture a thousand years in the future: what was the difference between a sports car, a sport sedan, a sport vehicle, and a sport utility vehicle?)

Probably the most general word translated “lamb” is the Hebrew word *seh*, used forty-six times in scripture. A *seh* is simply one of a flock—a lamb, sheep, goat, a *young* sheep or goat, any clean small four-footed mammal, or even a flock of them. It is the word used when the particular species, age, gender or description of the animal is less important than the mere fact that he exists. So the Torah’s property rights precepts, for example, usually use the designation *seh*, not something more specific.

The inherent sacrificial suitability of the *seh* is made clear in the story of the almost-sacrifice of Isaac on Moriah: **“Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here am I, my son.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb [*seh*] for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb [*seh*] for a burnt offering,**

my son.” (Genesis 22:6-8) This was a prophetic dress rehearsal, of course, for the eventual sacrifice of the Lamb of God, precisely two thousand years later, on the very same spot. There Yahshua was deemed a *seh*, a sacrifice suitable for the redemption of all mankind from the penalty of our sins.

This same truth is in view in the Law of the male firstborn, both of animals and men. **“You shall set apart to Yahweh all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be Yahweh’s. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb [*seh*], or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.”** (Exodus 13:12-13) The ultimate “Firstborn,” of course, would be Yahshua (Yahweh’s “only begotten Son”), who would fulfill not only the “sacrifice-the-firstborn” facet of the law, but also comprise the “lamb” substitute. We humans, like donkeys, are unclean: we cannot atone for our own sins or pay for our own redemption. Rather, a “clean” substitute—a *seh*—must be provided in our place. That lamb is Yahshua.

A more specific Hebrew designation for a “lamb” is *keseb*, a young ram or sheep, a small ruminant mammal of the *Ovis* family, about a year old or more (though in some contexts there is no apparent focus of the youth of the sheep). This seems to be a general word for the “sheep” species—unlike the *seh*, it is exclusive of goats. A *keseb* is a ceremonially clean animal, so it’s okay to eat, according to the Levitical dietary laws. A related word is *kebes*, meaning virtually the same thing. The usage statistics are revealing. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes, “This root and its derivatives [i.e., both *kebes* and *keseb*] occur 128 times in the Old Testament. Of these, only 17 do not occur in the context of sacrifice. *Kebeś* itself occurs 106 times with only 6 of these being non-sacrificial. As might be expected, 105 of the total occurrences are in the Pentateuch.”

We can see the general term contrasted with the specific in the instruction concerning the Passover “lamb,” which, as it turns out, didn’t have to be a *lamb* at all, but merely one of the flock—of the sheep *or* the goats. **“On the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb [*seh*] according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep [*kebes*] or from the goats [*’ez*], and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.”** (Exodus 12:3-7) Once again, the particular species isn’t the crux of the matter, but rather the animal’s intrinsic suitability as a sacrifice—a selection from the flock, a “clean” animal, one without imperfection or flaw. The “firstborn” theme is also in view here in the

Passover instructions. (Note that the “firstborn” passage we just reviewed is in the very next chapter.) The Passover sacrifice, after all, was specifically intended to prevent the angel of death from slaying the firstborn of the household in which the lamb was slain. Thus the *substitutionary* nature of the sacrifice—of one life being taken so that another might live—is introduced in no uncertain terms. This is the foundation of the concept of “grace” that’s so prevalent in the writings of Paul.

The substitution, however, couldn’t be of one thing for something like it (e.g., Sydney Carton nobly going to the guillotine in place of Charles Darnay in Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*). In the real world, a sinful man can die for his own sins, but not for the sins of another. And as Yahshua pointed out in John 3:17, *all of us* stand condemned by our sin—unless something is done to alter that situation (that “something” being defined in the previous verse as “believing in God’s only begotten Son”). Since God’s Son is sinless, innocent, blameless, and pure, He alone is able to function as the sacrifice Yahweh requires. And this is where God’s choice of the “lamb” as a symbolic sacrifice comes into view. Lambs represent innocence, a life lived without sin, without malice, and without deceit.

In the Passover scenario we just reviewed, the lamb chosen by the family to substitute for the life of the firstborn son wasn’t just picked out at random and summarily killed. Rather, God commanded that he was to be selected, inspected, and brought into the household *four whole days* before he was to be slain. What could be expected to happen between Nisan 10 and Nisan 14? Considering the docile, gregarious nature of the lamb (and even, to some extent, a young goat), an attachment would naturally develop between the animal and its family. It would become a pet, a companion, a fuzzy four-footed friend. He would become a familiar fixture around the house; his own unique personality would be revealed. The children would know him by name, and they’d get to where they could pick him out among a hundred sheep who looked just like him. So when the afternoon of the fourteenth rolled around, when the lamb had to be slain and roasted, there was plenty of agony to go around. The father would have spared the lamb if he could, since by now his children were in love with it. But he knew that if he did, his own son would die. There was really no option. As fond as the father had grown of the little critter, it came down to a choice between the lamb and his own son. There was no contest. The lamb had to die so his son could live.

To anyone with a firm grasp on the history of the thing, it should be apparent that this is precisely what happened in 33AD. Yahshua entered the “household” of Israel on Monday, Nisan 10, being thronged in adulation on the road leading from Bethlehem to Jerusalem—and in the process upstaging the High Priest, who thought *he* was bringing the perfect Passover lamb into town. (This *particular* Nisan 10 was prophesied—if you do the math—in Daniel 9:25.) During the next four days, Israel got to know their Lamb quite well as He taught in the temple,

mentored His disciples, chastised those who profaned His Father's house, and generally created mayhem and consternation for the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees (much to the delight, I imagine, of the "children" of Israel who found their arrogant pretensions hard to swallow). But four days later, on the 14th of Nisan (precisely as specified in the Torah) Yahshua was offered up to save us all from the messenger of death, His blood being applied to the doorpost and lintel of our eternal home—the "cross": the *stauros* (upright pole) with its crosspiece, the *patibulum*. And just as John had prophesied, Yahshua was revealed to be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The images of Passover may be the most obvious repository of "lamb symbology" in the Torah, but they are not remotely alone. Virtually every type of blood sacrifice allows (or specifies) the use of a lamb, and the picture it presents is always the same: the innocence of the animal standing in for man's lack of it. The peace offering (or *selem*) was typical: **"If his offering for a sacrifice of peace offering to Yahweh is an animal from the flock, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish. If he offers a lamb for his offering, then he shall offer it before Yahweh, lay his hand on the head of his offering, and kill it in front of the tent of meeting."** (Leviticus 3:6-8) The laying on of hands symbolically transferred innocence from the lamb to the one making the offering (or vice versa—guilt from the worshipper to the lamb). Burnt offerings (the *olah*), sin offerings (the *chata't*) and trespass offerings (the *asham*) all specified circumstances under which lambs could be offered. And of course, the firstborn offering (the *bekor*) specified that all firstborn male lambs (being clean animals) were to be sacrificed.

Several of these offering types are seen in the context of the cleansing ceremony for leprosy. I discussed this at length in *The Owner's Manual*, so I'll confine my remarks to the "high points." Leprosy is a scriptural metaphor for spiritual sickness—which can manifest itself in many different ways. The rites in the Torah do not actually prescribe a method for ridding oneself of the disease, but rather describe what to do once you have been cured. During the first seven days (indicative of the course of one's mortal life), inspection and verification are done, and only after that time is the spiritually ill person (that's all of us) finally declared "clean" (or not).

The "eighth day" of the rite, then, speaks of what happens in the eternal state: **"And on the eighth day he [the one who has been cured] shall take two male lambs without blemish, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish, and a grain offering of three tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil, and one log of oil. And the priest who cleanses him [literally, declares him to be clean] shall set the man who is to be cleansed and these things before Yahweh, at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall take one of the male lambs and offer it for a guilt offering, along with the log of oil, and wave them for a wave offering before Yahweh. And he shall kill the lamb in the**

place where they kill the sin offering and the burnt offering, in the place of the sanctuary. For the guilt offering, like the sin offering, belongs to the priest; it is most holy.” (Leviticus 14:10-13) Three lambs are to be offered by the cured leper. The first male lamb is a guilt (a.k.a. trespass) offering (the *asham*), acknowledging one’s lapses in holiness. The second is a sin offering (the *chata’t*), addressing the cured person’s failures in behavior. And the ewe lamb is an *olah*, or “burnt offering,” brought for atonement, homage, and celebration before Yahweh.

In the end, of course, all of these sacrificial lambs looked forward to Yahshua, God’s sacrifice that declares *us* to be clean of our spiritual sickness. It is no coincidence that after this symbolic law was pronounced, no Israelite (that we know of) was ever cured of leprosy—*until* Yahshua did so. In Luke 17, we’re told the story of ten lepers who were healed by Yahshua. But of the ten, only one—and a Samaritan at that—came back to thank his Benefactor. Only this one fulfilled the spirit of the Torah with his reaction: **“When he saw that he was healed, [he] returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks.”** (Luke 17:15-16) This spontaneous outpouring of gratitude was the very *olah*, the burnt offering, that Yahweh had specified back here in Leviticus 14. We are all lepers; we are all born with a congenital spiritual malady. And we have all been offered the cure for our deadly condition. But who among us will do what the cured Samaritan did? (1) Realize we’ve been healed; (2) return, i.e., turn around (read: repent); (3) publicly glorify God; (4) worship our Healer; and (5) give Him thanks. Only those who do will be pronounced clean before Yahweh on the eighth day, the eternal state.

Looking at the seven annual holy convocations (the “Feasts”) of Yahweh, we note that lambs are associated with every single one of them. The lamb slain on Passover was eaten after sundown, meaning that the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Nisan 15, the second convocation in the series) is in view. For the third convocation, the Feast of Firstfruits (the day after Unleavened Bread), we are told, **“When you come into the land that I give you and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before Yahweh, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath the priest shall wave it. And on the day when you wave the sheaf, you shall offer a male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 23:10-12)

The Feast of Weeks continues the pattern: **“You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering.... And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one bull from the herd and two rams.”** (Leviticus 23:15-18) There’s a lot more to it, of course, but my purpose here is merely to point out God’s ubiquitous usage of lambs in Levitical worship. In Numbers 28 alone, lambs (*kebes*) are mentioned thirty-two times in reference to Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the

Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (making the “lamb score” seven for seven in Yahweh’s cycle of annual feasts), in addition to the daily tabernacle offerings, Sabbath rites, and new moon celebrations.

The tabernacle/temple is a comprehensive and detailed metaphor for God’s plan for our redemption. Thus I find it significant that lambs (*kebes*) are spoken of twenty-six times in Numbers 7 in reference to the offerings that were made to dedicate the original tabernacle. (At the dedication of the first temple, Solomon and the Israelites were said to have offered 120,000 sheep!) And lest you think that the imagery is all but obsolete, note that in Ezekiel 46, the *future* Millennial temple offerings—now memorial rather than prophetic—speak of lambs seven more times. I wasn’t educated in a fancy seminary and I don’t have a lot of letters behind my name, but I have observed a thing or two about God’s word. My horseback hermeneutics run something like this: (1) Yahweh has good reason for telling us whatever He’s told us: He doesn’t say anything on a pointless whim. (2) He’s told us everything we need to know about life and godliness, and has equipped us with brains to figure out the rest on our own. (3) God doesn’t make stupid mistakes: if something looks wrong, the problem is on our end (faulty logic, bad translations, errant assumptions, etc.), not His. (4) He’s perfectly capable of taking care of His own kingdom; He doesn’t need our help, even though He enjoys our enthusiastic participation. And (5) the more often a theme or subject is broached in God’s word, the more essential it is to our understanding. Therefore, the sheer ubiquity of “lamb sightings” in scripture should tell us that as a symbol, this one’s really important, to wit: any innocence we have (and remember: we must be guiltless if we wish to stand before a holy God) is borrowed, imputed, *transferred to us* through the sacrifice of Innocence on our behalf. And ultimately, Innocence has a name: Yahshua—“Yahweh is Salvation.”

God told us what to expect: **“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,”** says Yahweh of hosts.” (Malachi 3:1) That was fulfilled when John the Baptist testified in the desert: **“John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked by and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.”** (John 1:35-37) The Messenger of Yahweh’s covenant is the Lamb of God. Following Him is the only logical course of action open to us.

There’s more to the “lamb” metaphor than innocence. In addition to being God’s “suitable sacrifice,” Christ is also cast as the Good *Shepherd*—highlighting the fact that sheep are generally vulnerable, gullible, not too bright, and apt to

wander away and get lost—they need help. These attributes make sheep a pretty good metaphor for people, who are weak, venal, and all too apt to go astray. I firmly believe that a big part of what comprised Yahshua's "sacrifice" was taking on the form of a man. That's not merely a "demotion." He gave up entire *dimensions* in order to meet us where we are. The manifestation of God as man is the ultimate expression of empathy, for Yahshua in so doing subjected Himself to every test and temptation common to our race. And His only defense against evil was that which all believers have at our disposal.

What, precisely, was this defense? Paul explained it: **"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."** It's hard to defend yourself against something you don't understand. **"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication."** (Ephesians 6:11-17) Truth, righteousness, the Good News of God's love, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer: Yahshua used—or *was*—all of these things to defend Himself against the "schemes of the devil" as He walked the earth. His only "offensive weapon" was (as it is with us) the indwelling Holy Spirit. As a mortal human, Yahshua was every bit as vulnerable as we are, and yet He overcame it all, maintaining His innocence (and through it, His power to atone for our sins). **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."** (Hebrews 4:15) So Yahshua is both sheep and shepherd, both vulnerable and invincible, both tested and triumphant.

Isaiah points out the same contrast: **"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Yahweh has laid on Him [the Messiah] the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth."** (Isaiah 53:6-7, quoted in Acts 8) In other words, because we act like dumb sheep, Yahshua became a sacrificial Lamb on our behalf. Consider the role of lambs or sheep in human society. They have two jobs: (1) get fleeced, and then (2) get eaten. People were never designed to be "sheeple." As far back as the Garden of Eden, our mandate was to administer, tend, and be good stewards over God's creation, at least here on earth. Man was given dominion over every living thing—*except for other men*. Some people's goal, however, is to rule over their

fellows, fleecing them and consuming their wealth—or their very lives. When we “turn to our own way,” we cease being men and women, and become *sheeple*.

So the Psalmist laments (as must we all), **“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget Your commandments.”** (Psalm 119:176) And seek us God does—and finds us, if we want to be found. David noted, **“Yahweh is my Shepherd. I shall not want.”** (Psalm 23:1) That’s a swell sentiment, but little more than sweet poetic musings if God doesn’t actually *do* something in His role as Shepherd. Yes, David experienced the guidance and provision of Yahweh in his life, but in the long run, we’d hope for something a bit more tangible, a bit more *direct* from our Creator. And we wouldn’t be disappointed: Yahweh is our Shepherd, but the One we see holding His rod and staff, leading us beside still waters, is Yahshua—taking care of His Father’s flock.

“Jesus again said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.’ He’s speaking, ultimately, of any proposed path to God (or to prosperity, paradise, heaven on earth, utopia, world peace, or whatever you want to call it) that Yahweh Himself did not reveal, any manmade religion or philosophy that denies the truths presented in the Torah—truths Yahshua had come to personify and fulfill. **“I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly....”** The blessed experience described by David in the 23rd Psalm is equated here with a life in Christ: there is no other door. This experience, though everybody may say he wants it (or something like it), is *exclusive* to those who enter into it God’s way—through God’s only door: Yahshua.

Shifting metaphors a bit, He continues: **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”** If someone has no vested interest in an enterprise, whether financial, emotional, or moral, he will have no reason to risk his own neck on its behalf. Have you ever noticed the tendency of some politicians to throw their supporters under the bus at the first sign of adversity, or to duck their responsibilities and commitments when it seems politically advantageous to do so? That’s what happens when the agenda is personal power, not love of country. Yahshua didn’t have to grasp at power—He was Almighty God, after all. Christ laid down His life so we dumb sheeple could escape from the ravenous, drooling wolf, Satan. **“I am the good shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep....”** God does not consider us His “property” (though this is His right) but rather friends, companions, His children. We know Him, and He knows us, for His Spirit lives within us.

Remember, Yahshua was speaking to Jews, to Israelites. So the next revelation came as a bit of a bombshell to them: **“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd....”** Yahshua is, of course, referring to the church, the called-out assembly of people who believe in the efficacy of His sacrifice—the “laying down of His life for the sheep.” Though exclusively Jewish in the beginning, the ekklesia would become largely comprised of gentiles as time went on. But the central truth, the one thing everybody seems to forget, is that even though we live in different “folds,” *all of His sheep* are of one flock, with one Shepherd, whose one voice speaks to all of us. Israel *will* recognize her Messiah. It’s a prophetic *fait accompli*.

One final epiphany: **“For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father.”** (John 10:7-18) Nobody “took” Yahshua’s life. He wasn’t seized and executed against His will. Rather, He “laid it down” willingly and voluntarily for our sakes (knowing the whole time that He had the power to “take it up again” when the time was right). It was all a question of *authority*. Being the Son of God, Yahshua (though clothed temporarily in a mortal human body) held absolute authority over life and death. He had proved that very thing any number of times. Providing life and atonement for us by literally becoming the “Passover Lamb” of God was “merely” the next step in the unfolding of the Torah’s symbology. I am still dumbfounded that the scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests of Israel, as steeped as they were in the Torah, couldn’t see this coming. I mean, they had Him executed on *Passover*, of all days! What were they thinking? In retrospect, this is about as obvious as any fulfilled prophecy has *ever* been.

Anyone who finds himself in a position of leadership could be characterized a “shepherd.” I mentioned that a sheep’s “job” is to get fleeced and then eaten, but the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep is supposed to be a two-way street: in exchange for wool and the occasional lamb chop, the shepherd is responsible for feeding, guarding, protecting, and tending the flock, leading them to water and fending off predators—even if it means risking his own life in the process. So in Ezekiel 34, Yahweh has a scathing rebuke for the “shepherds” of Israel: **“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel [the leaders, both of the monarchy and the religious elite]; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, ‘Thus says the Sovereign Yahweh: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat.’** If you’ll recall, the “fat” symbolically indicates “the best there is,” and more to the point, it was reserved for Yahweh. **“You clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep....”** The leaders of Israel were not keeping up their end of the bargain. They were supposed to be “herding” their people into a close and

secure relationship with Yahweh, but all they were doing was feeding their own faces and lining their own pockets at the expense of the sheeple. Whether or not they realized it, this was tantamount to stealing from God: He concludes the chapter by reminding Israel, “You are My flock, the flock of My pasture.”

Ezekiel continues the tirade, this time detailing the shepherds’ failures: **“The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.”** Everything a shepherd is supposed to do for his sheep has a counterpart in what leaders are to do for their people. Although He’s talking to Israel here, it’s pretty clear that the principle could be extended to any leadership situation—other nations, heads of families, pastors of churches, corporate employers, institutions of learning, etc. If people are depending on you for guidance and provision, Yahweh *requires* that you meet their needs to the best of your ability—and do so *before* you meet your own needs at their expense. **“So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them....”** By the time Ezekiel wrote this, Israel’s northern kingdom had long since been ground to powder in the Assyrian machine (which is not to say Yahweh can’t still track their whereabouts), and Judah had been hauled off to Babylon in chains—all because their “shepherds” had failed in their responsibilities to keep their people safe in Yahweh’s care. And yet the admonition still holds true, for it is a universal principle: leaders have responsibilities before God, the foremost of which is to guide their flocks in the ways of Yahweh.

Furthermore, there are consequences for failing to lead according to God’s law: **“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: As I live, declares the Sovereign Yahweh, surely because My sheep have become a prey, and My sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because My shepherds have not searched for My sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed My sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of Yahweh: Thus says the Sovereign Yahweh, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My sheep at their hand and put a stop to their tending the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue My sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.”** (Ezekiel 34:2-10) First, God will declare himself an enemy of the worthless shepherd. Idiots and atheists, of course, don’t care about that, but it ought to at least give a rational person pause. Second, God will “require His sheep at their hand,” that is, He will hold the false shepherds personally responsible for their destruction. Again, if you have any pretense of belief in a supreme being, this prospect ought to shake you to your soul. Third, Yahweh will remove the false shepherds from their exalted positions of leadership, so they can no longer fleece the sheeple. This one must be weighed against God’s propensity for giving people ample time to repent. From

the point of view of the sheep, of course, removal of the bad shepherd can't come soon enough. But Yahweh's timing is perfect.

In the end, every leader who has ever lived is merely an understudy, for Yahweh, manifested as Yahshua, is the ultimate Shepherd. **“For thus says the Sovereign Yahweh: Behold, I, I Myself, will search for My sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out My sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.”** Although the principle is still universal, Yahweh is focusing on Israel's future here—their restoration under their King and Messiah during the coming Millennial kingdom. The reference to darkened skies is an oft repeated theme in Tribulation eschatology. **“And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land.”** For the record, the “mountain heights of Israel” are in the currently disputed “West Bank.” Yahweh is stating in no uncertain terms that Israel's borders will once again match the original promises. (See in particular the hyper-specific description of the Land in Numbers 34.) **“There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I Myself will be the shepherd of My sheep, and I Myself will make them lie down, declares the Sovereign Yahweh. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”** (Ezekiel 34:11-16) Yahweh intends to “fire” those worthless shepherds who led Israel (and the rest of us) astray, taking their cut off the top while scoffing at their responsibilities of stewardship. And who will lead His people? He will, personally. Sometimes, if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

I should note that people who ascribe to “replacement theology,” a.k.a. “supercessionism”—the idea that the church has inherited Israel's promises, blessings, and covenant, while the Jews are thrown under the bus of history for their transgressions—is flatly contradicted by these verses (and a hundred similar passages in the Tanach). The church was never scattered like frightened sheep, nor is it reasonable that God intends to gather every member of the ekklesia and squeeze them into tiny eretz Israel, the land promised to Abraham's physical descendants. To believe in such things, one has to irrationally declare that none of this is *literally* true—that God was only speaking in allegorical terms. But if you start “spiritualizing” scripture to yield the result you want (rather than taking it the way you found it, assuming only that Yahweh knows what He's doing), you have no objective basis for your hermeneutics anymore: you're just making up scripture as you go. It's tantamount to both adding to *and* subtracting from the

words of God—in clear violation of such warnings as Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32, Proverbs 30:6, and Revelation 22:18.

Anyway, so much for the shepherds. What about the sheep themselves? Do they (we) have any responsibilities? Are we to be held accountable, even though we're not leaders? Apparently, yes: **“As for you, My flock, thus says the Sovereign Yahweh: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep [both *seh*, the generic word for members of a flock], between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must My sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?...”** A careful reading of the text reveals a distinction between one kind of “sheep” and another here. One group He calls “My sheep,” set in contrast with “you,” other sheep who pollute what they don't utilize. They're all part of the same big flock (humanity), all of which belongs to God, but some of them, though not shepherds, still manage to display a degree of selfish, willfully destructive arrogance that Yahweh finds reprehensible. We may not know the solution, but we don't have to be part of the problem.

“Therefore, thus says the Sovereign Yahweh to them: Behold, I, I Myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue My flock; they shall no longer be a prey.” Interesting concept: sheep preying upon other sheep, sheep in wolves' clothing, so to speak—very un-lamblike behavior, but something that's becoming more prevalent all the time. It's the antithesis of loving one's neighbor. **“And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, Yahweh, will be their God, and My servant David shall be prince among them. I am Yahweh; I have spoken.”** (Ezekiel 34:17-24) “David” (Israel's beloved shepherd-king) could be a metaphor for his physical descendant, King Yahshua here, but it's also possible that the resurrected, now-immortal David is in view. My studies in prophecy have led me to the conclusion that *both of them* will be present in the Millennial Jerusalem. Either way, Yahweh has promised to rescue and protect His flock from both evil shepherds and belligerent, self-centered sheep during the Kingdom Age.

As we saw in Hebrew, the Koine Greek dialect has several words denoting lambs or sheep. When John the Baptist said of Yahshua (twice, both in John 1) “Behold the Lamb of God,” he used the word *amnos*, the word used to denote sacrificial lambs. *Amnos* is apparently the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *seh*, for it is used in Acts 8:32 to render Isaiah 53:7 into Greek (“As a lamb before its shearer is silent...”). And Peter uses *amnos* to stress the substitutionary nature of Christ's sacrifice, comparing it to the Torah's lamb offerings: **“You were ransomed**

from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb [*amnos*] without blemish or spot.” (I Peter 1:18-19) So in the New Testament, Yahshua is positively identified as the Lamb of God’s redemption, the suitable sacrifice of which the Torah spoke, the only means by which we may be reconciled to Yahweh.

But what about lambs or sheep as a metaphor for people—vulnerable, not too bright, and in constant need of our Good Shepherd? In the telling encounter between the humbled Peter and his resurrected Savior, several descriptive “sheep” words are used: **“Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Feed My lambs’ [that’s *arnion*, a little lamb]. He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love Me?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, ‘Tend My sheep [*probation*].’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know everything; You know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep [*probation*].”** (John 21:15-17) A *probaton* (or the diminutive *probation*) is a small grazing animal, a sheep or goat, figuratively, one in God’s (i.e., Christ’s) care and possession. While it lacks the tender overtones of *arnion*, it is used overwhelmingly in the Greek scriptures as a euphemism for “sheeple” who would be lost were it not for their association with their Shepherd, Yahshua. A few examples of the *probation*: **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”** (Matthew 9:36) **“Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?”** (Matthew 12:11) **“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’** (Luke 15:6) Or, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** (Matthew 15:24)

That last example stings a bit, for “the lost sheep of Israel,” ultimately following the bad advice of their rabbis, opted in the end to *remain* lost. That is why Yahweh had warned them through the prophet Ezekiel, as we saw above, **“Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats.”** He will certainly do that among the Jews. As Zechariah reports, **“Awake, O sword, against My shepherd [Yahshua], against the Man who stands next to Me, declares Yahweh of hosts. Strike the shepherd, and the sheep [in context, Israel] will be scattered; I will turn My hand against the little ones.”** This has been going on since 70 AD. **“In the whole land, declares Yahweh, two thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one third shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire [i.e., the Tribulation], and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon My name, and I will answer them. I will say, ‘They are My people’; and they will say, ‘Yahweh is my God.’”** (Zechariah 13:7-9)

But Yahshua also informed His disciples (during the Olivet Discourse) precisely what the gentiles could expect as the age came to its final abrupt conclusion. It's a process of division, of separating the innocent (i.e., redeemed) mortals still alive on the earth at the end of the Tribulation from the guilty, unredeemed survivors: **"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on his glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...."** Note that He said "when," not "if." Yahshua *will* reign in glory upon the throne of planet earth. It's a prophetic *fait accompli*.

The "nations" are the gentiles—everybody but Israel (whom the King will later describe as "these My brothers"). The only time this scene could logically take place is immediately after the Tribulation—at the very beginning of the Millennial age—for God clearly intends to begin His earthly kingdom (as He did after the flood of Noah) with a clean slate, an earth populated exclusively with people who have chosen to honor Him. If Daniel 12:12 means what I think it does (that someone is "blessed"—i.e., he has "made the cut"—if he survives until 1,335 days after the abomination of desolation, which in turn will occur on day 1,230 of the 2,520-day Tribulation), then the "separation of the sheep from the goats" spoken of here will be a process that will take the first forty-five days of the Millennium to achieve. And if my (admittedly wild) guess about the number of surviving mortals that will have to be evaluated (only a billion or so, out of the approximately seven billion alive today) is even remotely correct, then this judgment process will take place with blinding speed.

"And He will place the sheep [Greek: *probation*] on His right, but the goats on the left." That's the essence of the Biblical concept of "judgment"—the judicial separation of guilty from the vindicated. **"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....'"** If the God-King were nothing more than a judge, a mere decider of issues, this would seem very odd indeed. We're used to judges (as flawed humans themselves) having to be impartial and dispassionate, with no vested interest in how the case turns out. But this One is obviously rooting for the sheep, overjoyed that He's able to invite these vindicated defendants into the kingdom as blessed souls, destined to be the patriarchs and matriarchs of a perfect world. Only God Himself could exercise the perfect wisdom necessary for such tricky decisions. Remember, all the "defendants" standing before Him missed the rapture. That is, *none of them* had a personal relationship with the Living God when the "trumpet" was blown some years before this, catching up the true believers to be with Yahshua in the heavens while leaving everyone else to face the wrath of God.

So what did the sheep do in the meantime that compelled the Judge to pronounce them innocent and blessed? Did they all buy black suits and big ol' King James Bibles and start attending church services regularly? Did they work diligently to form airtight theological positions? No. Considering the times, I'd venture a guess that most of these "sheep" came out of the Tribulation not having much more "doctrine" under their belts than they did before it began. Churchianity remained a foreign concept to them. But they listened to their consciences, heeded the angelic messengers (see Revelation 14:6) and perhaps encountered one of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses—and they did what they knew was right, despite the consequences. The Judge says, **"For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me..."** These are practical expressions of love, not religious acts or cultic rituals. The time for symbols, it appears, will have passed. Now your guilt or innocence will be determined solely on the basis of what you do to help your fellow man, for this, in the end, is the only evidence deemed valid to reveal what you believe.

This—the idea that the sheep had aided the King (the *Shepherd*) in some way—will come as a surprise to them, however. **"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You, or naked and clothe You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visit You?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me..."** Sheep aren't expected to know much or have a lot of skill. Nevertheless, we saw above how God takes exception to those who "muddy the water with their feet," "trample down the grass," and "thrust at the weak with their horns." By treating their fellow sheep with kindness and generosity to whatever extent they were able, these "righteous" sheep will have actually been assisting the Shepherd, though they didn't even know He was watching.

As a practical matter, since this a picture of behavior during the dark days of the Tribulation, taking care of "the least of these My brothers" can be boiled down to providing shelter and support for the most hated, persecuted, irrationally despised population on earth—the Jews. The Nazis of the 1930s and '40s showed us how it will work. As Hitler's minions tried to round up and exterminate all of Europe's Jews, a few brave souls hid them, sheltered them, fed them, and secreted them out of harm's way—at dire risk to their own safety. These angels of mercy from our recent past are analogous to the blessed "sheep" of the Tribulation, who will similarly risk their own lives to feed, clothe, and shelter the Israelites—in and out of the Land. One wonders how many there will be. I only know this: they (along with the Jews they've supported) will be the *only* mortals left alive on earth when the King has finished the separation procedure.

This does not bode well for the “goats.” **“Then He will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’** If the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of which Yahshua spoke in John 3 describes how someone can be “born from above” into eternal life, then this terrifying scenario reveals the converse—being “born from below,” so to speak. These goats have consciously chosen to ally themselves with demons instead of God, and will therefore share in the demons’ fate, described a bit later as “eternal punishment.” As with the sheep, however, the only evidence allowed in this court is what they actually *did* (or did not do) to “the least of the King’s brothers,” for their actions reveal what (and whom) they believe. **“For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’** Then they also will answer, saying, **‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’** Then he will answer them, saying, **‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

One may be tempted to cry “foul” here. After all, helping Jews in these dark times will be (as it was under the Nazis) illegal, dangerous, and (gasp!) politically incorrect. The goats may protest, *I was only following orders*, or *I was only doing as the law required*, or *I was only trying to protect my family*. Though the moral precedent set at the Nuremburg trials will still hold true, the clincher will be that by turning their backs on the Jews, the goats had actually turned their backs on the King Himself, whether they knew it or not. He takes their cowardice (if that’s what it really was) as a personal affront. Nor will ignorance be an excuse: the principle had been laid down four thousand years previously, when God had told Abraham, **“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:3) In the end, it will all come down to who they believed, Yahweh or Satan. The truly terrifying thing about all this is that apparently, non-choice will no longer be possible: everyone alive on earth will be forced to get off the fence—to get right, or get left.

Lest there should be any confusion about the identity of the coming King, the Book of Revelation uses a literary device designed to establish the continuity between the suffering Messiah of Torah symbol and fulfilled prophecy, and the reigning Messiah of as-yet-unfulfilled prophecy. Here, the Sacrificial Lamb is presented as an image of the reigning King: the only person in heaven or on earth found worthy to judge in righteousness.

We find John in exile on the Isle of Patmos, receiving a heavenly vision of things yet to be: **“Then I saw in the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne [i.e., Yahweh] a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?...”** The scroll represents, in a manner of speaking, the title deed to planet earth—something that Adam lost to Satan in the Garden of Eden when Satan tricked Adam and Eve into sinning. Basically, it was like losing the family farm to a sleazy cheat in a rigged card game. The only way to win it back would have been by beating the devil at his own game, but to do that Adam would have had to be sinless. Unfortunately, as we saw with leaven, sin is like a chemical reaction—it’s irreversible. One must become a “new creation” to be rid of its effects. So as far as the world is concerned, only someone who’d been subjected to the same sort of testing as Adam, and yet had remained sinless, could “win” the earth back and undo the curse. And make no mistake. The curse is complete and total: there are *seven* seals preventing any normal (i.e., corrupted) person from opening the scroll and freeing the earth from bondage.

So John, faced with this seemingly insoluble conundrum, breaks down in tears: **“And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.”** But as it turned out, all was *not* lost. **“And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals....”** These “elders” represent the redeemed—those whose faith in Yahweh’s solution for their sin defined them as being righteous in God’s eyes. The elders *know* who is worthy to break the seals and reclaim the earth, for they have witnessed his victory over death. They see Him as the Lion of Judah: the king, the basis of David’s right to rule.

But what John *saw* didn’t look like a lion. He looked like a little lamb, and a dead one at that, one who had been sacrificed on the altar of Yahweh: **“And between the throne and the four living beings and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”** Note where the Lamb is standing: He is positioned between the throne (where Yahweh dwells) and the four living beings, representing God’s presence in the affairs of men. The Lamb is positioned *among the elders*—He identifies with us, empathizes with us, and most importantly, has given His life for us. **“And He went and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne. And when He had taken the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints....”** The elders know this Lamb to actually be the Lion of the tribe of Judah—in other words, the rightful King. But notice who else gives Him homage: the four living beings (representative of God’s

presence) are also seen bowing before Him. Moreover, prayers are being offered up to Him. It's the clearest of Biblical principles: one *does not* bow down to or offer prayers to anyone or anything—not created things, not saints, not even angels—but only to Yahweh Himself. This “Lamb,” it appears, is no ordinary sacrificial animal: He is God in flesh.

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals.’” Why are they all so excited? How is the Lamb able to do what no one else in heaven or earth had been able to do? **“For You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”** Yahweh (*as* Yahweh—the omnipotent Creator Spirit) could not function as our redeeming sacrifice, for spirits (and especially the self-existent One) are immortal; they cannot be slain, for any reason. That, of course, is why Yahweh, in His love for us, manifested Himself as a meek and lowly man—symbolizing the Passover lamb through whom He would be revealed as our redeemer, our ransom. By this most selfless of acts, Yahshua achieved our transformation from sinners into saints, and earned the legal right to open the seven seals of the scroll.

This revelation, not surprisingly, is cause for celebration—in heaven and on earth: **“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living beings and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’”** And the four living beings said, ‘Amen!’ and the elders fell down and worshiped.” (Revelation 5) On a more prosaic note, the opening of the seals (described in the following chapter) reveals precisely how the Lamb of God will go about taking His world back from Satan. The remainder of the book fleshes out the plot, reveals the players, and generally provides a framework upon which to hang hundreds of previous Last Days prophecies scattered throughout scripture. Taken as a comprehensive whole, like a 10,000 piece jigsaw puzzle, they provide a remarkably clear picture of what's on our immediate horizon. Tracking down all the puzzle pieces is a job for another book (one I've already written, which explains how I know what happens when you “work the puzzle”—click on www.FutureTruth.net). All I want to do at this juncture is to point out that none of this would be possible if Yahweh had not put aside His glory and humbled Himself like an innocent lamb—He came to be slaughtered on our behalf and in our stead.

The Messiah maintains his “Lamb” persona throughout the Book of Revelation, for it is essential that we make the connection between His sacrifice

and His right to rule. As if to make my point for me, we read, **“And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are of one mind and hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful.”** (Revelation 17:12-14) You don’t ordinarily see lambs “conquering” anything. I mean, they’re sweet, gentle, fuzzy, and not equipped with thumbs—hardly your typical “conqueror” metaphor. But as we have already seen, *this* Lamb is actually the Lion of the tribe of Judah: four hundred pounds of muscle and mane, teeth, claws, and unmitigated confidence. The lion eats what he wants, when he wants: in this case, He’s going to make lunch out of the Antichrist’s power base. The lesson to us humans: be careful Who you attack. He may not be the helpless victim you imagined Him to be.

Another example: we are given this glimpse of Yahshua’s homecoming: **“Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with Him 144,000 who had His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads.... It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.”** (Revelation 14:1, 4-5) These 144,000 are young men from all twelve tribes of Israel (well, actually, Dan is missing, compensated for by two tribes from Joseph), sealed and tasked to introduce their nation to the Messiah they rejected two thousand years previously. They (like the rest of the saints) are “blameless” not because they never sinned, but because their sins have been atoned by the blood of the Lamb—in whose company they’re seen on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. They’re doing what we should *all* be doing, metaphorically, at least: “following the Lamb wherever He goes.”

As we get near the end of the story—when evil has been conquered and justice prevails—we might expect God to drop the “Lamb” metaphor in favor of something a bit more regal. But we’d be mistaken: **“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’”** (Revelation 19:6-9) The sacrifice of the Lamb was what made everything possible—the celebration of God’s glory, the eternal union of Christ with His bride, and even her righteous deeds before God.

So no, this is one symbol Yahweh is going to keep using forever. Even when this earth is gone and the heavens are no more, we will still be celebrating the Lamb of God. **“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God**

gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.” (Revelation 21:22-27) Even in the New Jerusalem—which for our purposes is “heaven,” the Lamb is our liberty, our light, and our very life.

GOAT

❧ 3.2.2 ❧

The Sin Bearer

Sheep and goats are often linked or seen side by side in scripture, the same way we might see cars and trucks (or in my world, maybe guitars and basses)—they are “birds of a feather who flock together.” As we have seen, *seh* is the oft-used Hebrew word for “one of the flock” without particular regard to which animal is in view. Both are Levitically “clean,” meaning they are specifically designated in the Torah as animals that are safe to eat, provided they’re butchered properly. Like cattle, sheep and goats both have four compartments in their stomachs (called the rumen, reticulum, omasum and abomasums, if you must know). The complexity of their digestive tracts (as compared to monogastric animals like pigs, horses, or donkeys, for instance) accounts for their ability to process and eliminate toxic wastes rather than absorb them into their musculature. Yahweh wasn’t pointlessly micromanaging our lives when He told us what animals we could and couldn’t eat; He was protecting us from things we wouldn’t even comprehend for the next thirty-five hundred years. We really need to learn to take His word for stuff we don’t quite understand.

On the other hand, sheep and goats *are* different, and these differences, I believe, are the key to their divergent symbologies. Lambs are presented as the picture of innocence, whereas goats are seen as being more mischievous, so—while not actually *being* evil or malicious—they are associated with sin. Why this should be so is due to the way the two species are “wired.” Sheep are grazing animals, like cattle. Goats, on the other hand are browsers—more like deer than cattle in this respect. They prefer shrubbery, leaves and weeds to grasses. Further, they are equipped with a prehensile upper lip and tongue, not to mention a high degree of intelligence and a curious nature, all of which conspire to give goats a reputation as mischief makers: they’ll chew on just about anything in order to determine its suitability as food—tasting, nibbling, and sampling anything they deem worthy of investigation, which, in the end, is pretty much *everything*.

Goats are less gregarious than sheep, and more aggressive. They’re also notorious “escape artists,” having an uncanny propensity for getting out of their pens—one more thing to make them a natural metaphor for sin. There’s a difference between wandering off (as sheep are wont to do) and running away like an escaped convict, something any self-respecting goat will do if he’s found a hole in the fence. I think there’s a reason our Messiah is called the Good Shepherd and not the Good Goat-Herder. You see, goats know their master’s voice too; they just don’t pay much attention to what he says.

And you can chalk *this one* up to coincidence if you want, but certain varieties of Western European-origin goats without horns frequently produce intersex offspring—basically, female animals with male characteristics. While I imagine the advocates of homosexual/bisexual/transgender behavior might applaud this development as a “natural” confirmation of their own deviant moral choices, I would hasten to remind the reader that these goat offspring are *infertile*. Their genetic posterity is a dead end. If *all* of their offspring had these aberrant traits, the species would die out in one generation. The inherent unfruitfulness of such a monstrosity is thus an apt metaphor for those who choose to carry their own sin instead of accepting God’s grace. It’s the very picture of what goats symbolically represent in scripture: they are the sin bearers.

Let us, then, get down to the scriptural specifics. As with sheep and lambs, there are several Hebrew words used to describe goats—all of which are used in the context of Levitical sacrifices. But it is the exceptions—the figurative usages of these words—that will help us zero in on what God meant for us to know about goats as a symbol.

The generic designation for “a goat” is the Hebrew word *'ez*. Being a feminine noun, it most directly indicates a she-goat or a kid. It is used seventy-four times in scripture, about half of these in references to Torah sacrifices. The word is derived from the root *'azaz*, meaning to be strong or to prevail, reflecting the independent nature of goats in general, but let’s face it: goats aren’t elephants—they don’t have much weight to throw around. So we read, **“And the people of Israel were mustered and were provisioned and went against them. The people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats [*'ez*], but the Syrians filled the country.”** (I Kings 20:27) That’s an evocative picture of bravado in the face of overwhelming odds.

One symbolically significant mention of the goat—as something other than a blood sacrifice—is as a source of hair for making cloth. Moses was instructed, **“You shall also make curtains of goats’ [*'ez*] hair for a tent over the tabernacle; eleven curtains shall you make.”** (Exodus 26:7) This was to be the second of four layers (as counted from the inside out) covering the tabernacle. The source of the goats’ hair was to be the contributions of the Israelites—one type of raw material among many. Yahweh told Moses to make the need known, and the people responded, supplying everything that was necessary for the construction of the sanctuary: **“Take from among you a contribution to Yahweh. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring Yahweh’s contribution: gold, silver, and bronze; blue and purple and scarlet yarns**

and fine twined linen; goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, and goatskins; acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece." (Exodus 35:5-9) It's worth noting that God didn't ask for anything He hadn't already provided. There's no plutonium or chocolate sprinkles on the list—just things that were available and would serve in some symbolic capacity to introduce Israel (and through her, the whole world) to the Messiah, our redeemer.

Nor did God present Israel with a ready-made pre-fab tabernacle: He let them participate in its construction, like a parent letting the kids "help" in the kitchen. **"All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goats' hair."** (Exodus 35:26) Once the ladies had made the thread, it was incorporated into the grand design: **"He [i.e., the gifted "art director" Bezaleel and his team of skilled artisans] also made curtains of goats' hair for a tent over the tabernacle. He made eleven curtains. The length of each curtain was thirty cubits, and the breadth of each curtain four cubits. The eleven curtains were the same size. He coupled five curtains by themselves, and six curtains by themselves. And he made fifty loops on the edge of the outermost curtain of the one set, and fifty loops on the edge of the other connecting curtain. And he made fifty clasps of bronze to couple the tent together that it might be a single whole. And he made for the tent a covering of tanned rams' skins and goatskins."** (Exodus 36:14-19) There's a lot going on here, but as always, if we're willing to look for the metaphorical significance of the components and their mandated arrangement, we'll see Yahweh's beautiful picture emerge. (If we're *not* willing to ponder the symbols however, this all devolves into so much pointless minutiae.)

The first (or inner) set of curtains—ten of them—were made of linen, symbolic of imputed righteousness. They were twenty-eight cubits long and four cubits wide (roughly 42 feet by 6). They were to be tied together in groups of five (the number of grace), and these sub-assemblies were to be joined together with golden clasps (gold indicating immutable purity). This linen layer could be seen only from inside the tabernacle, for it was concealed by three other layers, the next of which was the one made of goats' hair, as described in our text. But there were *eleven* goats' hair curtains, six (the number of man) in one section and five (again, read: grace) in the other. This tells me (if I'm seeing this correctly) that one section (the one with five panels) represents the ekklesia, and the other (with six) Israel, which in turn symbolizes the entire human race. Since there was to be one extra goats' hair curtain, they were to overlap the linen set in an offset fashion, ensuring that there were no gaps, no visible seams. And these two goat-hair sub-assemblies were held together not with golden clasps, as before, but with bronze clips—indicative this time of judgment.

The emerging picture is that, from our vantage point (as priests) inside the holy place, our sin is hidden—covered—by the imputed righteousness provided

by Christ's sacrifice. Since the tabernacle coverings are made of two separate sub-assemblies, it is apparent that the basis of our salvation is the same whether we're Jews or Gentiles: it's Yahshua. Moreover, the goats' hair curtains were to be longer than the linen ones—just long enough (at thirty cubits) to touch the ground on either side of the tabernacle structure. The point is that while our sin (the goats' hair curtain) touches the earth, and *vice versa*, the imputed righteousness (the linen layer) we experience within the tabernacle cannot be soiled by contact with the world in which we live. We are separated from it, holy, called out—kept, quite literally (since it's a cubit short on either side), at arm's length from it.

Outside the goats' hair curtains there were to be two more layers, the symbology of which we'll discuss later in this chapter. For now, just note that this means our sin (represented by the goats' hair) is *hidden*: it is apparent neither from within the tent nor from outside it. Though it is *there* (as God well knows), it cannot be seen from any vantage point in heaven or on the earth.

A second word translated “goat” is *'attuwd*, a male goat, he-goat, or ram, thus figuratively, a leader, chief one, or even a goat herder. It is used in this sense to warn the leaders of Israel: **“My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders [*'attuwd*]; for Yahweh of hosts cares for His flock, the house of Judah.”** (Zechariah 10:3) Bearing in mind that the primary symbolic meaning assigned to goats is sin (or being a sin-bearer) we have thus been informed in no uncertain terms that the leaders of Judah have, in Yahweh's estimation, led the people astray. Note also that He describes Judah as *His* flock. He is their Owner. That makes the *'attuwd*-leaders mere hirelings—and we should all remember what Yahshua said (in John 10, above) about the hired hands—they are not to be trusted.

This theme of “following the sinful leader” takes on new and sinister proportions as Isaiah rails against the “king of Babylon.” As he begins, he seems to be talking about a human king, but since Babylon was barely a blip on the radar screen in Isaiah's day (Assyria being the big dog on the block at the time), it soon becomes apparent that the prophet is describing the monarch of a *spiritual* kingdom, one metaphorically called “Babylon” throughout scripture—a kingdom characterized by idolatry and rebellion against the true and living God. **“Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come. It rouses the shades to greet you, all who were leaders [*'attuwd*] of the earth.”** These “goats” (or goat herders) are those leaders who followed “Babylon's king,” and in doing so, led their people astray. **“It raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations. All of them will answer and say to you [a person whose identity will be made clear in a moment]: ‘You too have become as weak as we! You have become like us!’ Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps. Maggots are laid as a bed beneath you, and worms are your covers....”**

Who is this unexpected worm feast, whom the *'attuwd* leader-goats of the world followed, presuming he was immune to such horrors? It's none other than Satan himself. **"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!..."** "Day Star" here in the ESV is translated "Lucifer" in the King James; it's the only time Satan's "name" is mentioned in the Bible. How sadly ironic it is that everybody seems to know the devil's name (in reality, more of a description), but relatively few relate to God by His self-revealed name, Yahweh, "mentioned" *seven thousand times* in the original scriptures (only to be edited out of virtually every popular Bible translation). "Day Star," or "Lucifer," is the Hebrew *heylel*, a variant or derivative of *halal*, meaning to shine, to praise, to boast, or to act like a madman. In a fascinating twist, *halal* is also the root of the familiar expression of glory to God: *hallelujah* literally means "praise Yah," or "radiate Yahweh's light." That such a versatile word should have been chosen as Satan's descriptive name indicates Yahweh's willingness to let us make up our own minds on the matter: is Satan the "angel of light" as he'd like us to believe, or merely a boasting fool? ("Satan," by the way—Hebrew *ha-shatan*—means "the adversary." Make no mistake: he is *no one's* ally.)

Anyway, the goats who followed him are somewhat surprised to see that even the mighty Lucifer has, in the end, been reduced to maggot food (so to speak). **"How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit."** (Isaiah 14:9-15) The goats finally realize, a bit sheepishly, that they backed the wrong horse.

Jeremiah points out that although Yahweh's people have been led astray into Babylon, they *can* be led back into the paths of righteousness. What's fascinating about that is how he describes the potential ring-leaders of the escape from Babylon—as *'attuwd*, he-goats. **"My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold. All who found them have devoured them, and their enemies have said, 'We are not guilty, for they have sinned against Yahweh, their habitation of righteousness, Yahweh, the hope of their fathers.' Flee from the midst of Babylon, and go out of the land of the Chaldeans, and be as male goats [*'attuwd*—leaders] before the flock."** (Jeremiah 50:6-8) Remember what goats do: they try the fences, looking for weak spots; and they invariably bolt for freedom if they get the chance. Yahweh is encouraging us to lead whomever we can away from bondage in Babylon: look for ways to escape, seizing every opportunity to flee from idolatry. Step number one is to realize that you do indeed live "in the land of the Chaldeans." If your cultural norms or religious traditions take precedence in your life over God's word, it's time to wake up and shake off your chains.

Note the lame excuse that Babylon offers: **“We are not guilty, for they have sinned against Yahweh.”** While it’s true that we have all sinned, it’s a mistake for Babylon to assume that this gives them *carte blanche* to oppress God’s people forever. Those who live in Babylon are like prisoners of war: it is their *job* to try to escape. It is their *duty*. On a more literal level, this should be taken as a stern rebuke to “Christians” who somehow feel justified in persecuting Israel. It’s a myth that stretches from Constantine to Hitler, and beyond: *Jews are “Christ killers” who need to be run out of town at the earliest opportunity.* Really? Note that as bad as their sins were, Yahweh turned Judah over to Babylonian captivity for only seventy years—until the last of the *actual* guilty parties had died. And then, He destroyed political Babylon for her unwarranted enthusiasm in punishing the Jews (see Daniel 5). Although some misguided “Christian” denominations today may deny it, Yahweh isn’t through with Israel: their national restoration and spiritual redemption are by far the most prevalent theme in the Old Testament prophetic texts. To deny Israel’s future glory is to deny the very word of God; to declare oneself an enemy of Israel is to fight against Yahweh Himself!

Overt Satan worship is (thankfully) still a rare and esoteric phenomenon, at least in my neighborhood. But that being said, we’ve all seen evidence that such a thing exists. One of the symbols associated with it is the inverted five-pointed star (thus perhaps a graphic representation of the denial of grace), which forms a schematic or caricature of a goat’s head, betraying an enduring association of goats with satanic idolatry. Scripture doesn’t deny that such a thing exists; quite the contrary. But it uses a different Hebrew word than either *’ez* or *’attuwd* to describe this type of goat. The word is *sa’ir*, which means a he-goat or buck, but has the added connotation of being rough or hairy. *Sa’ir* is usually translated “kid” or “goat,” but occasionally it describes something sinister and demonic, a “satyr,” in King James parlance. **“If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat [*’ez*] in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to Yahweh in front of the tabernacle of Yahweh, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people.... So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons [*sa’ir*], after whom they whore.”** (Leviticus 17:3-4, 7) The point was *not* that you couldn’t eat meat anywhere other than at the tabernacle. (That point was made perfectly clear later, in the context of living in the Land of promise, in Deuteronomy 12:20-22.) But sacrifices for the purpose of ritual worship—even if *made to honor Yahweh*—were not to be done *anywhere* other than where He had directed: at the entrance of the tabernacle, on the altar provided for the purpose.

Yahweh is saying as bluntly as He can: do-it-yourself religious rituals are an anathema to Him—they're tantamount to murder. What was it Samuel said to King Saul? "Obedience is better than sacrifice."

Due to Solomon's disobedience in his old age, Israel split into two kingdoms after his death. Jerusalem (in Judah's territory in the south) was where the temple was. And Jeroboam, the leader of the northern kingdom, knew which way the political winds were blowing: if he followed Yahweh's Torah, his people would have to go to his rival's capital city to worship three times a year. Since he *obviously* couldn't have that, he made a clean break with sanity, truth, and Almighty God—exiling all of the priests and Levites living in the northern kingdom. **"And the priests and the Levites who were in all Israel presented themselves to him [Rehoboam, king of Judah] from all places where they lived. For the Levites left their common lands and their holdings and came to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons cast them out from serving as priests of Yahweh, and he appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat idols [*sa'ir*] and for the calves that he had made."** (II Chronicles 11:13-15) Israel (i.e., the northern kingdom, a.k.a. Ephraim or Samaria) would never again have a godly king. In order to gain nothing more substantial than political ascendancy, the kings of Israel henceforth doomed their people to centuries of idolatry and superstition. (Gee, that sounds suspiciously familiar.) Having replaced Yahweh with goat-demons and calf-gods, things went steadily downhill for Israel, until they were swallowed whole by Sennacherib of Assyria—after a mere 209 years.

And did you ever wonder what happens to a place after Yahweh's judgment has fallen upon it—when its people have been removed? He moves wild animals in to take up residence, including—you guessed it—wild goats, *sa'ir*. **"[Babylon] will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations. No Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild animals will lie down there, and their houses will be full of howling creatures. There ostriches will dwell, and there wild goats [*sa'ir*] will dance."** (Isaiah 13:20-21) Babylon is known symbolically (and historically, for that matter) as the home of systematic idolatry. As Yahweh has physically eliminated its government and wiped its infrastructure off the map, so He intends to deal with what Babylon represents: any organized attempt to circumvent, diminish, or replace Him in the hearts and minds of men. When the *systems* (read: religion, whether overt or covert) are gone during the Millennial Kingdom of Yahshua, personal righteousness will at last have an opportunity to flourish. But as long as mortal man walks the earth, the goats of Babylon will still be dancing—mankind will still have the sin nature we inherited from Adam and Eve, so redemption through the shed blood of Christ will still be necessary to reconcile people to Yahweh.

We read something very similar in regard to Edom. **“And wild animals shall meet with hyenas. The wild goat [*sa’ir*] shall cry to his fellow. Indeed, there the night bird settles and finds for herself a resting place.”** (Isaiah 34:14) Edom (meaning “red,” after the red stew for which Esau sold his birthright to Jacob) is symbolic of man’s bad choices, of rebellion against God’s plan, and of self-centered ingratitude—all of which are, in the end, roughly the same thing. Several passages from the prophets inform us that Edom (southern Jordan) will be a smoking, uninhabited desolation during the Millennium—a poignant (and pointed) reminder of God’s judgment within a three hour bus ride from Jerusalem. But just because Yahweh will have depopulated the place, it doesn’t mean that it will be uninhabitable: as in Babylon, the wild animals—including feral goats—will thrive there under God’s provision.

Whatever word you use to describe them, goats are a recurrent fixture in the Levitical sacrifices, popping up time and again in a variety of contexts. They are allowed for burnt offerings—the *olah*, a voluntary act of homage to Yahweh, for atonement, or in celebration: **“If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 1:10-11) Peace offerings too were an authorized venue for goat sacrifices: **“If his offering is a goat [*’ez*], then he shall offer it before Yahweh and lay his hand on its head and kill it in front of the tent of meeting, and the sons of Aaron shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar.”** (Leviticus 3:12-13) The trespass offering, or *asham*, also allowed for goats.

But by far the most prevalent use of goats in Torah sacrificial law is seen in the *chata’t*, or sin offering—covering our lapses in behavior, our errors in performance (the word literally means “missing the mark”), as the *asham* covers our failures in holiness. So we read in reference to the new-moon offerings: **“Also one male goat for a sin offering to Yahweh; it shall be offered besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.”** (Numbers 28:15) Later in the same chapter, they’re included in the rites of the Feast of Unleavened Bread: **“You shall present an offering made by fire as a burnt offering to Yahweh... also one goat as a sin offering, to make atonement for you.”** (Numbers 28:19, 22) Both of these instances (plucked from a plethora of possible examples) are specifically said to be sin offerings (*chata’t*), underscoring the symbolic association of goats with sin.

Moses explains: **“If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement before Yahweh for the person who makes a mistake, when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.”** (Numbers 15:27-28) Earlier in the same passage, the sin

offering to atone for the unintentional sin of the entire congregation was also a “kid of the goats,” but this time (because human error on a grand scale is implied) a young bull is to be offered first, as a burnt offering. The unintentional sin of a leader of Israel is also to be atoned for with the sacrifice of a goat, but this time, a male is specified. The reason is apparent: the male is symbolic of authority—a leader is supposed to know better. (By the way, I’m *not* saying men are better than women, nor did God. These are *symbolic roles* Yahweh has assigned to teach spiritual truths. Anyone who finds himself in a position of authority, whether a man or woman, is held to a higher standard. Be careful about coveting power.) **“When a leader sins, doing unintentionally any one of all the things that by the commandments of Yahweh his God ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring as his offering a goat, a male without blemish, and shall lay his hand on the head of the goat and kill it in the place where they kill the burnt offering before Yahweh; it is a sin offering.”** (Leviticus 4:22-24)

These sin offerings were all designed to atone for “unintentional sins.” But what about the *intentional* sins? Who among us has not, on occasion, done something we knew (or at least suspected) was contrary to God’s will? The converse of the situation with which the sin offering was designed to deal is described in these terms: **“But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles Yahweh, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of Yahweh and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off; his iniquity shall be on him.”** (Numbers 15:30-31) No goat or bull sin offering would suffice for such a person; he was to be “cut off.” Does this mean that *any* wrong thing we ever do—knowing it’s wrong but being too weak or uncommitted to resist (the kind of thing to which Paul confessed in Romans 7:19)—condemns us irretrievably? Is grace efficacious only for those who are too dumb to know what they’re doing is wrong or so strong-willed they can withstand every temptation? Did David’s sin with Bathsheba put him beyond reconciliation with God, just because he *knew* it was wrong and did it anyway? All of scripture weighs in against this notion. So what’s going on here?

Note that the text doesn’t read “intentionally” or “on purpose,” but rather “with a high hand.” It’s translated “presumptuously” in the New King James, “defiantly” in the NIV and NASB, and “brazenly” in the NLT, all of which get close to the heart of the matter. The Hebrew is two words: *ruwm*, a verb meaning “to rise up, exalt, be lofty, or lift up,” and *yad*, meaning “hand”, thus figuratively, “strength or power.” A direct translation (as here in the ESV) would therefore be “high-handedly.” But the connotation is even stronger. The phrase speaks of arrogance, pride, a lifting up of one’s own position of strength in the face of (and in defiance of) Yahweh’s Law. It’s like saying, “I don’t care what God says; I recognize no authority but my own. I will do as I please, without regard to the Word of Yahweh. I alone am the captain of my fate, and I refuse to show remorse

or entertain a sense of guilt for my actions.” *Ruwm yad* reeks of insolence and rebellion, not mere weakness. And I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this *ruwm yad* attitude is prophesied to become prevalent in the Last Days of our age. Worse, a blind man could see how rampant it has become in our world.

The sin offering, then, is designed strictly for people who acknowledge that they have indeed sinned before God—that His opinion and authority trumps ours, and that we have, for whatever reason, violated His perfect standard of behavior. But the *chata't* is of no use if we deny our guilt or reject Yahweh's authority. Basically, it's the same thing John told us: **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** (I John 1:8-9) The sin offering, then, is symbolic of Yahshua's sacrifice on our behalf. This should come as no surprise, of course: *every* Levitical blood sacrifice is fulfilled in Yahshua, all for different reasons, all teaching different principles.

Undoubtedly the clearest scriptural presentation of the sin offering and how it relates to goat symbology is to be found in the instructions concerning the Day of Atonement, the sixth of seven “holy convocations” ordained by Yahweh to inform us of the broad sweep of His plan for our redemption. Coming as it does between the Feast of Trumpets (signaling the translation of the saints from mortal into immortal) and the Feast of Tabernacles (the commencement of Yahshua's Millennial kingdom) the Day of Atonement must of necessity predict the national repentance of Israel, and their acceptance of Yahshua as their Messiah. The basic spiritual requirement of the *miqra* is delineated thus: **“On the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present an offering by fire to Yahweh. And you shall not do any work on that very day, for it is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before Yahweh your God. For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people.”** (Leviticus 23:27-29)

And the day's prophetic fulfillment was described by Zechariah: **“And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on Me [this whole passage is in Yahweh's voice], on Him whom they have pierced [in case you missed it, that's Yahshua—Yahweh's human manifestation], they shall mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over Him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”** (Zechariah 12:10) The prophesied “spirit of grace” fulfills the Torah's requirement to “not work” on that day. In other words, the Jews (just like all the rest of us) must rest in Yahweh and rely upon the sacrifice of their Messiah instead of on their own works. And the “pleas for mercy” of which Zechariah speaks are the fulfillment of Yom Kippurim's requirement for “affliction.” Israel will at last recognize their horrendous error, and they'll repent from their stubborn two-thousand-year

rejection of their own Messiah. What could precipitate such a sudden and complete change of heart? They'll *see* Him—they'll "look on the One whom they pierced" in the act of crucifixion—when He stands again on the Mount of Olives, as large as life, as promised (compare Zechariah 14:4 to Acts 1:9-11).

So what does all this have to do with goats? The central drama of the rites of the Day of Atonement revolves around two goats. This is an elaborate and highly symbolic dress rehearsal revealing the means by which our sins are to be atoned. As usual, the symbols point us directly and unequivocally toward Christ—to the exclusion of any possible alternative explanation. So we read, **"And he [Aaron, the High Priest] shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats [*'ez*] for a sin offering..."** As we shall see, both goats represent Christ, though they will have radically different ends: one will die, and the other will live. And note something else: *both* of them—*together*—are said to be a "sin offering." Like Isaac on Moriah, one needn't be dead to be accepted as an offering by Yahweh. That's why Paul (in Romans 12:1) admonished us to present our bodies as "living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God."

Moses continues: **"Then he shall take the two goats and set them before Yahweh at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for Yahweh and the other lot for Azazel...."** Most translations render this word "scapegoat." This, of course, is the source of the English word that has come to denote someone who is forced to take the blame for somebody else's sin. It's based on two Hebrew words: *'ez*, as we have seen, is the generic word for goat; and *'azal* is a verb meaning to go away or be used up. So a literal translation might be "the goat that goes away." The whole "scapegoat" concept is a bit off kilter, because scripturally, *both* goats, the one that dies as well as the one that lives, bear the sin of the guilty people upon their heads.

"And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for Yahweh and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before Yahweh to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel...." Yes, there is a penalty to be paid, blood to be shed, the innocent for the guilty. That's the concept of grace that became so clear to us in the shadow of Calvary. But the story isn't complete at this point. We must not only die to sin, we must also be alive to God—the whole point of the exercise is reconciliation, and you can't reunite a dead human (even one who has been exonerated) with a living God.

"Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses...." It makes sense that this atonement was

made “for the people.” What’s not quite so intuitive is that it was also said to atone for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting, and later, the altar. These things obviously didn’t sin, rebel, or become impure by their own behavior. They were, however, designed as symbols: they were supposed to be used by Israel to communicate Yahweh’s story of salvation to the rest of the world. So if Israel rebelled, if they became impure or missed the mark, the message of the Tabernacle would become obscure to the rest of us. Unfortunately, that very thing has become historical fact: Israel’s national sin has made the lessons of the Sanctuary opaque to the world (not to mention themselves), and Yahweh has found it necessary to remove the sanctuary and priesthood from their midst—*again*. Yom Kippurim—the day of Yahshua’s return in glory and Israel’s subsequent national epiphany—will correct that situation.

Only then does the live goat come into play: **“And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins.”** The act of placing the High Priest’s hands on the head of the goat signified a transference of guilt, from us to him. **“And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.”** (Leviticus 16:5-22) The Day of Atonement not only *covers* our sins; it also *removes* them. Both goats are a picture of what Christ accomplished for us—first by dying, and then by rising from the dead. The sins of the people were to be symbolically laid upon his head, and he was to bear them to a place where they could no longer trouble God’s people in any way: to the wilderness, an “uninhabited land.” The lesson: when we cling to our guilt, insisting on performing penance in an attempt to atone for it ourselves, we are preventing the “go-away goat” from doing his job, and we are standing in the way of our own redemption. Guilt is like a tar baby: it’s best to leave it alone.

Goats as symbols also show up in a prophetic context. The prophet Daniel was shown the course of future gentile history (as it applies to Yahweh’s overall plan) in several different, though parallel, ways—a big statue made of four different metals (Daniel 2), a series of four mythical beasts (chapter 7), and then, two animals of the flock that would profoundly affect the course of Israel’s history—with ramifications extending all the way into these Last Days. The first was a ram, whose identity was revealed as Medo-Persia, the nation that would shortly conquer Babylon (under whose rule Daniel labored at the time of the prophecy):

“As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia.” (Daniel 8:20) Babylon would fall to this coalition in 539 BC.

Daniel also saw what (or who) would eventually take down the Persians—a little over two centuries later. **“As I was considering, behold, a male goat [*tsaphiyir*] came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes.”** (Daniel 8:5) Here we’re introduced to another rarely used designation for “goat,” this time a fierce, self-assertive male, a he-goat—the *tsaphiyir*. The underlying connotation here is that of extreme aggressiveness, for the “goat” in question turned out to be none other than Alexander the Great, as Daniel reports: **“And the goat [*’ez*] is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king.** (Daniel 8:21) Horns represent authority or personal power.

Persia had been no mean kingdom. And it had ruled (at least as far as exiled Israel was concerned) with benevolence and tolerance, allowing the Jews to return to the Land and rebuild their city and temple. But many had stayed; thus we read of the marriage of Esther to king Ahasuerus of Persia (a.k.a. Xerxes) in 479 BC—not long after his armies had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Greeks (the campaign in which the infamous Battle of Thermopylae was fought). A century and a half later, Alexander took the war back to Persia (and ’most everybody else). **“He [Alexander] came to the ram with the two horns [Medo-Persia], which I had seen standing on the bank of the canal, and he ran at him in his powerful wrath. I saw him come close to the ram, and he was enraged against him and struck the ram and broke his two horns....”** The fury of the Greeks was a natural human response to the previous Persian treachery, the attempted invasion of their homeland. A parallel situation: considering what happened during World War II, one can only imagine the fury the Chinese will exact upon Japan when they invade it (along with the rest of the Far East) during the Great Tribulation (the sixth trumpet: see Revelation 9:13-21). Goats are *sin bearers*: they hold grudges, it would seem.

“And the ram had no power to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled on him. And there was no one who could rescue the ram from his power. Then the goat [*tsaphiyir ’ez*] became exceedingly great, but when he was strong, the great horn was broken, and instead of it there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven.” (Daniel 8:6-8) **As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power.** (Daniel 8:22) Just as the prophecy predicts, when Alexander (having conquered every land he’d ever heard of) died at the tender age of 32, his kingdom was divided up between his four generals, Cassander, Lysimachus, Seleucus, and Ptolemy—none of whom wielded anything approaching the power Alexander had.

My purpose is not to teach a history lesson, but to explore what it means to be a goat—a *tsaphiyr 'ez*—in the context of Biblical prophecy. The characterization of “sin bearer” still holds: in the case of the *tsaphiyr*, the “sin” is the single-minded pursuit of one’s own agenda (or worse, Satan’s), with no regard for God or man. The truth that seems to be emerging is that it doesn’t matter how powerful you are, how aggressive, audacious, charismatic, or successful you seem to be. The “goats” will be broken, cut off before their time. If they refuse to unburden themselves of their sin—if they insist on bearing it themselves—then the damage they inflict upon others will turn about upon their own heads.

This will become terrifyingly clear as the Tribulation draws to a close. We’ve already reviewed this Olivet Discourse passage, from the point of view of the sheep. But because the warning is so dire, let us again address what awaits the “goats.” **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.”** (Matthew 25:31-33) “All the nations” is everyone left alive on earth after the “battle” of Armageddon. By this time, everyone will have been compelled to make a decision as to whom to side with. The “mark of the beast”—the system implemented by the new world dictator to impose order and enable commerce (under his watchful eye) will have been universal law for three and a half years at this point, and the penalty for non-compliance is death. So most of the goats will be easy to spot. And their fate has already been pronounced by an angel of warning, who announces, **“If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”** (Revelation 14:9-11) So it’s the devil’s own choice: refuse the mark and Satan will try to kill you, but receive it, and you’ll experience the wrath of Almighty God. This, if nothing else, is the **“hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth”** (Revelation 3:10) out of which the saints of the Church of Philadelphia will be kept.

But it’s conceivable—even inevitable—that some who have not opened the door to Yahshua and heeded his counsel (see Revelation 3:18-20) will have, whether out of well-founded paranoia or geographical serendipity, not taken the Antichrist’s mark and oath of loyalty by the end of the Tribulation. These are those whose status must yet be determined. **“Then He will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison**

and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these [the goats] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous [the sheep] into eternal life." (Matthew 25:41-46) As always, it is what we believe and in whom we trust that determines our status before God. But in the end, that belief is revealed by what we do.

And lest it should not be obvious, I should point out that this is not some new paradigm that will suddenly spring into being at the end of the age: it is true now. It has always been true. As John put it, **"By this we know that we have come to know Him [defined in context as our "Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"], if we keep His commandments."** Boiled down to one word, Yahweh's "commandment" is to *love*. **"Whoever says 'I know Him' but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps His word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in Him: whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked. Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning."** (1 John 2:3-7) The sheep know this. The goats do not.

RAM

❧ 3.2.3 ❧

Leader of the Flock

Perhaps because all of the Torah sacrifices were ultimately fulfilled in the death of Yahshua the Messiah, rams aren't specifically mentioned in the New Testament. But because the Instructions differentiate between sheep (or lambs) and rams, so shall we. The word used in the vast majority of cases to describe a ram is the Hebrew *'ayil*, a male sheep, one with horns (which in themselves represent authority). The word is also used to figuratively denote the role a ram plays within its flock: a leader, ruler, one who governs. And this is the key to its Biblical symbology when comparing a ram to a male lamb—who are, after all, the same kind of animal. The ram is mature, aggressive, and protective. It is the fulfillment of the promise, the realization of the potential of the lamb.

The difference between the lamb and the ram is thus the key to the dichotomy between the “suffering servant” and the “reigning king” in Messianic prophesies. The *same* Messiah is in view, but each manifestation has a different role, a different function. This, of course, is the primary stumbling block of Judaism: they can't seem to understand that these “two” Messianic profiles picture the *same Person*. Knowing that God is Eternal Spirit (which He *is*), they can't (or won't) countenance the idea that He chose to manifest Himself as a mortal human in order to walk among us and sacrifice Himself on our behalf. In terms germane to our present subject, they look at the little lamb and just can't picture him as the leader of the flock. Just give him a few years, gentlemen. The next time you see that helpless, innocent little ball of fuzz, he'll be ruling the flock with a the horns of His undisputed authority.

The equivalence of the sacrificial lamb with the leader of the flock was hinted in Yahweh's provision of a substitute offering for the life of Isaac: **“And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘Yahweh will provide.’”** (Genesis 22:13-14) Theoretically, any clean animal would have sufficed. Actually, a lamb (read: innocence) would have been a closer parallel to young Isaac as a sacrifice, and Abraham had told his son that God would provide a *seh*, a generic “member of the flock” for His burnt offering. So why did Yahweh provide a ram? My guess is that it had something to do with its horns—or more specifically, what they represent: authority. The record says that the ram was “caught” by its horns. And in a way, that's precisely what drove Yahshua to the cross. It's not that our redemption wasn't voluntary on His part, but His *authority* defined His position.

Being Yahweh incarnate, Yahshua had the authority to do as He pleased: no one forced Him to offer Himself up in our stead. (When He prayed to the Father, “Not My will but Yours be done,” it was like the right hand asking its own body for permission to open a door. As He had said, “I and My Father are one.”) But because Yahweh’s nature is love, Yahshua could not abandon us to our fate without violating His own character. The Messiah was thus “caught” by His own authority, constrained by His own divine character, precisely as the prophetic dress rehearsal had indicated.

This same authority, this same leadership role, is played out in the Torah’s instructions for the ordination of Israel’s priests. Moses’ brother, Aaron, was assigned the role of being the High Priest, and all of his male progeny were designated priests. We read of their initial consecration rite in Exodus 29 (instructions that were carried out in Leviticus 8), amid a lengthy discourse defining the then-new tabernacle and its service. Yahweh instructed Moses, **“Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them [i.e., Aaron and his sons], that they may serve Me as priests. Take one bull of the herd and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil. You shall make them of fine wheat flour. You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, and bring the bull and the two rams.”** (Exodus 29:1-3) This was a complicated, multi-faceted ritual, but for now, let us merely skip ahead to what He said to do with the two rams.

As we saw with the two goats used in the rites of the Day of Atonement, the two rams here signify two different things, two separate prophetic realities. The symbol couldn’t be accurately conveyed using only one animal. **“Then you shall take one of the rams, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram, and you shall kill the ram and shall take its blood and throw it against the sides of the altar. Then you shall cut the ram into pieces, and wash its entrails and its legs, and put them with its pieces and its head, and burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to Yahweh. It is a pleasing aroma, an offering by fire to Yahweh....”** The first ram, in emulation of Yahshua’s total, unreserved, and entirely voluntary act of self-sacrifice for our atonement, was offered as a “burnt offering,” an *olah*. It was to be completely consumed upon the altar of judgment, its blood splashed onto the sides of the bronze-sheathed altar as a grim visual reminder that an innocent life had been taken. Note that the priests were to lay their hands on the ram’s head before it was slain, symbolizing the transference of sin from the priests to the sacrifice.

There are similarities, but also significant differences, in the case of the second ram: **“You shall take the other ram, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the ram.”** This, as before, indicates a transfer of guilt. But some of the blood was handled differently: **“And you shall kill the ram and take part of its blood and**

put it on the tip of the right ear of Aaron and on the tips of the right ears of his sons, and on the thumbs of their right hands and on the great toes of their right feet, and throw the rest of the blood against the sides of the altar.” Applying the ram’s blood onto the priests’ bodies signified that what the ram represented—the leadership of the flock—was being conferred upon the priests: daubing the blood on the earlobe, thumb, and great toe meant that what they heard (and spoke), what they did, and where they went were to henceforth be a reflection of the ram’s authority within the flock. In other words, the leaders were to *act* like leaders—guard their communication, their works, and their walk before God and man. **“Then you shall take part of the blood that is on the altar, and of the anointing oil, and sprinkle it on Aaron and his garments, and on his sons and his sons’ garments with him. He and his garments shall be holy, and his sons and his sons’ garments with him....”** (Exodus 29:15-21) The priests’ garments (a subject we’ll explore in a future chapter) were to be infused with the same significance: the priests were to take their assigned roles as the spiritual leaders of Israel very seriously.

The fat of the second ram (representing the best of the offering), along with a grain offering with oil, were presented as a wave offering before Yahweh, and burnt on the altar. Then Moses was told, **“You shall take the breast of the ram of Aaron’s ordination and wave it for a wave offering before Yahweh, and it shall be your portion. And you shall consecrate the breast of the wave offering that is waved and the thigh of the priests’ portion that is contributed from the ram of ordination, from what was Aaron’s and his sons. It shall be for Aaron and his sons as a perpetual due from the people of Israel, for it is a contribution. It shall be a contribution from the people of Israel from their peace offerings, their contribution to Yahweh.”** (Exodus 29: 26-28) The second ram was a *selem*, or peace offering, and as such, portions of it were to be used as food by the priests—and by Moses himself. Thus *both* rams were required to communicate the idea that although Christ’s body was to be totally consumed (like the *olah*) in the process of attaining our redemption, it is still available for our spiritual “nourishment,” bringing to mind such provocative statements as **“Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.”** (John 6:54-56) The principle applies, of course, to any Torah sacrifice that was to be eaten—whether a lamb, bull, goat, or ram. The symbolic character of the sacrificed animal was always in view, correlated with the metaphorical nature of the intended recipient. In this case, the ram (the leader of the flock) was to be eaten by the priests (those who have the privilege of serving in the presence of God)—including the High Priest (*our* leader, Yahshua). The point, once again, is that we believers are instructed to lead people—by our words, works, and walk—into the presence of Yahweh.

Finally, Moses was reminded of the exclusive nature of the ordination process: these things were not for just anybody who might have wanted them, but

only for the sons of Aaron. **“You shall take the ram of ordination and boil its flesh in a holy place. And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket in the entrance of the tent of meeting. They shall eat those things with which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration, but an outsider shall not eat of them, because they are holy....”** On the other hand, since “Aaron’s sons” represent all believers in Yahweh’s plan of redemption, they actually *are* available to anyone. But merely wanting heaven does not make it so. “Outsiders” are defined as those who choose another path—*any* other path—than the one Yahweh has ordained. And what is that path? It is identified here, expressed as the place in which the priests were to eat of the ram—at the “entrance to the tent of meeting.” It will transpire in our study (if you haven’t discovered this already) that every detail of the tabernacle’s design, construction, and service points directly and unequivocally to Yahshua of Nazareth—and what He achieved on Calvary.

One final admonition: **“And if any of the flesh for the ordination or of the bread remain until the morning, then you shall burn the remainder with fire. It shall not be eaten, because it is holy. Thus you shall do to Aaron and to his sons, according to all that I have commanded you.”** (Exodus 29:31-35) There is a time limit for partaking in the “ram of consecration.” It must be eaten when it’s available: there will come a time when God’s grace will go up in smoke, leaving the skeptics, the sleepers, and the victims with nothing to sustain them. *Now* is the day of salvation!

As we saw with the tabernacle covering of goats’ hair, there was also to be a layer made of rams’ skins: **“And you shall make for the tent a covering of tanned rams’ skins.”** (Exodus 26:14) This was the third of the four layers of the tabernacle covering (counting from the inside)—meaning that, as with the goat-hair layer, this stratum could not be seen when the tabernacle had been erected: it was visible neither from the inside nor the outside.

The ESV translation calls these rams’ skins “tanned,” which might seem reasonable, except that the actual Hebrew word means nothing of the sort. It’s *’adam*, rendered “dyed red” in most translations—an assessment that is supported by every Hebrew language resource I could lay my hands on. *Baker and Carpenter’s* entry is typical: “*’adam*: a verb meaning to be red, ruddy, dyed red. It is used to describe people (Esau, David, etc.). As for things, it describes ram skins that were dyed red and red wine. Metaphorically, this word describes sin as ‘red like crimson.’” I believe this latter instance is the crux of the imagery Yahweh wished to convey: **“Come now, let us reason together, says Yahweh: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red [’adam] like crimson, they**

shall become [white] like wool." (Isaiah 1:18) Further, when used as a noun, *'adam* means a male human, any human being (one of our species), or even the whole human race—mankind.

So a picture is emerging. Bear in mind that the tabernacle or "tent of meeting" is a multi-level symbol explaining Yahweh's plan for our redemption. The inner layer, the only one that can be seen from inside the tabernacle (making it the only one that counts, as far as our eternal disposition is concerned) is made of linen, which (as we will eventually discover) is symbolic of imputed righteousness. This layer makes it impossible to see the goat-hair layer (representing our sin) lying above it. Then, covering the inner goat-hair stratum is this one made of the skins of slain rams—who represent the leader of the flock (ultimately, the Messiah, to whom all authority has been given, according to Matthew 28:18). These rams' skins have been dyed red, meaning that our "crimson colored" sins have been applied to him. And as if that weren't enough, humanity itself (again, *'adam*) has been imposed upon the ram. One might think all this would be obvious to the outside world. But it isn't, for God has ordained one final layer, concealing the truth from those standing outside, unwilling to enter the sanctuary environs through the one door He has provided. We'll discuss this final mysterious stratum later in this chapter.

As always, the Israelites weren't asked to supply anything God hadn't already given them. 'Most everything needed for the construction of the tabernacle had come out of Egypt with them. **"Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring Yahweh's contribution: gold, silver, and bronze; blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen; goats' hair, tanned [literally, red dyed] rams' skins, and goatskins; acacia wood [there's a possible exception], oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece."** (Exodus 35:4-9) The point I'd like to make is that not only were the physical materials needed for the presentation of Yahweh's symbols provided up front, but the eventual *fulfillment* of the symbols was provided by God as well. I'm speaking, of course of Yahshua of Nazareth. His appearance was no accident, no fluke. He didn't "appoint Himself" the Messiah. Yahweh's solution to our sin had been planned from eternity past, its timing and nature revealed (if we had been astute enough to see it) by the prophets. It's another expression of grace: God provides everything we need for life and godliness. All we can do to help ourselves is receive it with thanksgiving and respond to it in praise.

This provision from Yahweh is one of the themes stressed in a type of offering called the *asham*—a trespass or guilt offering. Basically, it seems to be quite similar in some respects to the *chata't*, or sin offering, but instead of addressing lapses in behavior, the *asham* deals with lapses in holiness—our relationship with Yahweh, rather than to our fellow men. However, the exact offenses for which an

asham would have been offered are left maddeningly unspecific. That being said, under certain conditions, the proper sacrifice would have been a ram: **“If anyone commits a breach of faith and sins unintentionally in any of the holy things of Yahweh, he shall bring to Yahweh as his compensation a ram without blemish out of the flock, valued in silver shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, for a guilt offering. He shall also make restitution for what he has done amiss in the holy thing and shall add a fifth to it and give it to the priest. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and he shall be forgiven. If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by Yahweh’s commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, then realizes his guilt, he shall bear his iniquity.”** The word translated “anyone” here (or “a person” in some translations) is *nephesh*—one’s soul, his life, his inner being, the seat of his desires, emotions, and passions. **“He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent for a guilt offering, and the priest shall make atonement for him for the mistake that he made unintentionally, and he shall be forgiven. It is a guilt offering; he has indeed incurred guilt before Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 5:15-19)

My first impression is, “We’re gonna need a whole lot more rams.” And that would be true if mature male sheep were actually intended to be efficacious in atoning for our sins. But if they’re meant to be metaphorical of a greater reality (as seems pretty obvious to me), then Yahweh is through these instructions indicating that *one* Ram will be sufficient to atone for *all* of our trespasses, for all time. One sacrificial act will cover every mistake we’ve ever made, (1) *if* the “Ram” being offered is perfect, innocent, and worthy, and (2) *if* we are willing to allow His blood to stand in for our own. Symbolically, in order to *be* a “ram,” this Sacrifice must be the leader of a flock—with authority over the sheep. That, in turn, logically requires that He be of the “same kind” as the sheep He is leading. This blows holes in the Jewish theory that since God is incorporeal, He *cannot* have manifested Himself in human form, hence Yahshua (or any other Messianic candidate) “could not be God.” And further, to be a worthy sacrifice, He must not be in need of forgiveness Himself, i.e., someone who **“sins, doing any of the things that by Yahweh’s commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it.”** That’s a tall—some would say, *impossible*—order. But it is my contention that Yahshua of Nazareth proved Himself to be a worthy *asham* at every turn.

One odd-sounding scenario is offered, but we need to pay attention to the symbols if we hope to sort out the *real* lesson God meant for us to learn: **“If a man lies sexually with a woman who is a slave, assigned to another man and not yet ransomed or given her freedom, a distinction shall be made. They shall not be put to death, because she was not free; but he shall bring his compensation to Yahweh, to the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before Yahweh for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.”** (Leviticus 19:20-22) Normally, a man and woman who had sex outside of marriage were both to be put to death, for adultery

is a picture of idolatry—rendering to false gods that which is reserved for Yahweh alone. The fact that Yahweh made an exceptions to His own principle (in this case, death for extra-marital sex) *proves* that it isn't so much the sex itself He objects to, but rather the symbolic meaning He has assigned to it: intimate, loving fellowship leading to a permanent, fruitful relationship. (Just because it's "only" a symbol, however, it doesn't follow that adultery is actually okay. If God went out of His way to prohibit something, it's a *really bad* idea.)

Why did Yahweh make a distinction in this case? It's because the woman was not free to refuse the man's improper advances. So the symbols shift. At its core, this is a picture of religious practice, whether Christianity, Judaism, or otherwise. The slave woman is a person who has been "assigned" to Yahweh (because He has paid for her freedom—redeemed her), though she is still being held in bondage under some manmade system of religious obligation. In other words, she is a victim, powerless to change her circumstances or choose her own spiritual destiny. But the precept isn't really *about* the woman (who, being helpless, isn't culpable); it's about the man, and what *he* must do to obtain forgiveness.

The man who had sex with her has taken advantage of her vulnerability, whether he meant to or not. He symbolizes, I believe, the purveyor of religious dogma, whether a Christian cleric, a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim imam, a Buddhist monk—or anyone guilty of holding someone in bondage to religious tradition (as opposed to promoting the freedom to select one's own path—which will, if the slave chooses, lead to a relationship with Yahweh). The issue here isn't so much whether the man is right or wrong in his doctrine or behavior—it's that he is unwilling to let the slave-woman follow her own heart and make her own decisions. Because the woman wasn't free when he found her, he isn't exactly guilty of enslaving her; but he *is* guilty of something. So rather than being stoned, the man can receive forgiveness through the *asham*, the trespass offering, if (and when) he realizes his error and repents from it.

That's a really big "if," however. For the man to attain forgiveness, he must (1) compensate for the evil he had done before Yahweh—do what he can to undo his sin; (2) come to the "entrance of the tent of meeting," in other words, receive what the tabernacle was designed to symbolize—Yahweh's plan for our redemption through Yahshua, *not* some manmade religious construct; and (3) present to the Priest (ultimately, Christ) a ram for a guilt offering—that is, regard as sufficient the sacrifice of *the* Ram that God has already provided: the perfect, innocent, and worthy "leader of the flock," Yahshua.

There is admittedly a steeper "learning curve" here for a Islamic imam than there might be for, say, a Roman Catholic priest (who at least *claims* to honor Yahweh's word). But for both, the lesson is the same: do not hold people in religious bondage, for this is idolatry. Even though folks were already enslaved

when you found them, you are *still* guilty before God if you reinforce their chains. Yes, we're all sinners. But bear in mind that the *only* people Yahshua took to task for their behavior were *religious* people—people who were pretty good at keeping the Torah (at least outwardly), people who had appointed themselves arbiters of public morality and conduct.

By the way, it should be self-evident (but I'll say it anyway): this precept has absolutely nothing to do with sex or gender roles. The function of the “slave-woman” victim could be (and often is) played by men, and women can (in theory, anyway) be guilty of keeping men enslaved through religious oppression. And lest I leave the wrong impression, it's not religion *per se* I'm objecting to. At its best, religion is nothing more than “habits on steroids,” a useful tool for avoiding the necessity of reinventing the cultural wheel every time you turn around. But the minute religion becomes *the point*, the minute it takes on a life of its own and begins replacing someone's simple relationship with God—or worse, becomes a cage in which to confine unruly sheeple—then the purveyors of such a thing need to realize they've been abusing somebody else's slave; repent, and rely upon the Ram of God as a guilt offering. It's the only way to attain forgiveness.

Rams are specified as burnt offerings (*olah*) all throughout the instructions for the scheduled convocations to be celebrated by Israel. Although they're not mentioned for the daily and weekly (Sabbath) offerings, Numbers 28-29 lists rams among the animals to be sacrificed on virtually every other special occasion throughout the year: the monthly (or new moon) celebration, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles.

That last one is an interesting case. The Feast of Tabernacles (or “booths,” described in Leviticus 23:33-44) is an eight-day convocation in which both the first day and the last are designated as days of Sabbath rest. Its most unique feature is that the people were instructed to dwell in booths or temporary shelters for the whole week-long celebration. As with Passover and Pentecost, this was a time when all of Israel was to gather “in the place Yahweh chose to make His name abide,” which was defined as Jerusalem from the time of David onward. Considering where it is in the annual cycle of holy convocations (the last one of the seven), and factoring in the “booth” metaphor, it's fairly obvious what this celebration was intended to symbolize: the oft-prophesied Millennial reign of Yahweh, manifested as the glorified Yahshua, the God-King, over the whole earth. The “booth” metaphor indicates that this is when Yahweh intends to

personally “camp out” among men, reigning in righteousness and justice among His people for a thousand years.

So where do the rams come into play? In Numbers 29:12-37, we learn that two rams are to be offered up as burnt offerings every day for seven days, and then the number is reduced to one ram on the eighth. Why did God arrange it like this? Many—even most—people who recognize the principle of a coming Millennial age assume that society will be somewhat homogenous. Christians (especially those espousing the doctrine of replacement theology) tend to think that Israel (if it exists at all) will become part of the Church under the reign of Christ. And Jews (even Messianics, those who recognize the deity of Yahshua) usually assume that Israel will absorb the Church—that we’ll all become “spiritual Israel” on some level—sort of like the “mixed multitude” of Israelites and faithful Egyptians at the time of the exodus. Notwithstanding the fact that there is only one path to salvation—the redeeming sacrifice of Yahshua the Messiah—for everyone, whether Jew or gentile, whether in foresight or hindsight, scripture makes it quite clear that during the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, there will be a clear distinction between Israel and the “nations.” The Messiah will rule from Jerusalem as the “King of the Jews,” but His dominion will extend over the entire globe. Speaking of (or to) His Messiah, Yahweh explains the difference: **“I am Yahweh; I have called You in righteousness. I will take You by the hand and keep You. I will give You as a covenant for the people [Israel], a light for the nations.”** (Isaiah 42:6) This functional distinction between Israel and the nations has existed since the call of Abram, and will continue until the last mortal human has received the immortal, spiritual, eternal body God has prepared for him.

This fact is illustrated in the instructions for the sacrifices of rams during the Feast of Tabernacles. For the first seven days of the Feast (symbolizing the complete thousand-year reign of Yahshua on earth) both Jewish and gentile mortals will inhabit the planet side by side. Two rams per day are specified because Israel will still be distinct from the nations at this point. Christ is indeed “the leader of the flock,” but there will be *two flocks* throughout the kingdom age—hence two rams. The eighth day, however, represents the beginning of the immortal state—“heaven,” if you will—in which everyone who walked with Yahshua during the kingdom age will have received their permanent spiritual identity. And at this point, God’s purpose for Israel (i.e., to introduce Yahweh to the world) will have been fulfilled. There will therefore be no more need for separation between Israel and the nations—hence, only one ram is to be offered on the eighth day. As Yahshua said, **“I have other sheep that are not of this fold [Israel]. I must bring them also, and they [the gentiles] will listen to my voice. So [in the end] there will be one flock, one shepherd.”** (John 10:16) Either that, or Moses was just making this stuff up as he went along, and it’s all a big, pointless coincidence. I think you know where I stand on that issue.

Anyway, God made it abundantly clear that *literal* rams (or sheep, goats, bulls, or any other sacrificial commodity) were never the point of the Torah's rituals. All of it was designed to turn our eyes toward the Messiah—and in the case of rams, specifically toward His authority and ability as the leader of the flock. Without this symbolic reality, the Torah's sacrifices—or anything else we might do to try to appease God—are meaningless. As Micah said, **“Will Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”** (Micah 6:7-8) We may whine, “If God merely wanted us to be just and kind and humble, why didn't He just say so? Why ask us to jump through all these Levitical hoops, if that's not what He really wanted?” The point, I think, is that justice, kindness, and humility are not part of our fallen nature: we *can't* conjure up these qualities in our own strength. The “Levitical hoops” are there to inform us how Yahweh is making it possible for us to be “transformed by the renewal of our minds” into people who can stand before Him as He intended, innocent and righteous.

Isaiah says the same thing: **“What to Me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts.... Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them.... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.”** (Isaiah 1:11-17) Going through the motions of keeping God's Law without experiencing the transformation the Law was designed to reveal is as pointless as playing soccer without a ball: no matter how hard you work at it, there's no way to score.

It may seem (to some) like I've jumped to an unwarranted conclusion in assigning the symbolic meaning “leader of the flock” to rams in scripture. But the ordinary Hebrew word for “ram” (*'ayil*) is often *translated* as “leader, ruler, i.e., one who governs as a figurative extension of a ram as a leader of the flock.” (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages*) In fact, the same word came to be figuratively used to denote a large tree—an oak or terebinth (the emphasis on its size and strength)—and a projecting wall, column, or post (the idea being that it is an essential support structure). The point is that we are supposed to be able to rely upon the *'ayil*: The “ram” is there for us, steady, strong, and worthy to be

followed. It is thus used symbolically of human leaders—those who have a responsibility before God to “be there” for their people. Although the only *'ayil* worthy of the name in this respect would prove to be our Messiah, every would-be leader of men is required and expected to display the ram’s qualities.

Thus we hear the Song of Moses as He praises Yahweh for delivering the Israelites from Pharaoh’s hand. He observes that Yahweh’s defeat of the Egyptian armies at the Red Sea has struck the “fear of God” into the hearts of the peoples the Israelites would soon encounter: **“Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed. Trembling seizes the leaders [*'ayil*] of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of Your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O Yahweh, pass by, till the people pass by whom You have purchased.”** (Exodus 15:15-16) Within a short time, the Israelites would blow their big chance to waltz into Canaan virtually unopposed—their sole “weapon” being Yahweh’s awesome *reputation*. If all twelve of the spies had understood this (instead of only Joshua and Caleb)—if they had comprehended that the “leaders of the flocks” of *all* their enemies were cowering in terror at their approach—well, let’s just say the Pentateuch would have ended up being somewhat shorter. Once the opportunity had passed, however, it was gone forever. By the time the Israelite hordes finally did enter Canaan, a new generation of pagans had arisen that was no longer appropriately terrified of Yahweh’s awesome capabilities.

A “leader” in this respect needn’t be the top guy in the government, for *'ayil* is used to describe valiant warriors of lesser rank as well. Explaining the parable of the two eagles, Yahweh told Ezekiel to **“Say now to the rebellious house: ‘Do you not know what these things mean?’ Tell them, ‘Indeed the king of Babylon went to Jerusalem and took its king and princes, and led them with him to Babylon. And he took the king’s offspring, made a covenant with him, and put him under oath. He also took away the mighty [*'ayil*] of the land, that the kingdom might be brought low and not lift itself up, but that by keeping his covenant it might stand.”** (Ezekiel 17:12-14) Did you ever look at the government under which you live, whether national or local, and wonder how such weak, ineffectual, self-centered morons could have risen to high office? Now you know why: God has taken away the “mighty ones”—the *'ayil*—of the land in order that we might be abased, humbled, and forced to consider where we might have gone wrong.

Occasionally we see the *'ayil*, the ram of leadership, in the role of conqueror—the tool of God’s judgment. Assyria had been raised up to deal with the apostasy of Israel’s northern kingdom. But in view of Assyria’s subsequent brutal arrogance, Yahweh vowed to bring it to its knees: **“Therefore thus says the Sovereign Yahweh: Because it [Assyria] towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I will give it into the hand of a mighty one [*'ayil*] of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out.”**

(Ezekiel 31:10-11) This “mighty one” would turn out to be Babylon, who would in turn be cast out for its overly harsh treatment of Israel’s southern kingdom, Judah. We tend to see the cyclical rise and fall of nations as the natural course of events, but Yahweh is always behind the scenes, building up or tearing down nations in order to bring about His own purposes—even if His means and motives remain opaque to us centuries after the fact.

If you’ll recall, one of the Hebrew words translated “goat” (specifically a male) was *'attuwd*, which like *'ayil*-rams, denoted a “chief one” of the species, a leader among the flock. *'Attuwd* is derived from *'athad*, a verb meaning “to be ready or to prepare,” whereas *'ayil* (the ram) is based on a word meaning “prominence.” The nuances are important, because God has informed us, **“As for you, My flock, thus says the Sovereign Yahweh: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams [*'ayil*] and male goats [*'attuwd*].”** (Ezekiel 34:17) Merely *being* a leader is not an occasion for pride, for God has placed you in position, given you the tools for the job, etc. (Nor is being a follower—one of the sheep—cause for shame; it only means you haven’t been equipped for the task of leadership.) No, Yahweh is declaring that He will evaluate our performance before Him based on whatever He has given us to work with. Whether we find ourselves a lamb or a ram, a kid or a prepared and able leader of the flock, we are to fulfill our assigned roles responsibly before our God, our Shepherd.

BULL

❧ 3.2.4 ❧

The Endeavors of Man

Considering the overwhelming ubiquity of bulls in pagan worship, it's tempting to equate them with "idolatry" and call it a day. But upon reflection, I believe that's only part of it, an oversimplification or caricature of the intended Biblical symbol. A bull's intrinsic nature—his strength, massive bulk, aggressive personality, and fecundity—make him an obvious metaphor for man's lust for power, for making his own way in the world, for doing things *his way*.

Every ancient pagan civilization had a bull in its pantheon. Depending on the local culture, it was usually associated with the sun. The source of virtually every pagan "god" was Nimrod's original Babylonian mystery religion, built around the prototypical counterfeit trinity: Nimrod as the father, his wife Semiramis as spirit-mother, and the slain and risen son, Tammuz. The bull is a permutation of Nimrod's persona—the "god of confusion"—showing up as the Babylonian Marduk (a.k.a. Merodach), Bel, and Nebo, Canaan's Ba'al, Moloch, and Chemosh, the Egyptian Apis and Osiris, the Assyrian winged bull Lamassu, the Minotaur of Crete, the Greeks' Dionysus, and the Romans' Mithras. (Nimrod's character also surfaces, though not as a bull, in such entities as Hermes, Mercury, Janus, Chaos, and Vulcan.) For my money, the Marduk/Merodach character is highly significant, as "he" was positioned as the supreme deity of the Babylonians, since Babylon is a consistent Biblical symbol for systematic false worship. Listen to what Isaiah has to say about Babylon's "bull" gods: **"The idols of Babylon, Bel and Nebo, are being hauled away on ox carts. But look! The beasts are staggering under the weight! Both the idols and the ones carrying them are bowed down. The gods cannot protect the people, and the people cannot protect the gods. They go off into captivity together."** (Isaiah 46:1-2 NLT) That's what happens when the endeavors of man take precedence over the authority of Yahweh.

And yet, Yahweh ordained that bulls, along with lambs, goats, and rams, were destined to play a significant role in the Torah's Levitical offering regimen. Further, on some level, *every* blood sacrifice symbolized some facet or another of Yahshua's atoning or redeeming work. So although they are no doubt connected in some way, what the world sees when it looks at bulls, and what God means for us to perceive, are apparently two different things. Or perhaps they *are* the same thing, but viewed from opposite directions. One thing is certain: we'll have to stay on our toes if we hope to unravel what Yahweh meant to teach us with the metaphor of the bull.

The crux of the issue, I believe, will turn out to be whether we'll do things our way or God's way. The bull brings forward the issue of whom we trust—Yahweh, or ourselves. In one of the first instances in scripture in which this issue is addressed, an image of a bull plays a starring role. I'm referring, of course, to the "golden calf" debacle recorded in Exodus 32. **"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'"** (Exodus 32:1) Moses had been up on Mount Sinai (a.k.a. Mount Horeb) for over five weeks at this point. And this wasn't his first trip: he had been called up before (see Exodus 19:20) to receive the Ten Commandments. At that time, Yahweh had specifically instructed him, **"You shall not make gods of silver to be with Me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold."** (Exodus 20:23) This was in addition to His clear prohibition against making "graven images" in the Second Commandment.

However, I don't believe it was the Israelites' *intention* to jettison Yahweh in favor of whatever god-idol Aaron could come up with. They weren't *that* stupid. What they were looking for was some sort of visual representation they could associate with their God, which was precisely what Yahweh had told them not to do. Up to this point, they'd had Moses—whom they knew wasn't God, but someone they had nevertheless come to rely upon as Yahweh's spokesman, his "public persona." But although Moses had told them to **"Wait here for us until we [i.e., he and his protégé Joshua] return to you"** (Exodus 24:14), leaving Aaron and Hur in charge, the great Lawgiver had been gone so long now, the people despaired of his prospects of ever returning.

At this point we need to ask the provocative question: does Yahweh know how we're wired? Does He understand that we *need* a physical manifestation of His presence in order to feel secure about His reality? *Of course* He does. That's why He had shown Himself as a pillar of cloud and fire to guide their way, and why He had wreathed Mount Horeb in fire and smoke to announce His presence. But in a more fundamental sense, Yahweh told us not to make images of Him—or anything else—because He intended to provide One for us—in the person of Yahshua of Nazareth. Today's mockers delight in patting us on the head as if we are idiot children as they refer to God as our "imaginary friend." But in doing so, they are merely displaying their willful ignorance of the historicity of God's human manifestation—of Yahshua's life, death, and resurrection—the latter a fact so compelling, it caused the church to grow from a couple of dozen despondent and defeated disciples into a worldwide fellowship of confident, dedicated believers hundreds of millions strong, enduring for two thousand years against every weapon Satan could bring to bear against it. So yes, Yahweh knows we need a physical, tangible *"Elohim* to go before us." His name is Yahshua. Of

course, the same mockers who say God must be imaginary because we can't see Him insist that Jesus—Yahshua—couldn't have been God because He was an historical figure, a mortal man. The only thing that would satisfy them, I suppose, would be an anthropomorphic manifestation of deity who suddenly appeared as a King of kings, whose countenance shone with the brightness of the sun, and who could—and did—destroy entire armies with a mere word from His mouth. Don't look now, but the *next* time Yahshua shows His face on earth, He will look very much like that: see Revelation 19:11-16. Somehow, though, I don't think the scoffers will like this version very much, either. Sigh.

Back at the foot of Mount Horeb, things were going south in a hurry. **“So Aaron said to them, ‘Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.’ So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf [*egel*]....”** Despite the lame explanation Aaron would later feed to his brother (v. 24), the text reveals that Aaron purposely fashioned the bull with a “graving tool”: this was no accident, no fluke. His model was doubtless the bull-gods of Egypt—the strongest, most virile, most “worthy” image he could think of to represent Yahweh—never mind what God had actually instructed. The animal described in the text, an *egel*, is a young bullock, a bull-calf—an adolescent, weaned, nearly-mature male bovine, the symbolic essence of strength, energy, and potential. By the way, notice where the gold to make the statue came from: *not* from the guys pushing for this idolatrous expression, but from *their dependents*. We should not be unaware that our failures before God tend to impoverish those we love.

Now Aaron, having compromised with the ignorant masses who were depending on him for leadership in Moses' absence, became the prototypical politician—blowing like a dry leaf before the wind. It was the elders and citizens of Israel, not their God-appointed High Priest, who declared the golden bull-calf to be a proper representation of Yahweh: **“And they said, ‘This is your god [*elohim*], O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”** So the politician/priest saw which way the wind was blowing, picked up the ball, and ran with it: **“When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh.’ And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play....”** Eating, drinking, and playing before Yahweh are all good things: we are *commanded* to rejoice in His presence. But this bull statue *wasn't* Yahweh, no matter what the people thought. The amazing thing to me is that the people apparently didn't even realize they'd done anything wrong. Aaron had rolled over and played dead every time pressure had been applied to “bend the rules.” If I know Moses, he would have blown a gasket at the mere suggestion of making a

golden calf image as a representation of Yahweh. But Aaron gave the people no reason to suspect that doing such a thing was contrary to God's revealed will.

Meanwhile, Moses' allotted forty days (Exodus 24:18) came to an abrupt conclusion. **"And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.'**" Moses must have thought, "Oh, swell. Now they're *my* people, and *I* brought 'em out of Egypt! This does not bode well." Yahweh didn't see the golden calf as a mere mistake, miscalculation, or bad idea. It was *corruption*—the Hebrew verb is *shachath*: to destroy, become ruined, ravaged, perverted, corrupted, decayed, or spoiled—the implication is that the object has become useless. **"They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"** (Exodus 32:2-8) Reality check: Christians and Jews who cluck their tongues at these folks in condemnation of their idolatry need to take a step back and examine their own thought processes. The Israelites weren't guilty, exactly, of leaving Yahweh in favor of some other deity—somebody from the Babylonian pantheon, for example. No, they were guilty of defining Yahweh's character according to their own preconceptions, of letting man's "wisdom" take precedence over God's word. How many of us have fallen into the same trap—of assuming because of our long-held (and unchallenged) religious traditions that we *know* who God is, even if our conception doesn't quite square with His revealed word? Many of us—*most* of us—are, on occasion, just as guilty as the Israelites were of "making graven images" of God.

So Moses and Joshua headed back down the mountainside. **"When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, 'There is a noise of war in the camp.' But he said, 'It is not the sound of shouting for victory, or the sound of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing that I hear.'** And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, **Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain...."** Israel's corruption, in other words, caused Moses to "break" the law—*literally*. It didn't matter whether they had sinned out of stupidity or malice. Our sins *never* have a positive effect on those around us. There is no such thing as a victimless crime.

Moses now set about undoing the damage as best he could: **"He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it."** Moses was telling the people, ever so eloquently, "This 'god' of yours that you've made out of gold is in reality nothing more than human excrement, and I'll prove it to you." He then turned his attention to his idiot brother: **"And Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you that you have brought such a great sin upon them?'** And Aaron said, **'Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, 'Make us gods**

who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” So I said to them, “Let any who have gold take it off.” So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.””

(Exodus 32:17-24) Aaron did what politicians usually do—he tried to weasel out of his predicament by blaming others for his own failure. And he flat-out *lied* about how the statue came to be. Moses, I’m sure, didn’t buy a word of it.

Scripture doesn’t record what punishment, if any, Aaron personally endured for his part in this debacle. (The nation suffered a minor plague and a small scale civil war in its wake.) But it is not without irony that a bull-calf, an *egel*, was specified as a sin offering for Aaron himself on the final day of the priestly ordination process: **“On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel, and he said to Aaron, ‘Take for yourself a bull calf [*egel ben baqar*] for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, both without blemish, and offer them before Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 9:1-2) The Hebrew noun *baqar* is a generic term for a bovine—cattle or their herds. I find it significant that Aaron would not be qualified to assume his role as Israel’s High Priest until an *egel*, a “bull-calf son of the herd,” had been sacrificed to atone for his sin. It is doubly ironic that the ultimate fulfillment of the bull-calf symbol would turn out to be Yahweh in the flesh: Yahshua—the only person *ever* to live up to the potential God had built into the human race.

It could be argued, then, that the Israelites weren’t exactly *wrong* when they pictured Yahweh as a young bull, for the bull or bull-calf metaphor is used time and again throughout the Levitical Instructions. And all such blood sacrifices were to be fulfilled in Yahshua the Messiah—Yahweh’s image in human flesh—though of course they didn’t know that. The fact remains, however, that Yahweh had specifically prohibited the making or worship of graven images. The point is that it doesn’t help to be *right* if we are at the same time being disobedient to God’s revealed word. The bull is the perfect test case for this principle: the question is whether we’re relying on the strength, intellect, logic, and wisdom of man, or upon the sovereignty of Yahweh.

Relying on man’s thought process is a slippery slope at best, as another scene involving the *egel* as a graven image will demonstrate. We’ve run across this incident before, in reference to demonic idols being characterized as goats: **“And he [Jeroboam] appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat idols [*sa’ir*] and for the calves [*egel*] that he had made.”** (II Chronicles 11:15) If you’ll recall, after the fracturing of Israel into northern and southern components (the direct result of the aging Solomon’s apostasies) Jeroboam, the northern king, realized that Torah law required that every male in Israel go to Jerusalem three times a year to celebrate before Yahweh. He concluded (and not without cause) that this would weaken his own political grip on the ten northern tribes. So Jeroboam did

what men so often do: he threw out God's word and replaced it with a manmade substitute, a counterfeit, a plan more to his liking and purpose. **"And Jeroboam said in his heart, 'Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of Yahweh at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah....'"** True enough, Jerry, but you should have thought of that before you revolted against the house of David, even if Rehoboam was a spoiled jerk unworthy of the throne.

At this point, Jeroboam had options. He knew what the Torah had instructed his people to do. He knew Rehoboam was the rightful king, the heir of Solomon. So he could have—and *should have*—encouraged his people (who hated the oppressive rule of Rehoboam as much as he did) to continue going to the Jerusalem temple anyway to worship Yahweh in the manner prescribed in the Torah—at the same time praying that Yahweh would provide a way to reunite the kingdom under godly and benign rule (i.e., under somebody other than Rehoboam, though still in David's lineage—which he himself was not). But Jeroboam had now tasted power, and he was hooked on it. So he chose instead to elevate himself over Almighty God, and in the process doomed his fledgling nation to apostasy, confusion, and wrath. **"So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, 'You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.'"** These were practically the same words Israel had used in ascribing deity to Aaron's golden calf. This was, to put it bluntly, *bull*. Not only had Yahweh *not* rescinded His prohibition against making graven images, He had not put an expiration date on the command to gather before Him three times a year (Exodus 23:14-17), nor had He moved the venue for His feasts away from Jerusalem (II Chronicles 6:6). So human arrogance—utter disregard for the word of God—was the only possible explanation for Jeroboam's disastrous edict: **"And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan."** Bethel was on the southern edge of the northern kingdom—only a few miles north of Jerusalem; and Dan was located in the far north of Jeroboam's realm. **"Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one."**

And Jeroboam didn't stop there. Not comprehending the difference between Yahweh's Instructions and some mindless manmade religion, he began swapping out the specifics—places, people, and practices, dates and duties. **"He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings."** (I

Kings 12:26-33) Once again, religious Christians tend to shake their heads and mutter in disgust, “How *could* he?” But we do the same sort of thing all the time. Our traditions have superseded God’s clear instructions. For many, Rome has replaced Jerusalem in our affections. Christmas (with all its pagan baggage) has replaced the Feast of Tabernacles (the announcement of God’s symbolic intention to “camp out” among men). Good Friday has replaced Passover, we ignore the Feast of Unleavened Bread altogether, and Easter is celebrated in place of the Feast of Firstfruits. Oh, and Jeroboam’s contrived “fifteenth day of the eighth month” feast day? That falls suspiciously close to “All-Saints Day,” a.k.a. Halloween. I hate to rain on the parade, but many of our “Christian traditions” are just as far away from the center of God’s will as Jeroboam’s bogus neo-Judaism was. But at least Jerry’s symbols tell us where we’ve gone wrong: it’s all a lot of *bull*.

Having lived through a few, I can understand how a single apostate national leader could adversely affect the fortunes of his whole nation. But Jeroboam wasn’t alone: the general populace was right there with him, circling the drain of history. After a few generations, despite the fact that Yahweh had sent prophets to warn the people and their kings, we are confronted with this sad commentary: **“But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in Yahweh their God. They despised His statutes and His covenant that He made with their fathers and the warnings that He gave them.”** Just because we are blessed with free will, it doesn’t follow that all paths are equally viable. Yahweh *wants us* to choose to follow Him. Although He won’t physically force us to obey His precepts, He does *command* us (for our own good) to do so. And then He warns us of the consequences of choosing poorly: we take on the characteristics of whatever we revere. **“They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom Yahweh had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they abandoned all the commandments of Yahweh their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves [the *egel* that Jeroboam had made]; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal.”** As the bull was a recurring permutation of Nimrod-worship, the Asherah image celebrated the pagan female counterpart—that of Semiramis, Nimrod’s wife and the mother of Tammuz—the prototypical false Christ. **“And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings [Molech and Chemosh were both bull-gods] and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of Yahweh, provoking Him to anger. Therefore Yahweh was very angry with Israel and removed them out of His sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only.”** (II Kings 17:14-18)

Dieticians tell us, “You are what you eat.” We have just seen that Israel’s Northern kingdom (a.k.a. Ephraim) “went after false idols and became false.” This leads us to the parallel conclusion that in a sense, *You become what you worship*—that is, you tend to take on the characteristics of whatever you revere,

whether falsehood or godliness. Israel had forsaken the worship of Yahweh, replacing Him with Jeroboam's twin bull-calves. I find it fascinating, then, that Yahweh ties Israel's eventual repentance and restoration (something prophesied time and again in scripture) to their recognition that they had become just like what they'd worshipped—an unruly bull-calf. **“There is hope for your future, declares Yahweh, and your children shall come back to their own country. I have heard Ephraim grieving, ‘You have disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untrained calf [*egel*]. Bring me back that I may be restored, for You are Yahweh my God. For after I had turned away, I relented, and after I was instructed, I slapped my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was confounded, because I bore the disgrace of my youth.”** For His part, Yahweh never turns a deaf ear to genuine repentance. He asks, in light of Ephraim's new realization of its own culpability, **“Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he My darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, declares Yahweh.”** (Jeremiah 31:17-20) Prophetic scripture (notably Ezekiel 37 and 48 and Revelation 7) confirms that in the kingdom age, all twelve tribes of Israel, including the ten “lost” ones, will inhabit the Land and serve their Messiah. They will *all* have decided that it was a really bad idea to follow the “bull” of man's endeavors instead of the word of Yahweh.

The most commonly used Hebrew word for “bull” is *par*, which means a bull, bullock, ox, or calf, i.e., an adolescent (one or more years old) to fully-mature male bovine, usually inferred to not be castrated. *Par* is a more generalized word than *egel* (a word that stresses the adolescent exuberance of the bull).

The Torah's first mention of sacrificial bulls after the tabernacle had been built was in the ordination ritual for the priests. We read of these things being performed in Leviticus 8, but the instructions themselves are found in Exodus 29. **“Now this is what you shall do to them to consecrate them [Aaron and his sons], that they may serve Me as priests. Take one bull [*par*] of the herd and two rams without blemish, and unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil. You shall make them of fine wheat flour. You shall put them in one basket and bring them in the basket, and bring the bull and the two rams.”** (Exodus 29:1-3) The elements of consecration are all symbolic of what a priest's function was to be, what his role was to represent. The wheat flour and the things made from it (as we saw in the previous chapter) indicate God's provision: the priest (whose job it was to intercede with Yahweh) was provided by Yahweh on behalf of the people. “Fine” flour indicates that the non-nutritive chaff has been removed and discarded: there is to be nothing useless or vain about the service of a priest. He is also to be filled with the Spirit (the olive oil) and untainted by sin (so the bread is

unleavened). Of course, the priests, being human beings, were not *actually* sinless. (The bull, in fact, was to be a *sin* offering, as we shall soon see.) But the *role* of the High Priest was prophetic of the One who would render us all sinless before God—the Messiah, Yahshua. The two rams, as we saw earlier in this chapter, represent Christ as the leader of the flock—the first was an *olah* or burnt offering signifying His total commitment to our salvation, and the second was a *selem*, or peace offering: Yahshua’s sacrifice reconciles us to Yahweh, removing the enmity that kept us separated from Him. This leaves only the meaning of the bull, the sin offering, to ponder.

I believe the sacrifice of the bull in this context indicates that all the human effort, schemes, calculation, and logistics that might easily characterize our walk before God must be laid aside if we are to serve as “priests of Yahweh.” And since the bull is the very first sacrificial element to be dealt with, it means that our agenda and methods must be made subservient to God’s *from the very beginning*. Manmade religious practice has no place in a relationship with God. So the instructions continue: **“Then [that is, after Aaron and his sons had been bathed, ceremonially dressed, and anointed for service] you shall bring the bull before the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on the head of the bull....”** This, as always, indicated transference—in this case, the sin of doing things our way (and in our own strength) instead of God’s way. How sadly ironic it is that immediately after this ceremony was first performed, Aaron’s two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, evidently not having a clue as to what it all meant, proceeded to “do religion” their own way, and promptly got “devoured by fire” for their sin (see Leviticus 10:1-3).

“Then you shall kill the bull before Yahweh at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take part of the blood of the bull and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and the rest of the blood you shall pour out at the base of the altar.” The bull’s blood represents its life, the bronze-covered altar represents judgment (i.e., separation from sin), and its “horns” represent the fact that Yahweh alone has the authority to judge. So the picture here is that of the submission of the priest to Yahweh—his recognition of God’s intrinsic and inalienable right to call the shots. **“And you shall take all the fat that covers the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, and burn them on the altar....”** These fat portions, you’ll recall, represent “the best we have to offer.” It is thus no surprise that it was to be burned in homage and submission to Yahweh on the altar.

But what about the meat? If this were a peace offering, trespass offering, firstborn offering, or even an ordinary sin offering, the priests would have used the bull’s flesh for food. So this last bit of instruction may come as an epiphany: **“But the flesh of the bull and its skin and its dung you shall burn with fire outside the camp; it is a sin offering.”** (Exodus 29:10-14) Why not eat the beef? Because the sin in

question, the transgression being covered by the bull's death, is *the priest's sin*. The principle is: under no circumstances are we to benefit or profit from our own transgression. In this case (as the hapless Nadab and Abihu discovered) the message is loud and clear: servants of God are not to invent or perform religious practices designed to enrich or empower themselves. Please understand: I'm not advocating "muzzling the ox that treads out the grain" (a subject I'll address in the next section), but rather warning against human endeavor and manmade religious tradition being used as tools to bring power, riches, prestige, and influence to people who are supposed to be serving as "priests" of Yahweh—intercessors between a lost world and the God who seeks to save it. Relationship with Yahweh is not a business.

But wait, you say. Aren't all of these sacrifices supposed to symbolize something the Messiah was, or did? This bull seems to be indicating something negative that we must eliminate from our modus operandi. What gives? Yes, Christ personifies innocence, so He is rightly represented as a lamb; He bears our sins, so the goat reveals His "job description"; He is the undisputed leader of our flock, so seeing Him as a ram makes perfect sense. But none of these things would have been possible if Yahweh had not manifested Himself as a human being. The point of the bull as a sin offering is that Yahshua, though a man, did not rely upon human methods or resources in order to achieve humanity's reconciliation with God. Being found as a man, His reliance upon God consisted of doing only what *any* human could do in similar circumstances: depending upon the word of God for guidance and the Holy Spirit for moral strength—but *not* feeling free to call upon legions of angels for timely assistance. In all three synoptic Gospels, we read of Satan's temptation of the Messiah. In each of the three "categories" of testing, the devil's intention was to entice Yahshua to achieve a goal or solve a problem by "cheating"—by circumventing the painful process of submitting Himself totally to Yahweh's will *as a human being*. Christ withstood these temptations, and in doing so became the rightful object of the Torah's "bull" metaphor. Having humbled Himself as a man, He now relied upon God's strength alone—just as we are supposed to do.

Yahshua lived a life entirely free of sin (which by definition, you'll recall, is "missing the mark" of God's perfection, falling short of His standards and opinions). We fallen humans, on the other hand, have a problem with sin—and I don't mean merely *doing* it. Even though we'd like to imagine that sin doesn't affect us (or doesn't really exist), deep down, we know it does. Whether we admit it or not, we spend our entire lives trying to scrape off its consequences and ramifications—something no animal would ever dream of doing. Every religion under the sun is designed—at its core—as a strategy for appeasing God. Even non-religious "faiths" like atheistic secular humanism are there for one purpose only: to convince their adherents that sin (of which they somehow *know* they're

guilty) *isn't real*. But it's all whistling in the dark—false hope and fables, the opinion of man taking precedence over the word of God. *Bull!*

The Torah alone meets the problem head on. It declares, “We’re all sinners before Yahweh, so deal with it. Here are His instructions on what to do about our transgressions.” The heart of the Torah’s atonement rituals, however, can be somewhat disconcerting for someone trying to eliminate his own guilt by becoming less guilty. It says, “Something innocent must die in order to cover and remove your sins—and *you aren't innocent*.” In other words, although we (rightly) feel like we ought to do something to pay for our own transgressions (even if we don’t believe there’s a God), the Torah tells us we can’t: the lamb, the goat, and the ram (or more to the point, Who they represent) must die in our stead. Religions often suggest that penance, or alms, or good behavior, or self denial, or even martyrdom will balance the books. But God’s word flatly denies this: these are man’s answers to a problem only God can solve.

This brings us back to the bull of the sin offering. It says, ever so eloquently, “The most logical, most well conceived, most powerful, and most promising way man can think of to rid himself of the guilt he feels is inadequate and insufficient.” The problem must, rather, be dealt with in God’s strength, solved with His logic. We may say we want justice, but justice is only a good thing (on a personal level) if we’re innocent. And the fact is, we *aren't*. If we wish to get out of this predicament alive, we should be looking not for justice, but for mercy. Obtaining mercy, however, requires that we swallow our pride and admit that man’s way won’t work. Sacrificing a bull as a sin offering, as the Torah prescribes, says that very thing. But since literal sacrifices and offerings are no longer possible (by God’s decree, no less), we have no choice but to look at what the fulfillment of the “bull” symbol turned out to be. And (surprise!) just as with every other blood sacrifice in the Torah, that fulfillment turns out to be Yahshua the Messiah.

It should be obvious to us by now that it wasn’t *literally* bulls, lambs, goats, and rams that Yahweh was interested in. These were merely symbols—pictures of the things God was in the process of sacrificing on *our* behalf. He commanded Israel to do these things for precisely the same reason Yahshua instructed His disciples to partake of the rite of communion: “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Just because the rite, in and of itself, does not “save” us, there is no reason to consider it obsolete or worthless. The precept is a lesson, and our repeated rehearsal is crucial if we wish to comprehend what Yahweh wants us to know. The *real* sacrifice, after all, is not really being made by the worshipper anyway—it’s being made by the bull or the goat.

That being said, there *is* something we fallen humans are to bring to the party: not our lifeblood, our alms, our good deeds, or our penance—things that are

worthless to God outside of a relationship with Him. No, what we may (or should I say, *must*) contribute is an attitude of humility. David, faced with the reality of his own sin, wrote, **“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. Do good to Zion in Your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then will You delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on Your altar.”** (Psalm 51:17-19) Everything we’ve talked about in this chapter—all of these sacrifices, all of that spilled blood—is mere “kabuki theater” if done (or studied—since the temple no longer stands) without an attitude of contrition and humility before our God.

Sadly, when most Christians stray into passages like Leviticus 4, where the procedures covering the sin offering (the *chata't*) are detailed (and I do mean *detailed*), their eyes usually begin to glaze over as they slowly descend into a state of serene stupor, while a little voice within the most primitive part of their brains begins to softly murmur, *Didn't you hear somewhere that the Law was obsolete? This isn't for you. Your eyelids are getting heavy. Sleep. Sleeeeeep.* Jews on the other hand, if they're paying attention, read this stuff and break out in hives brought on by the sure knowledge that doing what “HaShem” is commanding them to do here is impossible—and has been for almost two thousand years. Without a temple and a priesthood, *none* of the myriad of offerings and sacrifices in the Torah can be performed. Yet the excruciating detail of the rite of the sin offering here mocks their frustration: God has apparently commanded them to do what He knows can't be done.

It is my contention, however, that the Torah's minutiae is vitally relevant for the Christian, *and* eminently doable for the Jew—if they're willing to embrace the symbols Yahweh has presented here. Why? In God's prophetic mind, the sanctuary is not a place; it's a plan. And the priesthood isn't actually the sons of Aaron; it's the called-out assembly of God's spiritual children—all of us. Anyway, you'd have to be terribly naïve to think that the blood of a bull *actually* does anything to remove our sin. Israel was instructed to go through this goofy sounding ritual for only one reason: it's a picture, a parable, a *symbol* of the process by which our lapses in behavior before God can be atoned.

Sin offerings for individual Israelites were specified to be goats (read: sin bearers)—males if the sinner was a ruler of the people and female goats if an ordinary citizen were applying for forgiveness. But if the sinner was a priest, or if the whole congregation's sin was in view, a bull was specified—emphasis being placed on the fact that the sin must be dealt with God's way, not through the

machinations of man. **“Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, saying, if anyone sins unintentionally in any of Yahweh’s commandments about things not to be done, and does any one of them, if it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, then he shall offer for the sin that he has committed a bull from the herd without blemish to Yahweh for a sin offering.’”** Here it is made clear that when a priest—one whose job it is to intercede with God on behalf of the people—goofs up, he brings “guilt on the people,” because the people are relying on him to get it right. (I find it ironic that since a secular leader of the people was to bring a goat, no such expectation of circumspect behavior was made: it’s as if it were a *given* that kings and generals would usually get it all wrong.) The warning is not just for Aaronic priests, of course, but for anyone who fulfills what the symbol the priesthood represents—any child of Yahweh, but especially those who find themselves in a position of public trust. We should never forget that what we believers say and do is a direct reflection on our God. The precept stresses instances in which these “priests” do things that God’s law expressly prohibits—which smells to me like hypocritical behavior: saying one thing while doing another. The world is watching, brothers and sisters. We *owe* it, at the very least, a good example—a consistent, holy life lived in accordance with Yahweh’s instructions. When we start making up our own rules based on situational morals, political correctness, or whatever makes us feel good, we bring guilt upon the people.

And as we have seen, the symbolic remedy for having pursued such a path is the sacrifice of a bull. **“He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before Yahweh and lay his hand on the head of the bull and kill the bull before Yahweh.”** Again, the priest’s sin is symbolically transferred to the bull before it is slain. **“And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting, and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before Yahweh in front of the veil of the sanctuary.”** If we find we have misled the people, there will be (figuratively, anyway), blood on our hands. This is serious business: the *life* is in the blood. Where was the blood to be sprinkled? The place being described is where the altar of incense stood—where (symbolically) the prayers of the saints were sent heavenward. So we read, **“And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before Yahweh that is in the tent of meeting.”** Horns represent power, so smearing some of the bull’s blood on the horns on the corners of the altar of incense is a picture of forsaking man’s solutions while accessing the power of prayer. In other words, it’s like saying to Yahweh, “Not my will, but Yours be done.” **“And all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting....”** The rest of the bull’s life-blood thus became associated with the judgment Christ endured for our sakes. Make no mistake: taking man’s word over God’s is a capital crime.

As we have seen before, the specified fat parts represent “the best we have to offer” being reserved for Yahweh’s honor and use. **“And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys (just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings); and the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering.”** At this point, a distinction needs to be drawn. There is a fundamental difference between “giving our best” to Yahweh and getting it into our heads that anything we have to offer is intrinsically valuable—that God should be impressed with us. As a Christian musician, I’ve struggled with this conundrum for decades. On the one hand, it is a very good thing to sing or play an instrument in Yahweh’s honor, giving it one’s very best effort—practicing, honing one’s craft, being diligent in service, and considering it a great privilege to help lead God’s people in corporate worship. On the other hand, our goal should never be to impress anyone, God or man, with our skill or our gifts. So although it would be dishonoring to God to purposely play *worse* than I’m capable of doing, my “best” should be designed to enhance the worship experience—and *not* to enhance my reputation as a guitarist or singer. The whole thing would make me crazy if I dwelled on it. So mostly, I just try to “lay the fat on the fire,” playing as well as I can but concentrating on the lyrics of the song. It helps to know that there’s always somebody more gifted than me out there, and yet Yahweh has allowed me (of all people) to praise Him with a Strat in my hands. Wow!

The instructions continue: **“But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung—all the rest of the bull—he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood. On the ash heap it shall be burned up.”** (Leviticus 4:1-12) As we saw with the ordinance of dedication, since the *chata’t* is being offered to cover the sin of the priest, he himself is not to partake of the nutritional value the bull might have provided. The lesson: we cannot profit or benefit from our own transgressions. Burning the carcass “outside the camp,” of course, is a transparent euphemism for the crucifixion of Christ, who was executed *outside* Jerusalem’s city walls, even though His shed blood fulfilled the precept’s “altar” symbols—unleashing the power of prayer for our forgiveness and atoning for our sins as He endured God’s judgment for our sakes.

We have seen how the sins of the priests bring “guilt upon the people,” since the people are relying on them to be an accurate reflection of God’s will in the world. So what is the remedy for the congregation’s guilt? It is the same as it was for the priest: **“If the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do any one of the things that by Yahweh’s commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt, when the sin which they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull from the herd for a sin offering and bring it in front of the tent of meeting. And the elders of the congregation shall**

lay their hands on the head of the bull before Yahweh, and the bull shall be killed before Yahweh.” This time, the elders of the congregation—the temporal leaders representing those who had fallen into sin—are to lay their hands on the head of the bull in order to symbolically transfer the people’s guilt to it. But the rest of the rite is identical: **“Then the anointed priest shall bring some of the blood of the bull into the tent of meeting, and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before Yahweh in front of the veil. And he shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar that is in the tent of meeting before Yahweh, and the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And all its fat he shall take from it and burn on the altar. Thus shall he do with the bull. As he did with the bull of the sin offering, so shall he do with this. And the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven. And he shall carry the bull outside the camp and burn it up as he burned the first bull; it is the sin offering for the assembly.”** (Leviticus 4:13-21)

These two “bull” sin offerings (for the priest and then for the congregation) are described separately (though one right after the other) in Leviticus 4. The implication seems to be that it is likely—though not inevitable—that when the whole nation goes astray, it is the fault of the “priests.” That is, the problem will probably be that the alleged followers of Yahweh haven’t been following closely enough. More to the point, what the world will have perceived in our words and walk is actually *our own* opinions, *our own* solutions, *our own* logic, and *our own* rules—not Yahweh’s. Israel fell into this trap and was removed from the Land and the sanctuary for her apostasy—*twice*. And the church has fared no better for the most part—being declared “dead” at one point (Revelation 3:1), and “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” at another (Revelation 3:17). It’s no comfort (well, not much) that God knew how badly we were going to fail even before we did so. But it is a great comfort (to me, anyway) that Yahweh provided—from the very beginning—the means for all of us to reenter His fellowship. Yes, the Bull would have to die: all of our human pretensions, plans, and plots would have to be subjected to the fires of judgment. From our point of view, of course, it seems a small enough price to pay for such a huge benefit. But the Bull Himself (I’m speaking, of course, of Yahshua) might beg to differ: He gave everything He had—life itself—so that our foolish man-centric sins could be covered, so that our “human condition” could be cured. At the very least, we owe Him our sincere and heartfelt apology.

We see precisely the same symbology repeated in the instructions for the Day of Atonement, the sixth holy convocation on Yahweh’s annual calendar. We’ve already seen how the two goats (one who dies and the other who is set free) play their part. But before we ever get there, the priest who is to offer them must make a *chata’t* offering to cover his own sins—you guessed it: a bull. **“Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for**

his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself...." So far, this is exactly the same as any priestly sin offering. Normally, he would merely smear some of the bull's blood on the horns of the altar of incense and depart the sanctuary.

But on this one day of the year, the High Priest was to actually enter the holy of holies, and that changed things, for this (symbolically, anyway) was where God was said to dwell. **"And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before Yahweh, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before Yahweh, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die...."** This incense, you'll recall, symbolizes prayer: we cannot enter into the presence of God unless we are protected by prayer—intimate communication with Yahweh. But remember who the High Priest represented: his role reveals that of the Messiah. The point is that it is actually *Yahshua's* communication with the Father that indemnifies us against harm on Yom Kippurim—the day set apart to commemorate the affliction of the soul that leads to repentance in humility, the day in which we either respond to Yahweh's offer of cleansing or cut ourselves off forever from the household of faith. It is Yahshua who provides our atonement.

So on this day, the blood is sprinkled not on the altar of incense, but on the mercy seat itself. **"And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times."** (Leviticus 16:11-14) The same procedure would be followed with the first goat (v. 15). But the goat prophesied Christ's accomplishment as He bore our sins on Calvary's tree, while the bull that preceded it represented the fact that He did so *not* according to the wisdom or logic of man (because let's face it, the idea of saving someone by sacrificing your own life is about as counterintuitive as it gets), but rather, in simple obedience to God. Upon reflection, it transpires that this is the only possible way God could have been both just *and* merciful at the same time. Honestly, you couldn't make this stuff up.

Numbers 28 and 29 inform us as to what sorts of animals were to be offered in the context of God's scheduled convocations in theocratic Israel, and when. Since the temple and priesthood do not exist (at the moment) we must content ourselves with the instructions themselves—we can't watch the play being performed; we can only read the script. In the matter of bulls, if we stay on our toes, the information imparted can be quite revealing. Bulls are not specified for either the daily or weekly scheduled sacrifices—for these, it's lambs only: we are constantly being reminded of the innocence of our Messiah, not to mention our responsibility to rest in His finished work.

We begin to see bulls specified in the monthly, or "new moon" offerings. It has occurred to me that the phases of the moon symbolically indicate the varying

amount of spiritual “light” that’s being reflected toward our world at any given time. Isaiah, for example, sarcastically challenges the proud wise men of “idolatry central”—Babylon: **“Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you may be able to succeed; perhaps you may inspire terror. You are wearied with your many counsels. Let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you.”** (Isaiah 47:12-13) It’s dark outside at the time of the new moon—symbolically and literally, the best time to “gaze at the stars” and pretend that man’s wisdom is actually worth a tinker’s damn. Yahweh’s wisdom, on the other hand, is represented when the maximum amount of His light is being reflected onto the earth— symbolically, at the full moon. This truth is demonstrated through God’s timing: His feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, and later, Tabernacles, all occur at the “full moon” phase. (In contrast, the Feast of Trumpets, which I believe predicts God’s scheduling of the rapture harvest, happens at a time of maximum spiritual darkness—the new moon.) So it’s no coincidence that bulls are to be offered at the new moon feasts: our eras of spiritual blindness invariably coincide with the periodic ascendancy of the endeavors of man. As one increases, the other diminishes, like inversely proportional clockwork. Thus we are told (in Numbers 28:11) that two bulls are to be offered at all of Israel’s new moon feasts.

Why two? Since it isn’t explained, we’re left to speculate, but it seems fairly obvious to me that the two bulls represent two erroneous man-centric paths—one followed by the nations, and the other followed by Israel. In other words, Jews and gentiles both fall into error and apostasy, but their respective heresies tend to differ. Both, however, are rooted in the practice of taking man’s word over God’s. Most Christians are hyper-aware of the fact that the vast bulk of Yahweh’s communication to mankind came to us through Israel, but it helps to remember that Israel’s place as the exclusive conduit of the oracles of God lasted for only fifteen hundred of man’s six thousand year tenure (so far) upon the earth. As I’ve said before, salvation is *of* the Jews, though not (exclusively) *for* the Jews. So two bulls are the rule.

Passover *per se* is the day of preparation—the day the Lamb was slain. But the *result* of Passover begins on the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, and here again (Numbers 28:19) we see two bulls specified as an *olah*—a burnt offering. The same is true of the Feast of Weeks (28:27). If we examine the historical fulfillments of these prophetic convocations, we see that both Jews and gentiles participated in or benefitted from them: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which includes the Feast of Firstfruits) speaks of the removal of our sin from us; and the Feast of Weeks (a.k.a. Pentecost) predicts the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit within the individual lives of the Messiah’s followers—both Jews and gentiles.

The Feast of Trumpets (*Yom Teruah*) is where we get our first telling little hint that we're on the right track in identifying the two bulls of previous mention as applying to Israel and the nations. For here, in the first yet-to-be-fulfilled holy convocation on Yahweh's schedule, *only one* bull is specified (Numbers 29:2). Why? Because the day prophesies the removal of the ekklesia from the world—the bodily spiritual transformation of the called-out assembly of Yahshua, as described in I Corinthians 15:49-54. Although the church today is comprised of both Jews and gentiles without functional distinction, this will no longer be the case after the Feast of Trumpets: the rapture will for the first time in two millennia place God's prophetic focus on Israel alone—and it will go a long way toward restarting the stopwatch that has been paused since March 28 (Nisan 10), 33 A.D.—i.e., between the 69th and 70th “weeks” of the amazing Daniel 9 prophecy. Bottom line: after the definitive *Yom Teruah* (on the first day of Tishri in some future year that God has chosen not to reveal) Yahweh will no longer suffer the “bull” of gentile religious practices, whether within the church or outside it. Israel will be Yahweh's focus—a fact revealed by literally hundreds of prophecies predicting their eventual regathering (all twelve tribes), redemption, restoration, and renewal under the rule of their Messiah and King, Yahshua. Needless to say, that hasn't happened yet.

The really enlightening commentary on the “bull” symbol, however, is latent in the instructions for their sacrifice during the eight days of the Feast of Tabernacles—the final convocation of the annual series, the one prophetic of the Messiah's Millennial kingdom upon the earth. The details are enumerated in Numbers 29:12-40, but they make no sense at all *unless* you understand who King Yahshua is dealing with during this period of time. There will be two “races” of humans on earth during the Millennium. First is the immortals—those who, whether living or dead, will have taken part in the rapture event on the Feast of Trumpets—*years* before the Kingdom age will begin (or a subsequent harvest of martyrs implied to have taken place at the end of the Tribulation: see Revelation 20:4). These people will have received their immortal “spiritual bodies,” as described in I Corinthians 15:42-44. The “bulls” of the Tabernacles offerings do not apply to these believers, for they, as immortals, now have the capacity to “know as they are known.” Confusing human wisdom with God's word is no longer a problem for them. I, for one, am really looking forward to that.

The Millennial mortals, on the other hand, are in a very different boat. Who are they? These are folks who (1) were alive on earth but missed the rapture (having no relationship with God at the time the event took place); (2) are comprised of both Israelites (whose collective national epiphany concerning the identity of Yahshua as the Messiah will be the central feature of the definitive Day of Atonement) *and* gentiles, those who subsequently took Yahshua's advice to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:18; (3) all of whom somehow survived

through the horrors of the Tribulation, and (4) were counted as “sheep” instead of “goats” as the Kingdom commenced (as characterized in Matthew 25:31-46). These blessed mortals will enter the Millennial kingdom under the personal reign of Christ. They’ll rebuild the earth under His rule, and repopulate the planet.

But they’ll have a problem, at least initially. Every last one of them is, by definition, a “new believer.” It is highly unlikely that more than a handful of them will have any knowledge of God’s plan or purpose beyond the rudimentary information they were able to glean—on the run—during the Tribulation from the angelic messengers or the 144,000 anointed Jewish messengers. All they’re likely to know for sure is to **“Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come, and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”** (Revelation 14:7) If they do this (and manage to stay alive), they will enter the kingdom as one of the blessed mortal “sheep” of Matthew 25:34. But you must admit: as theologies go, this is kind of on the thin side. Yes, they’ll have a thousand years to figure out who Yahweh is, mentored by the raptured immortals and led by the divine King in Jerusalem. But at the beginning of the kingdom age, they won’t know any more than Abram did when God told Him to leave Ur and move to Canaan.

Hence the instructions of Numbers 29. Singling out the bulls (though there is admittedly a lot more going on here), we find that a descending number of bulls are to be sacrificed as burnt offerings during the festival’s eight-day run. On the first day of the feast (v. 13), thirteen young bulls are to be sacrificed—that’s right, *thirteen*: there’s apparently going to be a whole lot of error in play at the beginning of the Millennial kingdom: even though *everybody* will honor God, few will even know His name. But things will gradually get better as the time wears on: on the second day twelve bulls are to be offered (v. 17); on the third day, eleven bulls (v. 20); on the fourth day, ten (v. 23); on the fifth day, nine (v. 26); on the sixth day, eight (v. 29); on the seventh day (which seems to indicate the completion of the Millennial kingdom age), seven bulls are to be sacrificed—apparently telling us that the process of weeding out error among the mortal population of the earth will be complete as well.

And what then? The eighth day is set apart as a special Sabbath (v. 35), one I believe symbolizes the commencement of the eternal state. Earth will be dissolved, replaced with a new earth, new heavens, and a new Jerusalem. And every remaining child of Yahweh will shed his or her mortal frame, trading it in for a body designed not for earth, but for eternity. Although we will at this time, by all accounts, be sinless creatures, free of error, and living in perfect harmony with the leader of the flock, there are still sacrifices to be made on the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles: seven lambs, one ram, one goat—and one bull—all with their appropriate grain and drink offerings. I can only conclude that

throughout our blessed eternal future, Yahweh doesn't want us to forget *anything* about what He did for us. Yes, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes—including the tears of shame and frustration our sins have brought upon us. And yes, we are instructed to **“Behold, I [Yahweh] create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.”** (Isaiah 65:17) But somehow, though our sin, our history, and our former home will have vanished like a bad dream, we will vividly remember waking up in Yahweh's presence. Just because we will have been “cured” of our fallen humanity at this point, we must never forget the incredible lengths to which God went in order to bring us to this point. I, for one, wouldn't want to.

I think my favorite “bull” story in scripture is the “prophets’ duel” between Elijah and the priests of Ba'al on Mount Carmel. Israel's King Ahab (and his pagan queen, Jezebel) had followed the path of Jeroboam (who, you'll recall, had installed two bull idols for Israel to worship, so his people wouldn't go to Jerusalem as Yahweh had commanded them to do). Yahweh had responded by sending a severe drought to encourage Israel to reconsider their position—announced by the prophet Elijah. Three years into this drought, Elijah, not surprisingly, found himself “public enemy number one.” (Irrational people invariably attack the messenger instead of heeding the message.) But in a surprise move, he sent word to Ahab to gather the priests of Ba'al and meet him for a showdown at Mount Carmel. This is roughly like John Dillinger calling J. Edgar Hoover and suggesting they meet to talk things over at the First National Bank.

Ahab wouldn't pass up this opportunity to corner the illusive seer. **“So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, ‘How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If Yahweh is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.’ And the people did not answer him a word....”** It had been the better part of a century since Jeroboam had promulgated his bull idols, and by this time, the populace of the Northern Kingdom were so used to the travesty, nobody gave it a second thought anymore. (It's sort of like the Federal Income Tax in America, which had been deemed unconstitutional, illegal, and downright idiotic until 1913, when it suddenly became the law of the land, slipped in right under our noses in the dark of night.) The reason, I believe, that everybody just stood around with their hands in their pockets when Elijah said this, was that nobody had a frame of reference: it never occurred to them that there was anything wrong with their religious practices. They'd lived with apostasy all their lives—*so* long that the worship of Yahweh probably seemed a quaint and foreign anachronism.

“Then Elijah said to the people, ‘I, even I only, am left a prophet of Yahweh, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it.” Only Elijah, of course, would have realized that bulls were appropriate as sin offerings—particularly the sin of placing man’s wisdom over Yahweh’s word. These, however, were not characterized as Levitical offerings—the Levites and priests had all been banished to Judah. But the symbol still holds true. **“And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of Yahweh, and the God who answers by fire, he is God.”** And all the people answered, **‘It is well spoken....’** I imagine the 450 priests of Ba’al didn’t appreciate having their “faith” put to the test like this. But the wily Elijah had backed them into a corner like a lion in a cage—using the clueless King Ahab as his whip. Priceless!

Knowing he had the upper hand, the prophet of Yahweh suggested that his rivals go first. **“Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, ‘Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it.’** And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, **‘O Baal, answer us!’** But there was no voice, and no one answered.” *Of course* no one answered: Ba’al was a figment of their imagination, a non-existent “deity” invented with one purpose in mind: to enslave the people. **“And they limped around the altar that they had made.’** And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, **‘Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.’**” Elijah was having entirely too much fun with this, but Ba’al, let’s face it, was good for only one thing: getting a laugh. They would have turned and attacked Elijah, of course, but the king had sanctioned this whole fiasco. Their hands were tied. **“And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention....”** I can’t help but note that if Allah were to be put to the test in a similar fashion today, he too would become a laughing stock. The world would be a very different place if all “religious disputes” were handled like this. The only thing people should be allowed to do is *ask* their “god” to act. But stonings, beheadings, and car-bombings in defense of your “god’s” questionable reputation should be universally recognized as admissions that he is either an impotent moron, or he doesn’t even exist. Although Yahweh seldom raises His hand or His voice in our world (yet), He does reserve the right to personally exercise judgment—in His own good time. Unlike Allah, He doesn’t demand (or even suggest) that His followers to kill people in defense of His honor. He doesn’t need to.

Anyway, the priests of Ba’al proved convincingly that their “god” wasn’t the least bit interested in helping them. **“Then Elijah said to all the people, ‘Come near to**

me.' And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of Yahweh that had been thrown down." The Bible lists quite a few of these altars, scattered about the Land—built by men like Abraham, Jacob, Samuel, Saul, and David. They were not intended to be venues of sacrifice, rivals to the tabernacle or temple (which would have violated the Torah) but were simply commemorative “stone piles,” reminders of times and places in which Yahweh had made His presence known. **“Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of Yahweh came, saying, ‘Israel shall be your name,’ and with the stones he built an altar in the name of Yahweh. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed.”** That is, about five bushels. **“And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, ‘Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood.’ And he said, ‘Do it a second time.’ And they did it a second time. And he said, ‘Do it a third time.’ And they did it a third time.’ And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water....”** Elijah’s point, of course, was that nothing is impossible for the true and living God. It doesn’t really matter if your wood is all wet; Yahweh is still perfectly capable of lighting your fire, if you ask in faith.

“And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, ‘O Yahweh, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word.’” That is an extremely important point, one we dare not skip over. Elijah wasn’t “running ahead of God” (as we so often do, asking Him to bless the messes gotten ourselves into with a timely miracle). There’s a difference between faith and presumption. **“Answer me, O Yahweh, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Yahweh, are God, and that You have turned their hearts back.”** The point of the whole demonstration was to turn the hearts of the people back to Yahweh. And turn them back, He did: **“Then the fire of Yahweh fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God.’”** (I Kings 18:20-39) You’ve heard of Yahshua turning water into wine. Here, it appears, Yahweh turned it into something a bit stronger: 200-proof alcohol, perhaps. Whatever it was, Yahweh hit it (I imagine) with a lightning bolt, and the whole thing *vaporized*—the bull, the wood, the rocks, the “water,” and even the dust—leaving nothing but a gaping hole in the ground. And much to the chagrin of the 450 priests of Ba’al, the people came to the proper (not to mention obvious) conclusion: Yahweh is God.

Over the years, the Israelites had forgotten—with a great deal of assistance from their government—who the God was who had been worshipped and relied upon by their forefathers. It is with great sadness that I look upon my own beloved America and realize that the very same thing has happened to us: we too have been led astray into apostasy and error by our elected leaders and the puppet

masters who pull their strings—so long now that many of us can't really remember who our founding fathers relied upon for divine providence. Between revisionist history and satanic sleight of hand, America today has become like Israel of old. By stealing our past, our leaders have denied us our future. At the time of this writing, we are apparently still in the “three-years-of-drought” phase—we're suffering one national catastrophe after another, designed to wake us up to Yahweh presence and purpose. It is as Isaiah predicted it (in a passage I believe to be prophetic of America's role in the Last Days): **“For before the harvest, when the blossom is over, and the flower becomes a ripening grape, He cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks, and the spreading branches He lops off and clears away.”** (Isaiah 18:5) Face it: we are being pruned back like a diseased grapevine, for diseased we are. America needs a “Mount Carmel” experience in the worst way, and I think Isaiah has identified what that “way” will be: *the harvest*, i.e., the rapture, the catching up of the saints into the heavens, the singular event that will “keep us out of the hour of trial that is to come upon the whole world” (as it's described in Revelation 3:10). But before the Tribulation has run its course (doing to much of the earth roughly what happened to Elijah's bull sacrifice), the formerly apostate inhabitants of the earth (some of them, anyway) will be more than ready to admit, **“Yahweh, He is God; Yahweh, He is God.”**

The point of looking into the prophets' duel on Mount Carmel was to explore the use of bulls as a scriptural metaphor. The two bulls personify the two different ways man approaches God. The priests of Ba'al demonstrated that they considered man's methods superior to God's (since Ba'al—being an invention of the human imagination—had never actually told them to do *anything*. They had simply made their religion up as they saw fit). But Elijah demonstrated the proper approach, telling Yahweh: **“I am your servant, and I have done all these things at your word.”** He was a man who allowed Yahweh to work through him. The lesson: the endeavors of man are valid *only* if performed in the context of Yahweh's sovereignty. Our “good works” can clothe us either in “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6) or “fine linen, clean and bright, the righteous acts of the saints” (Revelation 19:8), depending on our relationship with Yahweh and His Messiah.

That's not to say doing things God's way, or in His wisdom, feels natural or intuitive to the average man. It doesn't. What “feels right” to us is to pay for our own mistakes, right our own wrongs, and work for our own salvation. We naturally believe in supply and demand, cause and effect, action and reaction, crime and punishment—all of which are logical, though incomplete, indicators of how our world usually works. But where our relationship with an infinite God is concerned, His program turns our whole logical paradigm on its head. It's based on love, not obedience (though obedience is a good thing); mercy, not justice (though justice is ultimately achieved); free will, not obligation (though we are forever indebted to His grace); holiness, not inclusivity (though everyone is

welcome in Yahweh's family). Man's mind says, "Do right, or God will punish you." God's mind says, "Do right, because I have *already* taken your justly deserved punishment upon Myself." Man says, "This is too easy: there must be a catch." And God says, "*Of course* there's a catch: salvation your way is *impossible*—which explains why I had to do everything for you. But easy? You call this *easy*? It wasn't easy for Me, I assure you." It was *so* difficult, in fact, it took God Himself to pull it off.

Men are morons. It was not for nothing that Yahshua, being crucified, prayed for His tormentors, "**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**" (Luke 23:34) We *don't* know what we're doing, and we never have. This wasn't the first time God had expressed this sad fact, either. "**After Yahweh had spoken these words to Job [proving His divine sovereignty, and in the process revealing the comparative inadequacy of human logic], Yahweh said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.'**" Job hadn't really gotten everything right, but at least he'd honored God as being sovereign and just, in spite of his puzzling circumstances. Eliphaz and his friends, in contrast, had blundered in and redefined God's character according to what they thought He ought to be like. Yahweh was not amused. "**Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And My servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.'**" (Job 42:7-8) The seven rams inform us that Job was to be looked upon as the spiritual leader of their group of friends (or, more to the point, their "priest," since he was instructed to pray for them), just as Yahweh was honored as Job's "leader." But the bulls are an admission that the ideas and ideology of man must take a back seat to Yahweh's revealed word. Granted, in Job's day, He hadn't revealed all that much—there was no "Bible" to which they could refer—and yet Yahweh held Job's "miserable comforters" responsible to comprehend what He *had* shown them at this point in man's history through encounters with such men as Adam, Enoch, and Noah.

Since we have been given more light by which to see, our responsibility today is greater than that required of Eliphaz and company—something that ought to be a rather sobering thought. And I, like Job, would pray for my generation, asking Yahweh not to deal with us according to our folly. But for that prayer to be answered in the affirmative, rams and bulls—symbolic of a fundamental change of heart and mind—must be offered up. Repentance is in order. If it is not forthcoming, the anger of Yahweh will continue to burn against mankind.

Why would anyone subject himself to the anger of Yahweh if there were a way to avoid it? This issue goes deeper than merely "missing some answers" on the quiz of life. The ultimate expression of man's folly was his rejection of God's

perfect plan for our salvation—carried out, ironically enough, by fulfilling the sacrificial symbols of the Torah by crucifying the Messiah. In one prophetic look at this, the role of the bull is highlighted: **“Be not far from Me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help. Many bulls encompass Me; strong bulls of Bashan surround Me; they open wide their mouths at Me, like a ravening and roaring lion.”** (Psalm 22:11-13) The entire Psalm in an incredibly accurate picture of the crucifixion, as seen through the eyes of Christ—a thousand years before it happened. The antagonistic “bulls” referred to here symbolize what was really responsible for the murder of the Messiah: man’s refusal to see things God’s way. One could argue that the scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, and Romans who conspired to have Yahshua executed were singularly responsible for carrying out the requirements of the Torah, but their intention was quite the opposite: you don’t get extra points for making two mistakes that cancel each other out. That would be like saying that Adolph Hitler was Israel’s greatest friend because the holocaust he precipitated was ultimately what shifted world opinion (for a brief moment) in favor of a national homeland for the Jews. I’m reasonably certain that this was not his intention. In the same way, when Christ saw “many bulls encompassing Him,” it was clear that their purpose was to throw God’s plan out the window and implement their own. Like I said, men are morons.

That’s true not only individually, but also institutionally. A consistent scriptural symbol (one we’ll cover in detail in a later chapter) for the systematic implementation of the endeavors of men (as opposed to the will of God) is the city of Babylon, the nation of the Chaldeans. Notice how the prophet ties Babylon to bulls in this passage: **“How the hammer of the whole earth is cut down and broken! How Babylon has become a horror among the nations! I set a snare for you and you were taken, O Babylon, and you did not know it. You were found and caught, because you opposed Yahweh.”** As so often happens in prophetic scripture, “Babylon” here is not only the temporal city-state Jeremiah knew, but also a symbol for something larger—universal, in fact—displaying the same character traits. This is proven beyond the shadow of a doubt by John’s use of the symbol in Revelation 17 and 18. The crux of the symbol (as expressed here, anyway) is that Babylon, the “hammer of the whole earth” (indicating something well beyond one city on the Euphrates) “opposed Yahweh.” **“Yahweh has opened his armory and brought out the weapons of his wrath, for the Sovereign Yahweh of hosts has a work to do in the land of the Chaldeans. Come against her from every quarter; open her granaries; pile her up like heaps of grain, and devote her to destruction; let nothing be left of her.”** That has been true of political Babylon for several millennia now, but symbolic Babylon, the home of idolatry, is still alive and causing trouble. So Yahweh says, **“Kill all her bulls; let them go down to the slaughter. Woe to them, for their day has come, the time of their punishment. A voice! They flee and escape from the land of Babylon, to declare in Zion the vengeance of Yahweh our God, vengeance for His temple.”** (Jeremiah 50:23-28) In the

long run, Yahweh's temple is more than the building that Nebuchadnezzar's armies destroyed in 586 B.C. It is, rather, what the temple (and the tabernacle preceding it) represents: the plan of Yahweh for our redemption and restoration. The "bulls of Babylon" have been at war against God's purposes since the very beginning. It's time to see them all sacrificed as a sin offering for the whole world.

It would be a disastrous mistake to assume that all of the Bible's "judgment passages" have already been fulfilled, just because the historical city of Babylon is now nothing but an archeological dig. Do not presume that Yahweh has forgotten about the godless agenda of fallen man that it represented. Another take on the same basic warning is presented here: **"For My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens. Behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction."** Edom is the land of Esau—the one man in scripture who (symbolically at least) God said He *hated*. Esau, you'll recall, "despised his birthright," which, in the end, represented Yahweh's grace. **"Yahweh has a sword; it is sated with blood. It is gorged with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For Yahweh has a sacrifice in Bozrah, a great slaughter in the land of Edom. Wild oxen [not to be confused with the domestic oxen we'll explore in the next section] shall fall with them, and young steers with the mighty bulls. Their land shall drink its fill of blood, and their soil shall be gorged with fat. For Yahweh has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion."** (Isaiah 34:5-8) The reference to Bozrah, an Edomite city, is paralleled in Isaiah 63:1-6 (not to mention Jeremiah 49), where the returning Messiah is seen (apparently at the very end of the Tribulation, at the "battle" of Armageddon) "treading out the winepress of the wrath of God alone." Who is in line for Yahweh's vengeance? The *bulls* (among others)—those who revel in their own strength, listen to their own counsel, and despise the grace of God. The most impressive endeavors of mankind will prove pitifully inadequate when marshaled against the sword of Yahweh, wielded in righteous anger.

Make no mistake: if we don't sacrifice the "bull" of our lives as a sin offering, God will.

OX

❧ 3.2.5 ❧

Service

The symbolic distinction between a “bull” and an “ox” isn’t the species, but the service it provides. Both are cattle, bovines, but a bull is an uncastrated male, hence its place in the symbolic lexicon as something that is virile, powerful, and a bit dangerous, or at least unpredictable—an apt metaphor for the endeavors of man. An ox is the same kind of animal, but one that has been castrated before sexual maturity, making him more docile, predictable, and cooperative, thus suitable as a draft animal.

In the Hebrew, the contrast is even more marked, for the word usually translated “ox” can mean a bovine of either gender. The *Dictionary of Biblical Languages* defines *sowr* as: “Cattle, i.e. male or female of the bovine species, as a class or category of animal; a bull, i.e., a fully-grown male bovine—better translated “ox” or “steer” if castrated [note: a steer differs from an ox in *why* it has been castrated—it is raised for its beef, not its utility]; a cow: i.e., fully-grown female bovine able to bear young; a calf; young male bovine.” I suppose we shouldn’t be too surprised to find several words used to describe essentially the same thing in Hebrew, since the language was used by a largely agrarian society. We’ve already encountered *baqar* as a rather generic word for cattle or their herds. *Sowr* overlaps *baqar* a bit, but it seems to place the emphasis on the individual animal, not so much the herd or the species.

The generic term *sowr* is used occasionally to describe sacrificial animals in the Torah, but it is clear that oxen *per se* (that is, cattle that had been castrated to make them more compliant) were not suitable for Levitical offerings. **“Any animal that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut you shall not offer to Yahweh.... Since there is a blemish in them, because of their mutilation, they will not be accepted for you.”** (Leviticus 22:24-25) The symbolic point, of course, is that Yahshua would not have been a suitable sacrifice if His life had been “blemished” with sin or compromise. In order to be our propitiation, He had to be a perfect specimen of humanity, with all the promise and peril that implies. But in other ways, the *sowr* would indeed be pressed into service as a metaphor for the Messiah—in His role as the willing servant of God and man.

One of these Messianic metaphors is the “firstborn offering,” the *bekor*. This was an extension of the original Passover sacrifice, in which the blood of the Passover lamb identified those who were under Yahweh’s protection—the firstborn of the families whose homes were marked with the blood. Those who had been indemnified by the blood were now, in a very real sense, Yahweh’s

property: their lives had been bought with a price, the blood of an innocent animal. So He told the Israelites, **“All that open the womb are mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep.”** (Exodus 34:19) The firstborn son, saved through the sacrifice of the lamb, was a picture of Yahweh’s own “firstborn,” Yahshua, who would be slain to save men from the consequences of their own transgressions, just as the Passover lamb’s blood was shed to identify those who were under God’s protection. The picture couldn’t have been any clearer if God Himself had painted the blood on the doorway’s upright wooden post and its crosspiece with His own two hands. Actually, that’s precisely what He did—on Calvary’s cross.

Moses later provided more detail concerning the firstborn offering: **“All the firstborn males that are born of your herd and flock you shall dedicate to Yahweh your God. You shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd [*sowr*—cattle], nor shear the firstborn of your flock. You shall eat it, you and your household, before Yahweh your God year by year at the place that Yahweh will choose. But if it has any blemish, if it is lame or blind or has any serious blemish whatever, you shall not sacrifice it to Yahweh your God.”**

(Deuteronomy 15:19-21) Yahweh is telling us something quite profound here. There is more than one way to provide “service.” Clean animals can be eaten, of course, oxen can also pull a plow or thresh out the grain, and sheep can provide wool. But by directing us to kill and eat the firstborn of the herd—before it has performed any conventional tasks—Yahweh is prophetically defining the *real* service His Messiah would provide: his death would provide us with life. Nothing else mattered. His teaching, His healing, His miracles—as wonderful as these things are, none of it would have helped us—not really. If Yahshua had *not* gone to the cross for us, but instead had lived on until this very day, teaching God’s word in our synagogues and churches, providing a shining example of how to live our lives, emptying out our hospitals, and feeding the hungry multitudes, He would have utterly failed in His real mission: as enlightened and contented as we might feel, we would still be bearing our sins.

So as an “ox,” Yahshua (God’s “firstborn”) came to render but one kind of service to us: sustenance. We are (as He so provocatively put it in John 6:53-54) to “eat His flesh and drink His blood.” That is, we are to assimilate the life that He personifies, making ourselves alive in the process. And considering the huge size of the typical ox, I’d say Yahshua’s remark about coming that we might have *abundant* life is germane. Spiritually, He’s not just a snack, an appetizer, an *hors d’oeuvre*. He’s the ultimate seven-course meal, and once we’ve tasted of His goodness, we’ll never be hungry again.

Sometimes, of course, a cow is just a cow—spoken of with no particular symbolic connotation. Often in such cases, the ox is listed along with other animals—donkeys and sheep—as examples of personal property protected by Torah law. But even here, when the ox is singled out, it's because it's functional nature is hinting at its symbolic significance. One example: **"If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep."** (Exodus 22:1) Why the difference in what the thief must pay back? It's because although both sheep and oxen are valuable resources, an ox is also a tool, an implement of industry—a man's "tractor," so to speak. If you steal an ox, you have stolen not only the potential barbecue and the leather made from its hide, but the service it could have rendered as well—its labor. Without his ox, a man would find it far more difficult to grow and process field crops like wheat and barley for his family's bread. In other words, the service the ox provides represents a significant component of its value.

As if to make the point for me, the record states, **"On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle and had anointed and consecrated it with all its furnishings and had anointed and consecrated the altar with all its utensils, the chiefs of Israel, heads of their fathers' houses, who were the chiefs of the tribes, who were over those who were listed, approached and brought their offerings before Yahweh, six wagons and twelve oxen, a wagon for every two of the chiefs, and for each one an ox."** The tabernacle and its furnishings were designed to be portable; it had to be moved from time to time at the leading of Yahweh's Shekinah. That's not to say it was an easy task: there were literally tons of wood, metal, leather, and fabric to be packed up and transported whenever the pillar of smoke and flame indicated it was time to move on. Yes, the tribe of Levi numbered 22,000 men, but moving the tabernacle was still a physically demanding endeavor. So most of it was to be transported on these wagons, pulled by oxen. (The exceptions were the holiest items, like the ark of the covenant, the golden lampstand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense, which were to be carried on the shoulders of the Levites of the clan of Kohath—see Leviticus 4.) **"They brought them before the tabernacle. Then Yahweh said to Moses, 'Accept these from them, that they may be used in the service of the tent of meeting, and give them to the Levites, to each man according to his service.' So Moses took the wagons and the oxen and gave them to the Levites."** (Numbers 7:1-6) It's worth noting that Moses and Aaron were of the clan of Kohath. Though these Levites were privileged to carry the most sacred parts of the tabernacle, it was no sinecure: they were given no wagons or oxen to help bear the load. The lesson: with increased honor comes increased labor; with more responsibility comes greater toil. Leadership roles in the kingdom of God are positions of sacrifice and service, not wealth and privilege.

Like our trucks and tractors today, oxen for the Hebrews required upkeep and maintenance. You had to feed them. They made life on a larger scale possible, but

there was a trade-off, as Solomon points out: **“Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.”** (Proverbs 14:4) This (to me) points out the fundamental dichotomy between the monastic mindset (in which poverty for poverty’s sake is somehow perceived as honoring to God) and Christ’s statement that **“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”** (John 10:10) Economic self-flagellation done to impress God (or worse, men) can be just as idolatrous as the love of money. What we have (or don’t have) in this life should be seen as a gift of God, to be used appropriately and honestly. If we find ourselves with “no oxen,” we should rejoice that we subsequently have no encumbrances to distract us—a “clean manger”; but if the “strength of the ox” has resulted in “abundant crops,” then we should rejoice instead that we have something to share with those who are less fortunate. The “ox” though, whatever form he takes, will work wherever God has placed him, able and willing to provide his own quiet service.

Throughout scripture there is an undercurrent of purpose: because Yahweh loved us, we are to love our fellow man in response—demonstrating that love through our service and generosity. This (with the added component of strength or ability) is the very picture the ox presents. But as I said, oxen require maintenance if you want them to continue functioning at their peak—you’ve got to feed them, water them, and let them rest from their labors. So we should not be surprised to find that Yahweh made it mandatory in the Torah to take care of one’s beasts of burden: **“You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.”** (Deuteronomy 25:4) Later, Paul made the obvious connection between the Torah precept and the day-to-day operation of the Kingdom of God: **“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’”** (I Timothy 5:17-18)

Balance and thoughtfulness are required here. Note that the ox isn’t to be given the deed to the farm, nor be fed the entire wheat harvest. The bane of Christendom (like every other religion in the world) is clerics who grow fat at the expense of the people they “serve.” Yahshua decried the practice of the scribes and Pharisees who got rich by “devouring widows’ houses.” Priests and preachers who don’t actually “labor” for their wages—never mind popes and cardinals (and whatever you’d call their non-Catholic counterparts) who are more politicians than servants of God or man—should hang their heads in shame. And yet, Yahweh has ordained that it is right and proper for His servants to receive remuneration for their labors in His fields—a living wage, commensurate with what any hard-working person might earn.

But (as any self-respecting ox knows) it’s not really *about* the wages. The ox doesn’t plow the field in order to get at what’s in the manger at the end of the day;

rather, he does it because *that's the job*—it's what he's supposed to be doing, taking cues from his owner, pulling the plow in a straight line. The salient admonition from Yahshua is, **"Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."** (Matthew 6:31-34) If we serve in love, Yahweh will be faithful in making sure there's food and drink and a roof over our heads. Or at least, that's always been my experience. But I've only been serving Him for *sixty years* now. Maybe things will change tomorrow. Somehow, though, I doubt it.

Yahweh knows our limits. Having designed us, He knows we're not perpetual motion machines—we need to recharge our batteries (so to speak) every so often. So He provided for even this, in the Law of the Sabbath: **"Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed."** (Exodus 23:12) *Everybody* is to rest on the Sabbath. We're told that even God "rested" from His labors on the seventh day (see Genesis 2:2-3). That's not because He got tired, of course, but because He wished to introduce a universal symbol: the Sabbath rest is a picture of our ultimate need to rest in Him. **"Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as Yahweh your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you...."** There's nothing wrong with work or service, you understand. It is what people are supposed to do. It's what the "ox" symbol is all about. It's worth noting that Adam, even before his fall into sin, had a job to do. (It's the sin of man that turned work into drudgery.) But God has made it abundantly clear that *no one*—rich or poor, male or female, young or old, clean or unclean (the symbolic distinction between oxen and donkeys), master or slave, or Jew or gentile—can attain salvation or forgiveness by working for it. In the end, we must rest in Yahweh's provision.

So He gives Moses' original audience a pointed reminder of how His provision works, in terms they couldn't miss: **"You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore Yahweh your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."** (Deuteronomy 5:12-15) The Israelites had been helpless to bring about their own release from slavery, and they knew it. God had had to provide it for them; they had only to accept it—and to walk out of Egypt free men. And in the process, they learned the difference between service and servitude. Like abused oxen, they had been used by their Egyptian overlords as beasts of burden.

But now that Yahweh had freed them from all that, the last thing He wanted them to do was voluntarily return to a life of servitude and slavery—this time under cruel taskmasters of their own imagination or manufacture. No, the paradigm from this point forward was to be “Work while you can in gratitude to God and joyful service to your fellow man, for the Sabbath is coming when no man can work.”

Although they doubtless didn't understand it at the time, this was all a picture of mankind's release from his bondage to sin. Once freed, our only obligation became one of love for the God who had purchased our freedom. Gratitude and thanksgiving are our natural and proper response, shown to Him through our love for other people (see I John 4:7-8, etc.). But God's word is peppered from one end to the other with indications (and outright prophecies) that our allotted time of service in this world is limited: **“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God.”** If II Peter 3:8 and Psalm 90:4 mean what they say (and aren't merely metaphorical), then mankind's opportunity to respond to Yahweh's love in this world will be limited to a six thousand year period—from the fall of Adam until the beginning of the earthly reign of King Yahshua. The “Sabbath,” the last of man's seven millennia, is prophetic of Christ's thousand-year reign, when our opportunities for this sort of service will have passed us by. That might sound academic, but check your calendar: any way you calculate it, our six thousand year window of opportunity is almost closed. If working for God's glory is on our personal agenda, we'd best get busy.

The world, of course, doesn't really want us to work on behalf of the kingdom of God. Our service is resented (whether overtly or covertly) because it honors a God the world doesn't recognize or revere. That service makes it harder for the world to “keep up with the Jones's” in the self-righteousness department. And it (in their eyes, at least) “blows the bell curve” in the quiz of life: *one* legendary “Mother Teresa” they can live with, but a whole community full of goodie-two-shoes Christians reflecting the love of their Savior through their consistent, selfless service is just too much to stomach.

A revealing insight into how God feels about this can be gleaned from Jacob's deathbed “blessing” of his twelve sons. Two of them had, years before, avenged their sister's honor with the edge of the sword. The Hivite prince Shechem had raped their sister Dinah, so through subterfuge, Simeon and Levi slew the prince, plus his father and all the males of their city, plundering the populace and looting their livestock. (The story is found in Genesis 34). When he heard about it, Jacob was mortified—not because justice had been done upon Shechem, but because innocents had been destroyed along with the guilty. *That* song that has never been in Yahweh's repertoire. So Jacob said, **“Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined**

to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel.” (Genesis 49:5-7)

Considering all the murder and mayhem the two brothers had inflicted, it may seem strange for Jacob to mention and condemn the comparatively insignificant fact that they had “hamstrung oxen.” But in light of the scriptural symbolism that’s emerging about oxen, perhaps we are being taught a lesson (beyond that of letting the punishment fit the crime). Oxen signify service. To willfully cut off the capability or possibility of future service in a fit of anger, wrath, and unrestrained malice is just plain *wrong*: it’s not only counterproductive, shortsighted, and mean spirited; it is a pretty clear picture of cutting off opportunities for repentance. In my experience, some of the most effective witnesses for the grace of God are people who have sinned greatly in the past, only to find and receive Christ’s love and mercy afterward. These folks (unlike lifelong believers) have a very clear picture in mind of what—and how much—they have been forgiven. I’m not saying this is the preferred path, of course, but it should be self evident that if their punishment had grossly outweighed their crimes, God’s mercy might have been rendered moot, as far as their subsequent earthly testimony was concerned. Repentance leading to service in love would have been tragically precluded: the oxen would have been “hamstrung.” It makes no sense to execute a man for J-walking, even though it *is* against the law; it’s far more logical to assign him to an afternoon’s community service as a school crossing guard. Don’t cripple the ox.

Speaking of “crime and punishment,” we should look into Yahweh’s civil liability law as it applies to (or rather, is revealed by) oxen. The ox is valuable as a draft animal for precisely the same reason it’s inherently dangerous: its strength. A two thousand pound animal doesn’t need a bad attitude to kill you, and it wouldn’t have to try very hard to get the job done. All it really needs is a moment of carelessness. The first time it happens, however, it’s impossible to tell whether the ox merely had an innocent accident or a momentary lapse in its normal docile, compliant nature. So Yahweh issued these wise instructions: **“When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable....”** First, the ox’s owner isn’t to be held accountable for an eventuality he couldn’t possibly have foreseen. Second, we aren’t to take any chances. Not knowing what caused the ox to gore its victim, we are to err on the side of caution: the animal is to be killed. Third, no one is to benefit or profit from this tragedy: the ox is not to be used for meat. This is the opposite of the “firstborn offering” scenario we saw above. The difference is that Gods “firstborn” (Yahshua) was entirely innocent, while this out-of-control beast is guilty of manslaughter. Fourth, note the method of the ox’s execution: he is to be stoned to death. The point of stoning (as opposed to some other form of execution) is that the whole community is to participate in its death. As the

congregation has been diminished by the loss of the victim, the ox must suffer retribution at the hands of the congregation. In other words, this isn't a legal matter to be settled between the victim's family and the ox's owner; it's a moral issue to be settled between the ox and the community it has harmed.

Remember, the ox is a symbol for service. If what the "ox" does is harmful (despite his intentions), the whole point of being an ox has been lost. In order to be of service, the ox must perform as its owner directs. Oxen don't play chess: they aren't known for their cleverness or their ability to calculate the consequences of their actions. When they act unilaterally, things tend to get broken. In this context, we believers are the "oxen," operating (ideally) under the direct supervision of Yahweh, as the Messiah, through the Holy Spirit. But what happens when the Church doesn't listen to its owner and tries to figure things out on its own. The field doesn't get plowed; the grain doesn't get threshed; the wagon doesn't get pulled. Rather, fences are trampled, barn falls down, and men and women get gored to death. One historical example among many: in the late twelfth century a movement called the Waldensians gained traction among European Christians. It stressed a literal interpretation of the Bible, a life of simplicity, and a rejection of the top-heavy (and decidedly unbiblical) ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics, feeling threatened by such outrageous "heresies," hunted down and killed Waldensians by the tens of thousands. It is my belief that these Catholics (many of them) genuinely thought they were serving God by murdering these simple Christians. But these would-be "oxen" weren't taking directions from their owner/master—Yahshua. Rather, they were just following their own brutish instincts. So, as the Torah points out, God wasn't to blame for the destructive actions of the Church—even if it was *His* Church. Yahweh does not physically compel *anyone* to obey His commandments. No, this out of control "ox," the Roman Catholic hate machine known as the Inquisition, needed to be taken out and stoned by the whole community.

The Torah's lesson plan continues. What if the ox has shown aggressive tendencies in the past—even if it hasn't actually killed anyone yet? **"But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death."** If the owner of the ox could have taken measures to prevent the tragedy—and didn't bother—he is deemed criminally negligent, and subject to the same death-by-stoning penalty as the animal. It is as if the ox was like a land mine the owner had planted: it was only a matter of time before it went off and somebody got hurt. Of course, in the interest of being fair, the Torah considers an intermediate scenario. What if (for instance) the ox was known to be a bit frisky, so the owner had honestly tried to keep him confined—and he *still* got out and killed someone? In that case, the life of the owner could be ransomed with a stiff

fine, presumably paid to the family of the victim. **“If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him. If it gores a man’s son or daughter [*his own*, is the implication in the Hebrew], he shall be dealt with according to this same rule.”**

One more contingency deserves our attention: what if the victim were a slave? The fate of the errant ox is still the same, but slave’s *owner* is to be compensated. **“If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.”** (Exodus 21:28-32) I realize this flies in the face of our American sense of freedom and equality. But God is making a symbolic point. He’s not condoning the institution of slavery, but He *is* pointing out that it is a fact of life. Whether we realize it or not, we are all slaves of whatever or whomever we serve. If you are Yahweh’s, **“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price,”** (I Corinthians 6:19-20)—and an incredibly steep price at that. But the same is true if we serve our sin: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the pride of life. If we serve the world, it “owns” us—it is our master, and we are its slaves.

That “thirty shekels of silver” reference, of course, sounds very familiar to anyone conversant with the crucifixion narrative: it is the price Judas Iscariot was paid for betraying Yahshua—it was the price of a slave (establishing the concept that Christ was the servant of mankind). Is this precept a prophecy, then? Let’s see. Who shelled out the thirty pieces of silver—defining *them* as the irresponsible “owner” of the killer ox? It was the chief priests—the religious elite of Israel. The ox itself—who should have been kept under control but who ended up goring the innocent One to death—was Rome: that big, powerful, supposedly benign political entity that just couldn’t restrain itself from throwing its weight around. The innocent “slave,” as we’ve established, was Yahshua the Messiah.

The shocking epiphany here is identity of the slave’s “master.” It was Judas Iscariot who was paid the thirty silver shekels. *Judas?* Yes—along with all of the rest of us who are given the opportunity to learn for ourselves who Yahshua is. We don’t “own” God, of course. But in this context, the “slave master” is the one who gets to call the shots, to make his own decisions, to exercise his free will—at least insofar as the “slave” is concerned. In other words, it is up to us to choose what we wish to do with the Christ. We aren’t *forced* to regard the Messiah one way or the other. Judas, wielding his free will like a three-year-old with his father’s loaded pistol, decided to turn Him over to the guys keeping the uncontrollable ox in the flimsy pen. The other disciples merely trembled in fear of the Roman ox—until they received the Spirit of boldness and began preaching the truth in the ox’s backyard. But this is where the earlier admonition comes into play: **“If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner**

also shall be put to death.” The events of Passover, 33 AD, proved that the Roman ox couldn’t be trusted. But the chief priests of Israel stubbornly maintained their relationship with the unruly beast, because it pulled so much weight for them. After Yahshua had raised Lazarus from the dead, **“the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’”** (John 11:47-48) So much for “best-laid plans.” Less than one generation after they had turned their “ox” loose on God’s Messiah, this very thing happened: in 70 AD the Romans turned on the chief priests and Pharisees, goring *them* by “taking away their place and their nation.” And although it took a few centuries to bring the beast down, the Roman ox eventually collapsed under the weight of internal corruption and barbarian pressure. Just as the Torah had prescribed.

The ox probably wouldn’t seem to be a particularly compelling scriptural symbol, except for one thing. It is used—in both the Old Testament and the New—as a direct visionary representation of God’s nature. In both places (one in Ezekiel 1 and the other in Revelation 4) the prophet was being shown that Yahweh manifests Himself to men (as the Messiah) through four different character profiles—symbolized by the man, the ox, the lion, and the eagle—apparently shifting in predominance according to where (or should I say, *when*) mankind is in the progression of God’s plan for our redemption. The first two are now historical reality, and the last two are still within the realm of yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy. Although both visions were clearly meant to convey information about God to the prophet, in neither case is it suggested that these symbols are all there is to Yahweh’s character. In John’s vision, in fact, the man-ox-lion-eagle image is seen standing *in the presence* of God (pictured as One seated on a throne), but *also* separate from the Lamb (see Revelation 5:6). In other words, God, though “One,” is presenting Himself through several distinct symbols, all shown together in the same vision. Each divine attribute is to be considered separately. And note further that both visions were given to prophets living in exile, as if to say, “People need to understand the complex nature of God more than ever when they’re facing tribulation.”

If you’ll recall, I covered both of these passages back in Volume I, Chapter 2 (The Nature of God: Visionary Manifestations—God as Apparition). It is not my purpose here to plow over old ground, but to focus on the ox as a symbol describing one of the ways Yahweh manifests His presence among us. First, Ezekiel describes what he saw: **“As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the**

north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures [Hebrew *chayah*—living *beings*, not “creatures”]. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings....” God is not telling us what He looks like. Rather, He’s revealing the character or nature of the One through whom He has elected to interact directly with man. Basically, His chosen form is that of a human being—like us. I see this as an amazing expression of empathy: His primary purpose is not to terrify or intimidate us, awe us into submission, or impress us with His glory. If He had wanted to do those things, He could just as easily have presented Himself as a glowing seven-ton tarantula. Instead, He wanted to put us at ease, to give us something (*someone*) familiar and non-threatening in form, with whom we could relate—even though God is not actually a man. Bear in mind, of course, that these four living beings emanated from something that *was* awesome and unapproachable, something decidedly non-anthropomorphic. Yahweh doesn’t really look like *that*, either, but Ezekiel needed to witness the process of God’s condescension on our behalf—His reaching out to us in love and tenderness.

It’s a matter of conjecture, of course, as to why the form of a man was chosen. We have something of a chicken or egg dilemma here: since “God made man in His own image and likeness” (Genesis 1:26), was He merely reverting back to His true form, or was it that mortal man was “designed” to be the perfect physical receptacle for hosting an eternal but ephemeral Spirit? I don’t know, and I don’t suppose it matters. What *does* matter is that God purposed to walk among us *as a man*, sacrificing Himself in flesh in order to reconcile our race to Himself. So here in Ezekiel’s vision, the living creatures’ form was basically anthropomorphic. Thus we read, **“Their legs were straight.”** That is, they looked like human legs, as opposed to animals’ legs and feet, which are invariably crooked. The living beings walked upright before God (in every conceivable way). But there were differences, too, all of which were symbolic, designed to convey information beyond the fact that God would appear as a man: **“And the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf’s foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze.”** The “calf” here is our old friend *egel*, the bull-calf, an adolescent, weaned, nearly-mature male bovine—who at this stage of his life has the potential of becoming either a “bull” (indicative of the endeavors of man) or an ox (symbolic of service). The “calf” is thus standing at a crossroads: a choice must be made to determine which potential character trait will define him. The “burnished bronze” of the hooves reinforce this idea: bronze is symbolic of judgment, which in scripture doesn’t so much mean condemnation as it does decision, choice, the selection of one thing over another one. As we can see in retrospect, the man-calf, Yahshua, became an ox, not a bull—serving God and man in His life and through His death, opting against the tempting path of human effort and logic.

Yahweh's Messiah, having manifested Himself as a man walking in the path of service, will subsequently reveal a series of other "faces," one of which is the ox, as Ezekiel's vision now demonstrates: **"Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus: their wings touched one another. Each one of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces...."** All four living beings had the same four faces, each explaining a different facet of the nature of the Messiah, the anointed Man. The ox speaks of His service (to God, on behalf of man); the lion His authority; and the eagle (as lord of the heavens) His deity.

The living beings in Ezekiel's vision didn't turn from side to side in order to emphasize one "face" or another at any given time. Rather, all four of them moved as a unit, and the *direction* it moved put one face at a time in the position of prominence. **"And their wings were spread out above. Each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies. And each went straight forward. Wherever the spirit would go, they went, without turning as they went."** I think what's being revealed here is that the Messiah doesn't change or morph from one character to another as He fulfills His destiny. As James puts it (in 1:17), with the Father of lights, "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (or "shadow of turning" in some translations). The Messiah is *always* all four things—human, servant, king, and God, even though one of the four attributes is being accentuated at any given time during our walk through history. Even the apparent opposites—servant vs. sovereign or man vs. Maker—are always equal parts of the overall picture. **"As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning. And the living creatures darted to and fro, like the appearance of a flash of lightning."** (Ezekiel 1:4-14) Lest we be tempted to reduce the Messiah to a series of mental metaphors, Ezekiel reminds us (again) that what he saw was in reality completely foreign to our normal earthly human experience. Though words no doubt failed him (as they would us), we must nevertheless try to appreciate the awe the prophet must have felt: he had been given a glimpse of the very glory of God.

Ezekiel later saw a vision with similar imagery. This time, however, the ox (the servant) is replaced with a cherub. **"And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle."** (Ezekiel 10:14) The point of the symbol has, however, remained absolutely constant. Cherubs (i.e. cherubim) are a class of powerful angelic beings, usually depicted with wings, who serve God—and, at His direction, man as well. So in that respect, cherubim are like oxen.

John had a similar vision during his stay in exile on the Island of Patmos. Thankfully, his was a bit simpler: **“After this [the messages to the seven individual churches of Asia Minor] I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here [an invitation that sounds a lot like the rapture—the fulfillment of the Feast of Trumpets], and I will show you what must take place after this.”** If the invitation does indeed refer to the rapture, then “this” refers to the church age, whose historical course was plotted through the seven letters of Revelation 2 & 3. This in turn would mean that what followed is a description of the Messiah as He will be revealed *after* the Christians have been caught up from the earth. **“At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal....”** We are in the very throne room of Yahweh Almighty (which explains why John had to be put “into the spirit” in order to see it). Note that the twenty-four elders (representing the redeemed of the previous ages, both Israel and the ekklesia) are present with God in heaven—another indication that this scene is subsequent to the rapture. But since the Messiah has yet to be revealed in the totality of His character, it is clear that the Tribulation and Millennium are still future as this scene unfolds. This is thus one of many strong scriptural evidences for a pre-Tribulation rapture.

“And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures [as in Ezekiel, “beings” is a much better translation—these are not *created* entities, but are manifestations of Yahweh’s nature], full of eyes in front and behind: the first living [being] like a lion, the second living [being] like an ox, the third living [being] with the face of a man, and the fourth living [being] like an eagle in flight....” This time, the living ones are seen separately, identified by their individual characteristics: authority, service, humanity (that is, empathy with mankind), and finally deity. And this time, the *order* is apparently significant: the very first thing we see is Christ in His post-rapture persona as King of kings and Lord of lords—something we didn’t get to experience (except through the eyes of faith) during His first advent. But at this point in the story, Yahweh’s heavenly glory (the eagle) isn’t yet the all-consuming paradigm. The second character profile is still that of the lowly ox. The Messiah is still in “service” mode, for there are yet mortals living upon the earth at this point, and there will be for another thousand years. They too need salvation and guidance. Thus the humanity of the Servant-King is stressed next. Only then is the deity of the Messiah revealed as His primary characteristic, and

this facet of His nature will dominate the rest of eternity. I have no idea if the people who assembled the New Testament canon understood any of this, but I find it fascinating that the *order* of the Gospels reflects precisely what we see here in John's vision: Matthew presents Christ as King; Mark stresses His service; Luke highlights Yahshua's humanity; and John reveals the deity of our Savior.

John's vision continues: **"And the four living [beings], each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"** This is the second time God's "vision" is emphasized: the living beings have eyes "in front and behind," "around and within"—He sees and comprehends *everything*. **"And whenever the living [beings] give glory and honor and thanks to Him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who is seated on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 'Worthy are You, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they existed and were created.'" (Revelation 4)**

It's easy enough for us redeemed mortals to see "casting our crowns" before God in worship and adoration. But to someone raised (as I was) on the idea that God is a trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—this whole scene with the four living beings is impossible to comprehend. Yes, "God the Father" seems to be the one seated upon the emerald-rainbow-wreathed heavenly throne. And "God the Son" shows up on cue a few verses later as a **"Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."** (Revelation 5:6) But the four living beings clearly display the attributes of the Messiah—a.k.a. the Lamb. By no stretch of logic or desire can they be construed as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and they can't be angels, either. And yet, here they are, surrounding the throne, giving glory, honor, and thanks to Yahweh. It is only when we come to terms with the truth that Yahweh our God is *One*, but that He manifests Himself in all sorts of diminished forms in order to save, instruct, and commune with you and me, that any of this makes sense. There is no "box" big enough to contain the true and living God. We should really stop trying to shoehorn Yahweh into our neat little theological theories. He won't fit.

We Christians rightly endeavor to be "Christ-like." But of these four Messianic characteristics revealed by the four "living beings" of both Ezekiel's and John's visions, only one—the ox—is a proper object for our emulation. Yes, it was astonishing for God to have humbled Himself by taking upon Himself the form of a man, but for us, it's no big deal—this is how we were created, though we have managed to screw up Yahweh's original design. And although we are destined to reign (as it says in Revelation 1:6) as "kings and priests" under the auspices of Yahshua, the exercise of royal authority over men is clearly the

prerogative of the Messiah alone, as He informed us after His resurrection: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.”** (Matthew 28:18) (Actually, the word translated “kings” here (the Greek *basileia*) could just as legitimately be rendered “kingdom,” i.e., the territory or populace subject to the monarch’s rule—“a kingdom of priests.”) And deity? Mormon theology notwithstanding, that’s the last thing Yahweh would have wanted us to aspire to. Remember, in Isaiah 14, Lucifer—Satan—said, **“I will make myself like the Most High.”** But the prophet reported what would really happen: **“But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.”**

That leaves only the ox as an attribute of Christ that we should be striving to duplicate. As Yahshua instructed His disciples, **“The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”** (Luke 22:25-27) Later, the Master performed a very un-masterly task: He washed His disciples’ feet—normally the job of a lowly bondservant in that culture. And He asked them, **“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”** (John 13:12-15) Basically, He was saying, “Don’t consider it ‘beneath you’ to perform the most menial of tasks on behalf of your fellow man in My name. It is in My nature to function as an ox, rendering quiet service to mankind—doing for them what they are not able to do for themselves. Go, and do likewise.”

This may sound (to the uninformed) as if work, service, and effort are the price of salvation. I can assure you: thousands of scriptures conspire to declare that this is not the case. Quite the opposite, in fact. That being said, Yahweh’s “week” is comprised of six days of *work*, followed by one day of rest. In other words, work is a fact of life, at least for now. Confucius once said, “Do something you love, and you’ll never ‘work’ a day in your life.” Having been on both sides of that coin, I can vouch for the basic veracity of the sentiment. (Those six months I spent as an insurance salesman in my youth went by far more slowly than my thirty years as a designer.) Although work doesn’t have to be drudgery, it sometimes is—laborious, difficult, unfulfilling, underappreciated, and poorly remunerated. What we wouldn’t give, sometimes, for somebody to work alongside us, mentoring, assisting, encouraging, and at the end of the day, congratulating us for a job well done. Actually, Yahshua is the very person we’ve been hoping to find.

Comparing Himself (once again) to an ox yoked to God's plow, He invites us to join Him: **"Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."** (Matthew 11:28-30) To fully appreciate this invitation, you have to picture a typical yoke of Yahshua's day. It was built for *two* animals, walking side by side. To train a neophyte ox, it would be yoked together with an older, experienced ox, one who had seen his share of barley fields and knew how to get the job done. The "mentor" ox would, by example, teach the "student" all about pace, straight furrows, and following the subtle instructions of the plowman. Christ is saying that *He* is this "mentor ox." (I suppose you could also say that the "Plowman" is Yahweh, but that role is not really being discussed here.) Not only does Yahshua know the ropes, but He outweighs us by a ton, so our distractions, misguided inclinations, and petty rebellions are going to be countered with irresistible momentum designed to keep us in line, moving at the right pace and in the right direction—if we're yoked together with Him. If we fight against Him, we'll end up frustrated, exhausted, and bruised, though the field will still get plowed. We're being trained to focus on the task at hand.

However, this is the only farm in the world in which the young ox has a choice of who (if anyone) he wants to be yoked with. Being yoked with Christ is strictly voluntary, though if you want to serve, it's the only game in town. Dragging a plow around the field of life without reference to the Plowman's (Yahweh's) intentions or design will do more harm than good. But doing things God's way—yoked together with the Messiah—is actually easier than it looks, because He is pulling most of the weight.

As I said, the typical yoke is made for two oxen. Therefore, the one with whom we choose to be yoked is of critical importance. Paul admonished us, **"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?"** It's one thing to yoke two oxen together (one mature, wise, and strong, the other young and untrained). It's something else entirely to yoke an ox with a garden slug, a tyrannosaurus rex, or a dead tree. If you do, that field will never get plowed. **"For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will make My dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says Yahweh, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, says Yahweh Almighty.'" (II Corinthians 6:14-18, quoting Isaiah 52:11 and Jeremiah 31:1, 9)** The whole point of being "equally yoked," of God's people working side by side with God (rather than with God's enemies) is the issue of holiness. We are to be separate, set apart *from* the world

and set apart *for* Yahweh's use and pleasure. I am constantly flabbergasted that such a large segment of the "church" doesn't seem to understand this. Yes, we *should* reach out in love to atheists, homosexuals, Communists, Muslims, and serial jaywalkers. But that doesn't mean we are to embrace their attitudes and idolatries—yoking ourselves to someone other than Christ. It is not a loving act to make someone feel good about committing suicide. If a man is sinking in quicksand, it won't help to jump into the pit with him out of a misguided sense of empathy. We are to remain separate—and throw him a lifeline.

Paul (as usual) was building upon a principle laid down in the Torah. **"You shall not sow your vineyard with different kinds of seed, lest the yield of the seed which you have sown and the fruit of your vineyard be defiled. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. You shall not wear a garment of different sorts, such as wool and linen mixed together."** (Deuteronomy 22:9-11) None of these things are intrinsically "evil." The prohibitions are strictly symbolic: by following Yahweh's instructions here, Israel would have been demonstrating what it means to be holy. In the case of being "unequally yoked," note that there's nothing wrong (in the eyes of the precept) with plowing with a couple of donkeys. In practical terms, this means that just as good works done in service to God and man in Yahweh's name and in His strength (reflecting the "clean" status of the ox) are our proper due as believers, "good works" done by *lost people* (donkeys are ceremonially unclean animals) in the power of the flesh are not to be discouraged or forbidden. However, the two things are separate, and are to remain distinct. God won't take credit for man's pitiful efforts, and the endeavors of man must not be elevated to parity with the works of God (which is the underlying connotation of the Third Commandment, if you think about it).

Another permutation of this principle was played out in Acts 16. A demon-possessed slave girl was following Paul and Silas around Philippi, announcing, **"These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."** (Acts 16:17) Although this was by all accounts true, Paul was irked, disturbed, troubled, and greatly annoyed (Greek: *diaponeomai*) at her. Why? Because this young fortune teller was getting her information from the demon who inhabited and controlled her, not from her own experience, and certainly not from God. This illustrates what it means for an ox and a donkey to be unequally yoked: even though the clean and the unclean may seem to be plowing the same furrow together, their true agendas are actually polar opposites. Yahweh does not need, nor does He want, a testimonial from Satan, even if the devil sometimes shows up looking like an angel of light. Remember, counterfeit cash won't fool anybody if it doesn't look a lot like the real thing. But fake money isn't an *homage*, it's a destructive and deceptive fraud that diminishes the value of the real thing.

As I approach old age, I find my priorities have shifted a bit. I've realized that I'd hate to reach the end of my mortal life only to find that my service and sacrifice had all been a counterfeit, a pointless waste—that nobody in heaven or earth deemed what I'd done with my life to be of any lasting value. In light of what we've seen concerning the scriptural symbolism of the ox, Yahweh offered a dire and sobering warning to Israel (and through them, to us) on this very subject. **"If you will not obey the voice of Yahweh your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.... Your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you shall not eat any of it."** (Deuteronomy 28:15, 31) On strictly symbolic terms, the warning is that one's service will be rendered moot if not performed in the spirit and under the auspices of God's law. And what is that spirit? What does that Law demand? That we serve in love—both for God and our fellow man. If we refuse to serve, or if we serve only ourselves, we will not only lose the opportunity to serve in the future, we will receive no real benefit from whatever we *did* do.

There is more than one way to serve. I've been using the idea of "pulling the plow" as a general euphemism for the kind of "service" an ox provides. And scripture mentions "treading out the grain" and pulling wagons as well, not to mention the "service" a *sowr* (which, if you'll recall, is the generic Hebrew word for cattle, generally translated "ox") can provide as a Levitical sacrifice (though he must be uncastrated—hence more precisely a bull—in order to do so). If God needs us to perform a particular task, it is our proper role as His servant to do it to the best of our ability, in an attitude of love and humility. One important tip-off as to the nature of the specific service to which Yahweh is calling us is our preparation, our gifting—what God has enabled and equipped us to do. For example, it's rather obvious (in hindsight) that Moses was prepared from birth to lead Israel. He didn't just wake up one morning and unilaterally decide to liberate his people and write the Pentateuch. His education in the courts of Pharaoh (not to mention his "grad-school" internship on the backside of the desert herding somebody else's sheep for forty years) were gifts from God—and as such were expected to be used in His service.

So in the spirit of thinking outside the box, and since *sowr* can mean either a male *or* female bovine, I'd like to take this opportunity to cover a cow symbol that might otherwise have slipped through the cracks in this study. I'm speaking of the precept of the red heifer, the rite through which someone may be declared "clean" if he has touched a dead body. The particular *sowr* in question in this case is a *para*, the feminine form of a word we've encountered before (*par*, the usual

word for “bull”). In our text in Numbers 19, it’s translated as a “heifer”—i.e., a young cow that has not borne a calf (according to Webster). This definition would make it the female equivalent of the bull-calf, or *egel*, the feminine form of which would be the Hebrew *eglah* (as used in Deuteronomy 21:3). Why this word choice? It is possible that God used *para* instead of *eglah* because of the word’s apparent linguistic root: the verb *parar* means “to break (in the sense of breaking a vow), destroy, frustrate, or invalidate.” As we shall see, the ordinance of the red heifer is a picture of God’s invalidation of the curse of death on mankind.

Here is the text of the “law.” I’ll warn you right up front that if you’re not willing to countenance its symbolic character, this precept will sound as goofy as anything you’ll find in the Torah. There is absolutely nothing “practical” about it. If the requirements of the ordinance of the red heifer don’t comprise a significant Messianic prophecy, then it would appear Yahweh has a serious obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, and He’s gone off His meds. (I think you know where I stand on that question.) **“Now Yahweh spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ‘This is the statute of the law that Yahweh has commanded: Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come....’** The cow was to be young but almost mature (in other words, full of promise), a flawless specimen of its type, unworked (and, because it had never borne a calf, un milked) and red in color. Depending on how “strict” you are about the color requirement (the rabbis insist that no more than three hairs on the animal may be other than red, though the Torah doesn’t say) this is an exceedingly rare animal. Only nine are recorded to have been used to carry out this precept in Israel, none of them within the last two thousand years.

“And you shall give it to Eleazar the priest, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him.” Note who is to administer the rite: not Aaron (the High Priest, symbolic of the Messiah), but his son, Eleazar (who represents those of us who *follow Him*). In this role, Eleazar represents the faithful witnesses to Yahshua’s sacrifice, in which He was subjected to the fires of judgment on our behalf. **“And Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times. And the heifer shall be burned in his sight. Its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned....”** Just as Eleazar’s finger sprinkled the blood before the tabernacle, Yahshua’s disciples (ultimately including us) are to take a hands-on role in the process of making purification available to all mankind.

A few things beside the heifer herself are to be burned: **“And the priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer....”** Cedar represents the pride of human strength. Hyssop symbolizes the converse—weakness and insignificance. Together, these things (which I’ll cover in a future chapter) tell us that our human achievements—and our failures—will

die with us. We will have nothing of which can boast, *or* be ashamed, once we are purified through what this rite represents. And the scarlet thread? That news is even better: it means that our sins, as permanent and stubborn as they might seem to us, are up in smoke as well. These three substances together represent the irony of the human condition—its irrational pride, its irrelevance apart from Yahweh, and the indelible stain of its defilement. They are all ritually consumed in fire along with the red heifer. The lesson: Christ’s sacrifice purges us of all the negative aspects of our fallen human nature.

Nothing we’ve seen so far is the rite *per se*; it’s “merely” preparation. But there are ramifications and consequences even at this preparatory stage: **“Then the priest shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward he may come into the camp. But the priest shall be unclean until evening. The one who burns the heifer shall wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water and shall be unclean until evening. And a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place. And they shall be kept for the water for impurity for the congregation of the people of Israel; it is a sin offering. And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening....”** Everyone who is involved in procuring the ashes is rendered temporarily (and ceremonially) unclean in the process, even though they aren’t necessarily the people the ashes (something I’ll explain in a moment) were prepared in order to help. The point is that the “prep team” are human too. Their job is to ensure that the Good News of Yahshua’s salvation is available, no matter what role they’re assigned in the process. It may seem strange to us, but Yahweh has ordained that we, His people, are responsible for presenting His Word to the world, even though we’re fallen, sinful creatures just like those we’re trying to reach with God’s love.

The remedy for our condition (as its stated here) is three-fold. First, we are to wash our clothes. As we shall see in a later chapter, clothing is symbolic of our spiritual status before God. So our garments—what God “sees” when He looks at us—must be clean and white, indicating our innocence. (Of course, since our clothing is something we “put on” to cover our bodies, it is clear that any innocence we display is *imputed*, not intrinsic.) Second, our bodies too must be washed with water—that is, cleansed by the word of God. Note, however, that for this to be at all helpful, the “body” must be *alive*. It does no real good in the long run to wash a corpse. It will still be dead—rotting, stinking, and deteriorating. And third, we must remain ritually unclean until evening—disqualified from participation in the full life of God’s community. This is a thinly veiled euphemism for physical death, the point being that we really won’t be able to fully participate in the activities of the Kingdom of God while we’re still restricted to life in our mortal bodies. But when “evening” comes—i.e., death or rapture, whichever comes first—we will no longer be defiled by our mortal state.

Yahweh then points out two important issues. **“This shall be a perpetual statute for the people of Israel, and for the stranger who sojourns among them.”** (Numbers 19:1-10) First, the statute is perpetual. It is not meant to be temporary. Being symbolic, it presents an eternal, unchanging truth, one that will be “in force” as long as mortal man walks the earth. And second, this truth is not just for Israel, but also for the “strangers that walk among them,” in other words, everybody else. The principles laid down in the ordinance of the red heifer would remain essential after Israel’s theocratic society disintegrated, after their idolatrous kingdoms had been carted off into captivity, and after God in His fury had scattered Israel’s rebellious sons to the far corners of the earth. The statute is in operation to this day, kept not in literal water and ash, but in what these things represent.

So how were the ashes to be used? The cremated remains of the sacrificed red heifer, the cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet cord were to be collected and stored outside the camp until they were needed. When someone encountered death (something that would have happened all the time in a nation as big as Israel was), a bit of the ash would be mixed in water and sprinkled on him, twice in seven days. **“Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean. Whoever touches a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of Yahweh, and that person shall be cut off from Israel; because the water for impurity was not thrown on him, he shall be unclean. His uncleanness is still on him.”** (Numbers 19:11-13)

Needless to say, this law had no basis in hygiene or public sanitation. It was purely symbolic. So let us examine the symbols, one by one. (1) *Death* is separation: as physical death separates the soul from the body, spiritual death separated God’s spirit from one’s soul. Not surprisingly, though it is universal and inevitable, death is presented as a bad thing, one associated with uncleanness and defilement. (2) *Uncleanness* is sin—that which separates us from Yahweh’s presence. The whole point of the precept was to teach us how uncleanness associated with death could be overcome. (3) *To touch* a dead body is, I believe, a euphemism for “contact with death.” That is, it’s the unavoidable end result of the human condition. (4) *The third day* requirement is, as we can see in hindsight, a clear reference to the resurrection of Yahshua the Messiah, the fulfillment of the third *miqra*, the Feast of Firstfruits. This is therefore a preview of our own impending reawakening. (5) *The seventh day* is likewise a reference to the convocations of Yahweh—this time the last one, the Feast of Tabernacles, indicative of the Millennial reign of King Yahshua, not to mention our ultimate Sabbath rest, when death’s curse will be undone once and for all. Together then, the third and seventh days exemplify the life made available to us through Yahshua’s sacrifice. (6) *The tabernacle of Yahweh*, said to be defiled if one does

not avail himself of the cleansing of the water of purification, is the plan of God for our salvation and redemption. If we refuse to be indemnified from the curse in the manner prescribed by God, we have declared our intention to remain unclean. (7) Being *cut off from Israel* is metaphorical of separating oneself from Yahweh forever, whoever you happen to be, Jew or gentile.

The details support and confirm our findings: **“This is the law when someone dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean seven days.”** The “tent,” I presume, represents someone’s cultural, or societal, or even religious environment. Who among us lives in a place that doesn’t have a few “dead bodies” lying around? Even Christ’s twelve disciples had Judas Iscariot among them. We all need cleansing. **“And every open vessel that has no cover fastened on it is unclean.”** We rightly endeavor to be open to life and truth, but most of us are bombarded with deadly lies from morning ’til night as we walk through this fallen world. The presence of death permeates our environment. **“Whoever in the open field touches someone who was killed with a sword or who died naturally, or touches a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt sin offering, and fresh water shall be added in a vessel. Then a clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there and on whoever touched the bone, or the slain or the dead or the grave. And the clean person shall sprinkle it on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day. Thus on the seventh day he shall cleanse him, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean....”** When society is in upheaval or when cultural influences are in a state of flux, it’s even harder to remain undefiled, for death (whether physical or figurative) can become commonplace. But real death—*spiritual* death—is neither normal nor inevitable. A cure has been found. His name is Yahshua.

Make no mistake: we are at war, a spiritual conflict fought against spiritual enemies who would leave none of us alive if they were given any choice in the matter. We are all touched by death. **“If the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of Yahweh.”** (Numbers 19:14-20) We are born condemned (see John 3:18) into a world characterized by death. It’s bad enough that our sins are strewn about the landscape waiting to defile us. But the “graves” of our religious traditions also lie hidden, lurking, for all we know, like land mines underfoot. Insofar as religion obfuscates the love of Yahweh, it is both dead and deadly. So we are all in need of the purifying work—the “red heifer”—of Yahshua the Messiah. As “oxen” go, this one renders the most vital service of all, for without it we will remain unclean, defiled, and forever separated from the Living God.

MAN

❧ 3.2.6 ❧

Volition

At first blush, it would seem a bit odd to perceive symbolic significance in mankind. After all, we humans are apparently the whole point of creation, from Yahweh's point of view. We permeate His scriptures almost from one end to the other, and within them (as this study is demonstrating) God introduced hundreds of symbols and metaphors designed to teach *us* what we need to know about Him. But could our own nature comprise one of these symbols? Are we the object as well as the subject of Yahweh's lesson plan?

In a way, I think we are. I speak of man, however, in his mortal state, realizing that the way we see ourselves in the mirror (and in scriptural metaphor) isn't our true or ultimate nature—we're destined for an infinitely larger and more glorious reality, if we'll allow God to transform us into the beings He has intended for us to be all along. That being said, there is something about our present form—this vulnerable, temporary, gifted, God-aware physical state—that is an essential component of the race we are meant to become. That component, that symbolic object, is *volition*: free will, the ability to make moral choices, the privilege of making personal decisions that affect our relationship with the very Creator of the universe.

No animal is gifted with this attribute. Even really smart ones, like apes, dogs, or dolphins, react and calculate based only upon their own previous experiences—if not raw instinct. Yes, your dog may show “guilt” for having chewed up your slippers, even before you discover their mangled drool-soaked corpses; but that's only because he's gotten in trouble before and is anticipating your puzzling (to him) outburst of anger. (Cats, of course, don't show any guilt for having turned your expensive couch into a chia pet because they presume you bought the furniture for *them*. They merely conclude that yelling and waving your arms is normal, inexplicable human behavior.) A lion doesn't feel guilty about “murdering” a gazelle, any more than a bacterium shows remorse for invading your body and making you sick. Humans are absolutely unique in their awareness of guilt and their desire to do something about it.

The reason for this singular propensity is explained (sort of) in the creation account. **“Then Yahweh, God, formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”** (Genesis 2:7) Although the kinds of lives enjoyed by the entire animal kingdom had been described by the Hebrew phrase *chayah nephesh*—the living soul, that which made them physically alive—man was given an another component, the “breath

of life,” or *neshamah chayah*, in addition to the soul. It is this *neshamah* that explains (at least logistically) how God created humanity “in His own image.” **“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”** (Genesis 1:26-27) We have been given a fundamentally different *kind* of life than animals have (which is, in turn, fundamentally different than the kind of life plants enjoy—though Yahweh is the source of them all). We humans have a unique type of life: we are cognizant of our creator, aware of His existence and (since the fall) of our relative inadequacy before Him.

But it’s not like the rest of creation doesn’t honor Yahweh—in whatever way He has enabled that expression: **“Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of Yahweh has done this? In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath [*ruach*—spirit] of all mankind.”** (Job 12:7-10) It never occurs to animals, plants, rocks, or sky to question their origins or their destiny. They are not made with the capacity to deny the God who made them. Only man has that ability.

So it is this facet of man’s nature—the unique ability to perceive his Creator and make choices concerning Him—that serves as the foundation for man as a scriptural symbol. The whole topic is as counterintuitive as it is unavoidable. We’re forced to deal with it, though, because Yahweh uses “man” as a metaphor for *His own* nature—at least twice in scripture. In the previous section, we looked at the vision presented in Ezekiel 1, where Yahweh’s presence among us was characterized by four symbolic entities, the ox, the lion, the eagle, and man. There we learned that all four attributes were always present, but their emphasis shifted depending upon which direction the “four living beings” were moving at any given time. And then we reviewed John’s vision in Revelation, where he saw the very same symbols used, though with slightly different imagery: **“And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’”** (Revelation 4:6-8)

Man in his mortal state is many things, but few of them make any sense as metaphors for the nature of God. Yahweh, unlike man, is neither fallen, sinful, vulnerable, limited, nor subject to death and decay. But He *is* intrinsically able to make His own choices—to do things “His way”—as long as doing so doesn’t

violate His other attributes, like love, justice, mercy, grace, and creativity. (Yahweh is not susceptible to nonsense, however. Asking whether He is able to make a rock so heavy He can't lift it is pointless and silly, and as far as I can tell, God doesn't *do* silly.)

The exercise of free will implies the application of power—the means to bring about what one has chosen to do, at least to some extent. The Greeks used two basic words for such power. *Dunamis* is inherent strength, power, or ability, the power residing in a thing by virtue of its nature. *Exousia*, on the other hand, is the power of choice, the exercise of authority, the liberty to do as one pleases, with the presumption that there is no physical factor to prevent it. (Several other Greek words describing power, such as *bia*, *ischus*, *kratos*, and *energeia*, don't really apply in this context). It seems clear that the sort of “power” man wields in the exercise of his free will is usually *exousia*, but such power can only be derived from Yahweh's unlimited *dunamis*. If volition has a “first cause,” that cause must ultimately have no inherent limitations. In other words, man has free will only because God gave it to him. Our freedom to make moral choices is thus a clue to the nature of Yahweh: He, by virtue of His unlimited self-existent nature, has the power to do whatever He wants, and He has authorized mankind to exercise that same kind of power—within limits, of course.

And as long as we're looking at definitions, let's review the words commonly rendered “man” in scripture. The most common Hebrew word for “man” (at 1,639 occurrences) is *'iysh*: a man, a male, husband, human (as opposed to God), servant, mankind, or champion. *'Adam*, a Hebrew word used 522 times, means man, mankind, or human being. It seems to stress the idea of man as being a creature “of the earth.” And a lesser-used Hebrew word translated “man” is *enowsh*, stressing our mortality: man, mortal man, a person, or mankind. In the Greek, one word is used predominantly (with 559 occurrences)—*anthropos*: a human being, male or female, male human, or husband. So not only is “man” an extremely common theme in scripture (which shouldn't be surprising, since our redemption is the whole point), the definitions also overlap to a great degree. In an effort to pursue the “man-as-symbol” quest, I have tried to limit myself to scriptures that help to illuminate the generalized “mankind” aspect—and through it, what makes us unique among God's creatures: volition.

This wonderful gift God gave to mankind, however, was also a curse. Like fire or the alphabet, the ability to make moral choices brought with it the potential for both great good and catastrophic evil. I liken it (having crossed that bridge a

number of times) to handing your teenager the keys to the car for the first time. Along with the prospect of increased responsibility, maturity, trust, and broader experience comes the possibility of disaster, tragedy, and fiery, gruesome death. Parents know that we can't give our kids the good stuff without risking the bad. So we teach them, train them, warn them, and equip them for success as best we can. But at some point, we have to let them "try out their wings."

All of this is the legacy of the conundrum Yahweh faced when He created man. He had already created animals, ranging from mindless microbes to quite intelligent beasts, beautifully suited to the environment into which He had placed them; and He had created what we call angels, immortal spirit beings with awesome capabilities. But since animals and angels alike were made without free will, none of these beings had the capability of loving their Creator, since love requires choice. The animals (I'm guessing) had no direct awareness of God's existence: they just did as God had programmed them to do—eat, procreate, nurture their young, and survive for as long as they could, in harmony with the world as they found it. Their very existence, the fact that they had living souls, was eloquent testimony to their source—the essential life of Yahweh.

Angels, on the other hand, are hyper-aware of their Creator, for they are immortal spirits (in essential form, like God Himself), designed to dwell and serve in His personal presence—something that mortal man cannot do and still survive. In a way, angels are like soldiers: although they're capable of functioning autonomously, they do not have permission to operate "outside of mission parameters." We are told (mostly through allegorical hyperbole) that the greatest of the angels let pride get the better of him, and he mutinied against his Creator-Commander, taking a third of the heavenly host with him. This rebellion was not the result of Satan's exercise of free will, however, but was more like an army lieutenant refusing to carry out the direct and lawful order of his general, and instead taking up arms against him. It was treason, treachery, grounds for dishonorable discharge and a life sentence in the brig.

This was where the "curse" associated with the gift of free will for mankind came into existence. Yahweh knew that for choice to be meaningful, there had to be alternatives: you couldn't *choose* something if it were the only entree on the menu. So He postponed the imprisonment of Satan and his demon-dupes in order to provide man with an option to receiving and reciprocating His love. We all know the story, as fraught with symbolism as it appears to be: Adam and his wife, the first humans created with the *neshamah*—the "breath of life"—were instructed by Yahweh's theophany to refrain from eating the fruit from a specific tree in the Garden of Eden. The instruction itself posed a choice, but unless both sides of the "debate" were voiced, the choice wouldn't have been (as one cable news channel puts it) "fair and balanced." So Satan was allowed to visit the

Garden and voice his opinion. God had instructed, **“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”** (Genesis 2:17) But Satan countered, **“You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** (Genesis 3:4-5)

That’s a clear choice, pro or con: show that you trust God by doing what He said, or trust someone else’s promise of “benefits” that God never saw fit to give you, demonstrating your decision by disobeying the command. We all know what happened: Eve was deceived by the serpent (which was bad enough), but Adam deliberately rebelled against God when faced with a choice between Yahweh’s instructions and his wife’s wiles. **“Then Yahweh, God, said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever.’ Therefore Yahweh, God, sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.”** (Genesis 3:22-23)

The provocative question is: who told the truth, Yahweh, or Satan? At first glance, remarkably enough, it looks like Satan did! Adam and Eve *didn’t* fall over dead that day. Adam, in fact, lived on for another 930 years. He got demoted and evicted, but his body didn’t immediately die. Moreover, Satan’s promise that their “eyes would be opened,” and that they would “be like God, knowing good and evil,” had also become reality (sort of), not that Eve got remotely what she’d bargained for. She had been willing to give it all up for knowledge. What she actually got was experience—and all the frustration and pain that goes with it. The couple had never known anything *but* good up to this point; now they would see both sides—up to and including physical death. If you understand the operation of the *neshamah*, Adam and Eve *did* die that day, for the Spirit of God that had made their souls immortal departed. The life they had lost was not physical, however, but spiritual—not *bios*, but *zoe* (if I may refer to the Greek terms defining the difference).

So Satan, who is not gifted with free will, was allowed by God to be the vehicle through which our free will could be tested. The only way Yahweh’s volition could be transferred to mankind was to present us with a choice. This temptation was dangerous, but essential, which explains why Yahshua said, **“Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!”** (Matthew 18:7) From this moment on, Adam’s race would be defined by our fallen, sin-prone nature. In a sense, we are born the most miserable of creatures: equipped with a *neshamah*—the capacity for spiritual indwelling—but bereft of spirit. Instead, within us is, as Pascal would later put it, a “God-shaped vacuum,” one that nothing but Yahweh can adequately fill. Yahweh knew we would fail, of course, and He had a plan ready through which each of us could be restored to life in His Spirit, if only we would *choose to*

do so. That God-given ability—the right to choose—is what makes mankind a symbol that reveals Yahweh’s nature.

But if this is true—if mankind has the freedom to make moral choices—then we find ourselves faced with a dichotomy, a fundamental disconnect between God’s revealed nature and the nearly universal teaching of the Church. Although few would put it this bluntly, that core teaching is that “You must love God or He will torment you forever in hell.” This has been the tacit Christian world view virtually from the beginning, and it’s a natural extrapolation of traditional Jewish perception, reflected in Yahshua’s tale of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. According to Josephus, Christ’s depiction of sheol being divided into two sections—one for the blessed, called Abraham’s bosom, and another for the damned, where the rich man ended up in fiery torment—was pretty much as the Jews of His day pictured it. The Hebrew scriptures don’t speak of “heaven” and “hell” *per se*, at least not in terms of man’s eternal destiny. The Tanach says almost nothing of the afterlife beyond sheol—the grave, the pit, the “place of inquiry.” I have no reason to suspect that this picture isn’t accurate, but I’m convinced it’s not remotely the whole story.

Here’s the problem. In John 3, Yahshua defined being “alive” (in the eternal, essential sense), as being “born from above” in (or of) the Holy Spirit—making God one’s “heavenly Father.” He also characterized the powerful religio-political elite, the scribes and Pharisees, as a “brood of vipers,” having been “born from below” (so to speak), which makes Satan their “spiritual father.” Because *all* spirits, created or not, are immortal, this would make the soul of someone who chose Satan to be his spiritual father immortal in precisely the same way that the souls of Yahweh’s children become immortal through *His* Spirit’s indwelling. In eternity, we share the destiny of whatever spirit indwells us, whether glorious or ignominious. And as one can have only one human mother, you can’t be born first to Satan’s spirit and then to Yahweh’s, in succession. Spiritual birth, like physical birth, happens only once, if it happens at all.

So far so good. But since mankind’s fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, we have all been born as spiritual “blank slates,” indwelled with neither Yahweh’s Spirit nor Satan’s. In order to “live forever,” we must select and invite an immortal spirit to inhabit and define our souls. We may (and should) choose Yahweh’s Spirit, available to us through the redeeming blood of Yahshua. But we *can*, as did the Chief Priests and Pharisees who had Christ crucified, choose an indwelling with Satan’s spirit instead. The result of that choice is hell: the eternal waking torment of remorse, defined by the horrifying knowledge that you’ve proactively elected to identify yourself with a false, evil god.

But let’s be honest: most people never choose *either* thing. They’re not exactly antagonistic to Yahweh, but they’re not particularly interested in knowing

Him, either. Or perhaps they're ignorant victims of their religion, culture, and customs, for whom the truth is simply not available, through no fault of their own. It should be obvious that failing to be born from above in Yahweh's Spirit is *not* the same thing as having proactively chosen to receive Satan's. Since the fall, we are born empty vessels, capable of being filled with either spirit—or neither of them. Or, to use another of my dumb car analogies, if I don't buy a Ford, it *doesn't* mean I've bought a Chevrolet instead. I might have bought a Honda, or a bicycle, or nothing at all, for that matter. No matter how compelling the implications can seem at first glance, these facts are completely independent of each other. And yet, I was taught from my youth in a solid, Bible-believing, evangelical Protestant church that if I hadn't "been saved" by "accepting Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior," that I was destined to an eternity of torment in hell. This doctrine made quite an impression on an eight-year-old boy, I can tell you. It took me half a century to figure out that it wasn't necessarily true. That's not to say hell doesn't exist—it most certainly does. But like heaven, you can't go there unless you choose to.

Of course, as a practical matter, the heaven-or-hell theory worked just fine. It's like comparing Newtonian physics to quantum mechanics: it's only in the theoretical realm that you run into trouble. In your daily life, stuff still obeys the laws of gravity, mass, momentum, and thermodynamics. Apples still fall from trees, even if we can't figure out where Schrödinger's cat is. So I could have gone my whole life (what's left of it) quite nicely without asking the hard question: if you "must love God or He'll send you to hell" (as I was taught), how does that square with free will? If we're compelled by threats of hell fire to "love" God, the definition of "love" has become skewed beyond all recognition, and the concept of choice has been rendered meaningless. No one could possibly love God under these conditions. We might surrender, submit, obey, or worship, but *love* cannot be gained in this way, nor could it be construed as a loving act on God's part to threaten us with eternal torment if we don't "love" Him in return.

Some Christians, on the other hand, believe that we have no free will—that because God had "called the elect to be saved," the others must logically be predestined to damnation. But the entire Bible incessantly encourages us—*everyone*—to make good, wise choices, to hear and heed His word. Why would scripture do that if Yahweh had *already* selected our destiny for us? No, predestination (in the sense that God has made our eternal choices for us) is totally antithetical to the broad sweep of God's word (except as an expression of the choices *we* make: if we choose "Cause A," then we are naturally "predestined" to experiencing the corresponding effect). The fact is, *real* free will gives the chooser *permission* to choose poorly—or not to choose at all. The rub is that every choice carries consequences with it. Having built us, Yahweh knows what will benefit us, and what will do us harm. That's why He pleads with us to

hear and heed His words: doing so will be good for us. God's love compels Him to reach out to us. But having gifted us with free will, He won't force us to do anything: invite, encourage, and counsel, yes—force, no.

It's clear in scripture that choosing to be “born from above” in Yahweh's Spirit will result in untold blessings—the heart of which is eternal fellowship with God Himself. Christ describes it: **“Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”** And it's equally obvious that choosing to be born in Satan's spirit will result in the converse fate: the reigning Son of Man will declare to those who've done so, **“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”** (Matthew 25:34, 41) But what of those (the majority, I'm guessing) who have chosen *neither*, whether out of ignorance, apathy, suppression of the truth by others, or simple bad luck (as is the case with abortion victims, for example). Without an indwelling immortal spirit, their souls will simply perish when separated from their bodies—just as with any animal.

That may come as a shock to those who (like me) were taught the “eternal bliss vs. everlasting torment” doctrine all their lives, but it's amply supported by the actual Hebrew and Greek text, the words used in the Bible to designate a “bad” fate from which Yahweh wishes to spare us. They aren't *all* what we'd call “hell.” While some of them do necessitate existence and consciousness (requirements for eternal torment), others merely describe death, destruction, annihilation, the state of ceasing to be (which, while bad, are still much to be preferred over hell's torments, you must admit). Logically, then, death and damnation *cannot be the same thing*. The default is death: we're born mortal—we're fallen creatures subject to decay and destruction. But we're creatures of free will. If we choose nothing, that is precisely what we will receive. Of course, God doesn't ask us to choose between death and damnation. Damnation (the fate described in Matthew 25:41—the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”) was never promulgated by God as a viable choice. Yahweh simply asks us to choose life—eternal, abundant, blessed, and available only through a familial relationship with Him, which is in turn available only through the atoning blood of Christ. Bottom line: if we do not elect to live, we will not.

The point of all this is that our free will, our volition, is God's focus when He uses “man” as a symbol. This is the one feature of man's character that uniquely defines who he is and links him to his Creator. It explains every facet of man's predicament, the human condition. It underlies everything scripture reveals about

the nature of humanity: our fallen state, our role in shaping our own destinies, and our responsibility before God. The Bible (especially in the Torah) talks incessantly about the consequences of the choices we make. And our potential for rebuilding a personal relationship with the God from whom we find ourselves estranged is defined and revealed by this unique gift: free will.

We won't get very far, however, if we can't (or don't) perceive that we are a fallen race, sinful creatures alienated from our Creator through the exercise of our own free will. That explains why Satan's favorite ploy is to try to convince us that we're "good enough"—or at least *can be*—in our natural state or through our own efforts. He would like us to believe that the kind of "sin" that separates us from Yahweh is "doing the worst thing you can think of." But it's not. Sin is merely missing the target of perfection, if only by a little bit. It is simply failing to do what is right (by God's standards)—flawlessly, constantly, and with an attitude of perfect love, humility, and selflessness. It's falling short of Yahweh's opinion, His unassailable assessment of how things ought to be (errantly rendered "glory" in Romans 3:23). You don't have to be a serial-murdering cannibalistic child molester to be a "sinner"—you just have to get out of bed in the morning.

We can't reason our way out of our guilt. We aren't nearly smart enough, as Job observed: **"But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living."** (Job 28:12-13) Many would beg to differ these days, of course. Ask any politician: he'll tell you *he* has the answers. But if he isn't factoring God's word and will into his solutions for the rest of us (and I've never heard of one who did, at least in my lifetime), he's hopelessly deluded. **"Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."** (Proverbs 26:12)

Part of being "fallen" is that we no longer comprehend what we've lost, much less how to regain it. **"Yahweh looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one."** (Psalm 14:2-3, cf. Psalm 52:2-3) In other words, it's no good blaming Adam and Eve for the fix we're in: we've all sinned, each of us fulfilling the potential for corruption that comprises the legacy they left us. If we had been in their shoes (okay, they didn't wear shoes, but you know what I mean), we would have performed just as badly—and we prove it every day of our lives.

It isn't just that we fall short of Yahweh's standards of behavior, either. It's that if we fail to heed the word of Yahweh, we live pointless lives, bereft of meaning or significance. As Solomon said, **"I searched with my heart...till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained**

under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 2:3,11) Taken in isolation like this, it all looks pretty depressing. But remember, these verses describe mankind in his natural, fallen state—estranged from God and divorced from His purpose. It may not seem too bad while you're living through it, but contemplation and reflection reveal that as benign as life without God might seem, it's actually empty, hollow, and pointless. (And let's face it: for most of humanity, life *isn't* all that benign.)

Yahshua said essentially the same thing, but in the same breath explained how to turn a pointless, empty life into something eternally significant: **"Jesus told His disciples, 'If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?'"** (Matthew 16:24-26) Gains and losses, advantages and disadvantages, are what the natural man *thinks* he understands. But he is a fool if his knowledge extends no further than his final breath. Earthly riches and temporal poverty alike are beside the point to someone who died ten minutes ago: **"Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath."** (Psalm 62:9) I realize that it sounds counterintuitive—that "losing" one's life for the sake of the kingdom of God is the only way to find it. But once again, Yahshua is talking about a fundamental transformation—exchanging one's mortal existence for a spiritual life that will never end. And once again, the only wrench that will fit this nut is free will: we must *choose* to "deny ourselves" in favor of the cross. The decision will not be imposed upon us.

Yahweh is under no illusions, of course. He knows going in that most of us will choose to walk the wrong path, the broad highway that leads to destruction. There was even a time when He felt compelled to eliminate an entire generation—except for one family—because mankind had become so utterly corrupt. But that family, led by its patriarch Noah, chose to honor God, and for their sake (and ours who follow their lead) Yahweh refrains from summarily destroying us for our transgressions: **"Then Noah built an altar to Yahweh and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when Yahweh smelled the pleasing aroma, Yahweh said in His heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."** (Genesis 8:20-21) As Christ informed us in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:36-44), the flood of Noah's day was a "dress rehearsal" for the coming judgment—something that, as before, will be preceded by the removal of a faithful remnant out of harm's way. The trick for God (since He always keeps His promises) is going to be dealing with the universally evil intentions of the hearts of fallen mankind while refraining from "cursing the ground" because of us. In Noah's day, *everyone* with a neshamah (except for those aboard the ark) perished—see Genesis 7:22. But during the coming Great Tribulation—even though all who have kept Yahshua's command to persevere will be kept out of the

hour of trial (see Revelation 3:10) as Noah was kept out of the flood—some will come to faith in the midst of the trial. In other words, the earth will *not* be cursed this time.

That's not to say man's propensity for choosing poorly will have improved much. John's apocalyptic prophecy tells us, **"Also it [the 'beast out of the earth,' a.k.a. the 'false prophet'] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666."** (Revelation 13:16-18) Remember what Yahshua said about gaining the whole world but losing your own soul? Those who receive the mark of the beast will forfeit their lives in an attempt to "gain" something that falls woefully short of "the whole world"—a few short months of respite from a "new world order" that would otherwise be irrationally bent on hunting them down and killing them. But note that the number describing the mark of the beast is said to be "the number of a man." If my observation that the primary and unique characteristic defining humanity is our free will, then I must conclude that whatever else it is, the mark of the beast will comprise the ultimate expression of man's choice. By receiving it, he is choosing to remain fallen, to reject Yahweh's remedy for his mortal condition in favor of a satanic counterfeit. But rejection of the mark (which will be the 21st century permutation of "taking up your cross and following Christ") will be an effective demonstration that he is willing to risk losing his life in order to find it—Yahshua's very challenge.

Those neo-believers who miraculously survive until the end of the Tribulation will comprise the blessed "sheep" of Yahshua's familiar Olivet Discourse parable about the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Having chosen life by risking death for the sake of God's promise, these "sheep" will repopulate Christ's earthly kingdom, spawning new mortal generations for the next thousand years (much as Noah's children did in the postdiluvian world). Paul once wrote of gentiles, unschooled in the Torah, who nevertheless tried to do as God's instructions commanded, acting solely on the basis of the dictates of their consciences. **"They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."** (Romans 2:15-16) The neo-believers of the Tribulation will not have the opportunity or leisure to study the scriptures in order to arrive at a reasoned and rational theological position. They will simply *know* (based on raw conscience and some timely angelic warnings) that the schemes of the beast are inherently evil, and are thus antithetical to the plan of the true and living God—about whom they admittedly know next to nothing. Based upon this empirical knowledge

alone, they'll exercise the greatest privilege ever bestowed by God upon any living being: they'll choose to reciprocate His love.

In the poem *Invictus*, William Ernest Henley communicated the incredible degree of arrogance the human mind can display before God. The last stanza reads: "It matters not how strait the gate / How charged with punishments the scroll / I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul." Having the courage and determination to prevail in the face of temporal obstacles is one thing; it's something else entirely to shake your fist in the face of God and tell Him your soul is "unconquerable." As poetic as it sounds, that's just plain dumb.

It's kind of funny when you think about it: fallen man likes nothing more than to imagine he's in charge of his own fate, the director of his own destiny. God, meanwhile, spends an inordinate amount of energy teaching us to trust Him, for He knows we're incapable of extricating ourselves from our own self-induced predicament. And yet, Yahweh has given man the authority to choose for himself who will be in charge of his affairs, who will call the shots, who will be responsible for his welfare, and who will ultimately direct his destiny. To my mind, it's sort of like handing a three year old the keys to the family car, and telling him, "Drive it, if you think you can, but my plan is to let you figure out for yourself that your feet don't reach the pedals, you can't see over the dashboard, and you really don't know where you want to go anyway, so it's better if you let mom or dad do the driving." It may seem silly (on God's part) when we phrase it in these terms, but His offer is serious and bona fide, I assure you.

The first of our race to "take the wheel" were Adam and Eve. The fact that they were deceived did not change the outcome of their actions. **"But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."** (Genesis 3:4-7) They had calculated that Yahweh's word wasn't any more reliable than the serpent's—that the benefits of eating the forbidden fruit would be worth the risks. And they found out the hard way that they were wrong. Too late in the game, they discovered the truth of what Solomon would later say: **"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."** (Proverbs 14:12)

Sin starts small. With Eve, it was a tiny seed of doubt, planted by Satan, watered by her own exaggerated version of what Yahweh's instructions had actually been (the first permutation of religion in the Bible), and nurtured through curiosity, covetousness, and compromise. The harvest was death—even if that death wasn't quite what she had expected it to be. Moses warned Israel of that same subtle trap: **"Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from Yahweh our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.' This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike."** (Deuteronomy 29:18-19) A little yeast leavens the whole loaf; a single spark can set the entire forest ablaze—and one person willing to doubt or disregard Yahweh's clear instructions is able, potentially, to infect an entire family, city, or nation with rebellion and heresy.

It's not inevitable, of course. Each individual among us has the power to choose whom to trust, upon whom to rely. A bit later in the same sermon, Moses made that unmistakable: choice is our prerogative: **"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil."** Gee, that's a tough one, Mo. Let me think on it and get back to you. **"If you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God that I command you today, by loving Yahweh your God, by walking in His ways, and by keeping His commandments and His statutes and His rules, then you shall live and multiply, and Yahweh your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it."** This, of course, can apply in principle to any people, in any age. Note that although God is perfectly capable of blessing individuals who honor Him within nations that don't, the promise is primarily national, not personal. This is true of the converse as well: **"But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving Yahweh your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him, for He is your life and length of days."** (Deuteronomy 30:15-20) There it is again: the flat declaration that the choice is ours to make: life or death, blessing or cursing, God's way or man's way.

At this point in Israel's history, however, it was all somewhat theoretical. Yes, their parents had chosen poorly: by calculating that they were not strong enough to take Canaan *in their own strength*, they had dishonored Yahweh, who had promised to fight on their behalf, providing their victories for them. But since then, a whole new generation had arisen, one that had known *nothing but* Yahweh's care and provision in the harshest of circumstances. This generation crossed the Jordan, did battle with the Canaanites, and—as long as they followed

Yahweh's lead—prevailed. But a generation later, when much of the land had been occupied, the issue of whom to trust was once again broached. Joshua, now an old man, admonished Israel, **“Now therefore fear Yahweh and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh....”** Put them *away*? Had they not jettisoned Egypt's gods long ago? Not completely, it would seem—and that was a problem.

“And if it is evil [Hebrew *ra'a*: bad, harmful, displeasing, injurious, causing misery] in your eyes to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.” It's a lesson we Christians need to relearn in every generation: no matter who you are, you're going to serve somebody or something—either Yahweh or something vastly inferior (like, for instance, *yourself*). The most insidious, destructive idolatries are those we never even think about—ingrained in our culture and endemic in our traditions. Joshua, like Moses, offered the people a choice of whom to serve—the same choice we all face today. And he wasn't coy about declaring where his own allegiance lay: with Yahweh. **“Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake Yahweh to serve other gods, for it is Yahweh our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed.’** (Joshua 24:14-17) This generation chose wisely, but it wouldn't be long before their children and grandchildren (having failed to drive the Canaanites and Amorites *completely* out of the land, as they'd been instructed) began to drift back into idolatry and error.

So in an ironic twist, it transpires that in a way, man actually *is* the master of his fate and the captain of his soul. He still can't atone for his own guilt, you understand, but every individual, in every generation, must make his or her own choice as to whom to serve, whether Yahweh or somebody else. In a very real and terrifying sense, it is every person's responsibility to determine his own eternal destiny—not by solving his own problems, but by selecting his own savior.

That goes a long way toward explaining why Yahweh was so adamant that no one was to commit murder: if your life has been cut short through the action of another, you have been cheated out of your God-given opportunity to spend your natural lifetime (however long or short that might be) deciding whom to trust with your eternity. One factor that makes this crystal clear is that even *animals* who kill men are to pay for their offense with their lives. Yahweh explained it to Noah: **“And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it, and from man....”** Animals don't exercise free will, so they don't make moral choices. The death penalty for them is no deterrent whatsoever. Yet they are to be “put down” if they kill a person, just as if they were human murderers. Why is that, if they

aren't morally "guilty" in God's eyes? Animals *aren't* given the death penalty for killing other animals. Nor is killing a beast considered a crime for men (unless it belonged to someone else, in which case the offense was theft, not murder). So the issue, strictly speaking, is *not* the taking of life (in the *bios* sense).

The key is *victimology*. **"From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image."** (Genesis 9:5-6) Since man is made in the image and likeness of God, he is to be given the freedom to—as Paul put it—"work out his own salvation with fear and trembling." In other words, he must exercise his privilege of choice in the matter of who to serve—for as long as God has given him. Others are not to take it upon themselves to abridge his natural lifespan.

So no one, man or beast, is given the unilateral authority to prematurely end a man's life—with *one exception*. **"Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death."** That's right: Yahweh believes—actually, He *insists* on—the death penalty for murderers. And as we saw above, it is *man* (not God) who is to perform the execution. It's all part of man's having been given dominion over the entire biosphere (see Genesis 1:26, 28). And it's the natural result of following the golden rule. "Doing unto others as we'd have them do unto us" establishes a paradigm of fairness, justice, and restitution. If someone stole something or broke something belonging to another, he was required under Torah law to make it good, as the passage goes on to explain: **"Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him."** (Leviticus 24:17-20) But what can someone do if his *life* has been stolen? It is beyond the ability of the murderer to restore it. So since restitution is impossible, the rule becomes *retribution*: the guilty life must be surrendered in place of the innocent one he took.

We've all heard the saying, "An eye for an eye, and the whole world will go blind." But it just isn't true, not under God's law. Although it isn't quite as catchy or politically correct, God's rule is actually, "An eye for an eye, and people will learn to appreciate vision." The Torah is scrupulous about establishing guilt before punishment is meted out. In the case of murder, two or three eyewitnesses are required in order to convict. Even though forensic evidence might serve as one of the three "witnesses" (I'm guessing), that puts a heavy burden of proof on the prosecution: God's system would much rather see a guilty person walk free than see an innocent man wrongly punished. After all, Yahweh can always opt to exact justice in His own time and in His own way—and He knows before the trial even begins who is guilty, and who is not.

By the way, all of this fairness-based law designed to give each individual his full allotted opportunity to choose his own destiny is made a mockery if he opts to

choose nothing—as is (I fear) the case with the majority of humans. I fully realize that our opportunities for receiving knowledge vary greatly. But we are all born with consciences, with curiosity, with the witness of nature’s glory, and with the *neshamah*—that capacity for spiritual indwelling that internally, and universally, compels man to seek his Creator. Yahweh has given all of us the means and motive to at least *wonder* about Him—even if we’re never given the chance to actively explore our intuition.

This fact gives the concept of “murder” a whole new dimension. Those who have taken it upon themselves to repress the thirst for God that happens so naturally in those around them are guilty of “spiritual murder.” John writes, **“This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”** (I John 3:11-15) Remember, God’s penalty for physical murder is death. Do you suppose He sees spiritual murder any differently? No; the former is the symbol for the latter.

Solomon tells us, **“Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways, for the devious person is an abomination to Yahweh, but the upright are in His confidence.”** (Proverbs 3:31-32) The attitude that manifests itself as violence in the physical realm becomes deviousness and deception in the spiritual. To my mind, the most devious way to spiritually “murder” someone is to enslave them in religion. Since man’s natural inclination is to seek for his Creator, Satan’s ploy is to distract him with a well crafted counterfeit. He uses man’s godly impulses (kindness, generosity, devotion, piety, etc.) to deceive him into thinking he’s following God. With luck, he figures, those gullible humans will never even figure out they’ve been fooled. The really “good” counterfeits, like rabbinical Judaism and pagan Christianity, blend truth and falsehood together so smoothly, it’s hard to sort out what’s real and what isn’t. The “bad” ones, like Islam, simply use threats, force, and intimidation to keep the “faithful” in line. But however you slice it, Satan can’t perpetrate frauds like these on his own: he needs the help of willing human accomplices—“useful idiots” who’ll do his heavy lifting in hopes of gaining power, prestige, prosperity, or pleasure for themselves.

Yahshua could spot these fakes a mile off, and He warned us against acting like them: **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”** Not that getting “rewarded” by God for our good deeds is the point. It’s a question of motivation: good deeds like alms or devotion are the natural byproduct of

knowing Yahweh, but they can be simulated by those who don't. **"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others."**

(Matthew 6:1-6) The religionistas (to coin a word) do "good" things in public in order to impress other people with their piety and devotion. They're presenting the fiction that they have exercised their free will in honoring God. But the "god" they're honoring is often one of their own imagination, and their motivation is as phony as their deity: praise from (or power over) other men. Of course, Yahshua was using Judaism as an example familiar to his audience. In Islam these days, "good works done to be seen by men" might include strapping on a suicide vest and blowing up a Tel Aviv bus stop. In pagan Christianity, it might be browbeating the faithful into contributing to questionable causes that elevate not God but the religious machine itself. With the religion of secular humanism, it might be joining in a protest march, sit-in, or riot. In all of these cases, the ultimate objective is to enslave, impress, or intimidate men—it's the antithesis of loving them. It represents a "spiritual choice" one has made, alright; but the choice is ultimately to align oneself with Satan's spirit in lieu of Yahweh's.

That's not to say that everything we do with improper motives is automatically a sign that we've sold our souls to the devil. We all make mistakes, and among those mistakes is listening to Satan when he whispers nonsense into our ears. This very thing happened to David—by all accounts Yahweh's favorite human, a faithful servant-king who loved God with all his heart, despite his occasional lapses in good judgment. At one point, David was tempted (by Satan himself, the record states) to take a census of Israel. As sins go (you may be thinking) this doesn't seem to be a particularly heinous crime. But the object of the census was to determine the military strength of the nation—in terms of human resources, the same criteria by which any monarch might have assessed his ability to wage war. What David had forgotten was that Israel's true strength lay, as it always had, in Yahweh, not in the number of available troops. God had proved it over and over again. (See Judges 7 for one extreme example.)

Once David had the results of his military census, he realized that he'd been duped. He promptly repented, but the damage had been done: there were consequences to be paid. And here is where the concept of human volition before God really comes into focus: **"So [the prophet] Gad came to David and said to him, 'Thus says Yahweh, "Choose what you will: either three years of famine, or three months of devastation by your foes while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of Yahweh, pestilence on the land, with the angel of Yahweh destroying**

throughout all the territory of Israel.” Now decide what answer I shall return to Him who sent me.’ Then David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress. Let me fall into the hand of Yahweh, for His mercy is very great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.’” (I Chronicles 21:11-13) Yahweh honored David’s choice (a fact remarkable in itself). The plague He sent killed 70,000 men. So much for strength in numbers.

But here’s where the story takes on “Biblical proportions.” David’s eyes were opened, and he actually *saw* the angel who was killing everybody off, standing there between earth and heaven with a drawn sword. Falling to his knees in repentance, David pleaded with Yahweh to spare the innocents of Israel—and to slay him instead. Yahweh, true to character, relented from the slaughter, right then and there. In thanks, David noted where they were—at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite (a.k.a. Arunah), on Mount Moriah, in the middle of Jerusalem. In a flash of inspiration, David connected this location with God’s everlasting mercy, and purposed to build an altar to Yahweh on the spot. He paid Ornan 600 shekels of gold for the place—its full market value. (By the way, this is the only historical record we have of anyone actually *buying* the temple mount. Every subsequent “owner” simply stole it from its rightful owners—the Jewish royal family.) Ornan, a faithful gentile farmer who had also seen the angel of death, offered to give it to the king. But David declined, saying “I won’t take what belongs to you in order to give it to Yahweh, and I won’t offer up that which cost me nothing,” a principle today’s religionistas would do well to learn. This event—the abrupt end of the plague in response to David’s prayer—is what inspired the king to build a “permanent” temple to replace the wilderness tabernacle that had been in use for the past half a millennium, set up nearby in Gibeon at the time. Though informed that he (being a man of war) could not build the temple himself, David spent the rest of his life preparing for his son Solomon to do it.

From that moment on, this one location in all the earth would be symbolically synonymous with the mercy of God. This idea was “set in stone”—literally—when the temple was built, based on the floor plan of the ancient tabernacle, for the tent of meeting was an architectural symbol of Yahweh’s plan for the redemption of mankind—the ultimate expression of God’s mercy toward man. Why was the temple built here on Mount Moriah, a few hundred yards from where Abraham had (according to Yahweh’s instructions) intended to sacrifice his son Isaac? It’s because this was where David had sought mercy, and this is where mercy had been granted. So we should not be surprised that this is also where Satan has tried his hardest to obfuscate the message. Since the seventh century A.D., he has maintained his own shrine here—the Dome of the Rock—commemorating everything he can think of to distract the world from the blessed mercy of Yahweh: lies, wishful thinking, apostasy, greed, the appeasement of a false god, and the forced submission of mankind—the artificial suppression of his God-given privilege of free will.

I would love to be able to tell you that scripture predicts a time when the whole world would reject Satan's broad agenda and choose instead the narrow path of Yahweh's mercy. But alas, I'd be lying to you. In the few years remaining between now and the inauguration of the Millennial reign of Christ, the vast majority of humanity will choose either to ignore the plan of God or oppose it. Paul writes, **"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty."** And what will make life so hard to bear, so dangerous and harsh? The evil nature of mankind will no longer be effectively repressed by law and custom, bubbling to the surface only sporadically. Rather it will become the norm. **"For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people."** (II Timothy 3:1-5)

Throughout most of history, man has generally been ruled either by conscience, custom, or clout. Individuals behaved badly from time to time, of course, but society—even in pagan, idolatrous cultures—invariably fostered a "don't rock the boat" mentality. In more primitive societies, fear of the unknown kept people in line. As civilization "advanced," powerful, often repressive, governments tended to keep a lid on dissent, innovation, and nonconformity in thought and action. And occasionally (though alas, all too infrequently) societies arose that were generally receptive to God's law, placing folks who behaved as Paul described out of step with the majority, sometimes to the point of becoming pariahs or outcasts. So one way or another, due either to repression or reverence, overtly evil behaviors like the ones against which we were warned were never able to overrun entire populations. Until now.

What changed? The answer may come as something of a shock. It's the outbreak of *democracy* in today's world. Throughout most of history, only the powerful, the elite, the privileged of society could openly exhibit the traits on Paul's list and expect to get away with it. You couldn't succeed as a selfish, arrogant, abusive, reckless narcissist unless you were first a warlord, prince, priest, merchant, or politician—with the means of enforcement (whether real or merely psychological) at your disposal. But now, thanks to the great American experiment in democracy—one we've done our best to impose on the whole world for the past century or so—every two-bit lowlife, revolutionary, or academic now feels entitled to do whatever he feels like doing, without regard to morals or consequences. Don't get me wrong here: I'm not opposed to democracy, which is, in the end, merely the institutional permutation of Yahweh's gift of free will. But I've been preaching for years that democracy can only work for good in a society driven and guided by Judeo-Christian principles. America used to be such a place, but we have largely turned our back on God in the

interests of greed, political correctness, and a false sense of entitlement. When he's restrained by brute force or by conscience, man tends to keep his evil propensities in check. But teach an unredeemed man that he's only an animal, tell him that there's no such thing as absolute truth or a holy God who loves him, and then give him freedom, and he'll invariably begin to exhibit the attributes on Paul's list.

Once again, I feel compelled to draw a distinction between liberty and license, between freedom and anarchy. Our choices carry consequences—if only bankruptcy and desolation for future generations. Free will is good, but only if you choose what is good for you. The great irony is that it is possible to use the freedom Yahweh has given us to choose to become enslaved. The power is in our hands. Good news, bad news.

In Yahweh's plan, then, it is man's responsibility to make good choices. Or put another way, **"They said to [Yahshua], 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'" (John 6:28-29)** He then proceeded to inform them, through His words, deeds, sacrifice, and ultimately His resurrection, precisely who it was that God had sent—Himself. What we choose to do, whom we elect to trust, invariably reveals itself in our lives. Addressing the scribes and Pharisees, Yahshua explains: **"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."** (Matthew 12:33-37) In other words, the things we do and say will eventually reveal the choices we've made. If we've chosen a relationship with Yahweh, that choice will be reflected in the love we show toward our fellow man. If we've chosen an alliance with Satan, our character profile will look more like what Paul warned Timothy to look out for in the passage we just reviewed. However, if we've chosen nothing, our lives will be a big zero, neither good nor bad, like a fig tree with no fruit on it—just taking up space, sucking up resources, neither helping nor harming anyone, not even ourselves.

Most of Christ's imprecations, of course, were directed toward the "brood of vipers" (read: children of the serpent, Satan) known as the scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests of His day who made it their mission to achieve and maintain

mastery over the hearts and minds of the people. These “snakes” (like their slithering prototype in the Garden of Eden) chose and promoted something far inferior to what Yahweh had intended for mankind. So Yahshua didn’t mince words: **“For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ And He called the people to Him and said to them, ‘Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.”**” (Matthew 15:6-11, cf. Mark 7:7-8) His immediate point (addressing the scribes’ complaint) was that failing to keep the rabbinical interpretation (and expansion) of the Levitical dietary rules wasn’t what defiled someone in the eyes of God; rather, it was what one said, and what he taught. It was an abomination, then, if what someone put forth as “God’s Law” was actually only man’s rules.

But the broader issue was that of whose authority a person accepted. Was his deference to God’s word a pretense, or was it genuine? Put another way, do we see ourselves as having been made in God’s image, or have we made Him in ours—defining and shaping the supposed characteristics of the One we claim to worship in terms of our own preconceived notions and desires? Paul points out that you can’t have it both ways: **“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”** (Galatians 1:10) For some, this thought should come as a stunning epiphany. We are commanded in the Torah to love our fellow man. But here Paul warns us *against* seeking man’s approval, of doing things calculated to “please” him. Thus by definition, loving someone is *not* the same thing as “making him feel good” or “stroking his ego” or “giving him everything he wants.” Rather, love is doing our best to meet his needs—as defined and exemplified by Yahweh.

This may include telling him truths he doesn’t want to hear or warning him about the consequences of his sin. Meeting needs is not necessarily a comfortable or pleasant experience for the recipient. But it’s not a loving act to let a man drown, simply because throwing him a lifeline might imply that he’s not a very good swimmer. He’s *dying*, already: toss him the rope. Worry about his delicate sensibilities later. It’s our responsibility to offer help; it’s his responsibility to choose whether to accept it or drown in his sins. Of course, it doesn’t help to be harsh and judgmental: we’re all sinners, after all. But if we have the means to help someone in need and we fail to do so, we have broken the law of love. Nor does it require a “special anointing,” a seminary education, or unlimited resources to show your love. We need only have reverence for our God—the most basic of human conditions. **“Who is the man who fears Yahweh? Him will He instruct in the way that he should choose. His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land.”** (Psalm 25:12-13) We don’t even have to be smart enough to choose the

correct path. Face it: sometimes the “road” through life looks like a bowl of spaghetti. The twists and turns can fool us. But if we choose to honor Yahweh, He promises to inform us what route to take.

In broad strokes, there are three possible paths we can follow through life (if we’re willing to see the symbolism presented here): **“And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am Yahweh your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow My rules and keep My statutes and walk in them. I am Yahweh your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 18:1-5) These three “paths” reflect the three distinct eternal destinies between which Yahweh has asked us to choose: life, death, and damnation. He, of course, wants us to choose life, for His whole point in creating us was that we might dwell forever in harmony and fellowship with Him. So He has issued rules, statutes, commandments, and laws—that is, instructions for living. Couched in these terms, it may sound as if we have no choice in the matter: “You *shall* keep My statutes and follow My rules.” But Yahweh is this adamant only because of the disastrous consequences we’d face by choosing the alternative: death, or worse. The fact is, we *do* have a choice, though in the final analysis, choosing anything other than life in Yahweh is unthinkable.

The second “option” listed is Egypt, symbolizing bondage in the world. This is a “life” (though you can’t really call it *living*) that leads nowhere. It has no point, no purpose, nothing to look forward to. Egypt is, so to speak, where we were all born, and left to our own devices, we’ll die there. It is the state of being “condemned already” about which Yahshua spoke in John 3:18—a state that can only be escaped through the second birth in the Spirit of Yahweh. The only way out of Egypt, as you’ll recall from the story of the exodus, is indemnification from death through the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb—Yahshua Himself. In eternal terms, Egypt is death, the total cessation of life, both physical and spiritual.

There is a third “option,” however, a far worse fate than having died in bondage in Egypt. “Doing as they do in the land of Canaan” is metaphorical of proactive false worship, the purposeful rejection of Yahweh’s gift of life in favor of false gods invented by man and promoted by Satan. Another name for this path is Babylon—the home of institutionalized evil in the world, and a place from which we’re repeatedly warned to flee. Historically, of course, they’re identical: the Canaanites were practicing religious rites that had first been invented a few generations after the flood in Nimrod’s capital city, and their refusal to repent was what ultimately prompted Yahweh to consign them to destruction, at least within the land He had promised to Abraham. Actually, though, Babylon’s pantheon showed up with little but the names changed all over the ancient world.

Permutations of it are *still* lurking just beneath the surface in the rites of pagan Christianity. Bottom line: if Egypt represents death, then Canaan/Babylon symbolizes damnation—eternal waking torment (a.k.a. hell) in the knowledge that you have purposely opted to wage total war against Almighty God.

Becoming Yahweh's, choosing to be His children, is never “automatic”—the result of following cultural norms or even one's own conscience—for these things, as helpful as they can be, can also lead us astray. Moses pointed out the difference to the children of Israel as they were about to enter the Land: **“You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, for you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that Yahweh your God is giving you.”** (Deuteronomy 12:8-9) His point was that they were still in the wilderness: much of the Torah *could not* be practiced until they settled in the land of promise. And although he didn't say so here, it is also true that they would no longer be able to practice the Torah in all of its detailed glory if they someday rebelled against Yahweh and got themselves thrown out of the Land—something he had warned against repeatedly.

The entire Torah is symbolic of a larger reality—even the “practical” parts like the dietary rules and property laws. One example among hundreds: if you had no fields under cultivation, it would be impossible to *literally* leave the edges and corners unharvested for the benefit of the poor of the land. It was thus meaningless to feign “Torah observance” until they actually entered the Land. But once they were dwelling there, their choice to heed God's instruction (or not) became a matter of evidence: the faithful man would refrain from gleaning the edges of his field. He would, rather, invite the poor to provide for their needs from the bounty God had provided to them through his faithfulness and obedience. The unfaithful man, on the other hand, would be harvesting every last kernel he could, for his trust was in himself, not in the God who had caused his crops to grow in the first place. In the final analysis, it's all relatively simple: **“The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep His Commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”** (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14) Our duty, our responsibility, is to revere Yahweh and heed His instructions—in the letter if we can, but in spirit without fail.

It's all a matter of choice, of free will, of volition. But since we can't perceive the unabridged glory of God, we aren't really choosing to keep His commandments on the basis of who He is—for that is something that must remain hidden from us as long as we inhabit these mortal bodies. In the end, we're merely calculating cause and effect, based on what little we *do* understand—what we *think* we know. So Yahweh, through David, says that it's okay to pursue a good, prosperous, peaceful life, as long as you understand that the sole source of such a life is God Himself. **“What man is there who desires life and loves many days,**

that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of Yahweh are toward the righteous and His ears toward their cry. The face of Yahweh is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.” (Psalm 34:12-16) Again, Yahweh is asking us to choose the good and reject the evil—for our own benefit.

In the West, where our culture is based on Judeo-Christian principles, we tend to assume that nobody wakes up in the morning and decides he'd really *like* to have a crappy life. But in societies where the love of Yahweh is unknown, an entirely different paradigm can come into play. Hatred and covetousness can *in themselves* become self-perpetuating goals. Earlier I mentioned that in late 2001, I went to Israel to do research for a novel (*Tea with Terrorists*) with my co-author, and we got to interview a group of Palestinian terrorists. One of the questions we asked them was, “If you could have one or two of the following things, but not all three, which would be your biggest priority: possession of this land, political autonomy, or a productive economy—an end to poverty?” They all agreed that they didn't really care about prosperity, and that political self-rule would come in a distant second (which sort of surprised us, considering all the vague complaints they'd had about how the Israelis were suppressing them). All they really wanted was undisputed possession of all the land that Israel occupied. They didn't care if they lived forever in squalor and slavery—they were used to that. They merely wanted whatever the Jews had, and they didn't care what they had to do to get it—a goal that ultimately included genocide against their self-proclaimed adversaries. *Their* idea of “seeking peace and pursuing it” was to drive the Jews into the sea. (Actually, the Islamic scriptures greedily envision the same fate for *all* “infidels.” We are to be enslaved—it's called “dhimmitude”—and eventually compelled either to submit to Islam or be executed. Just so you know.)

Thus Yahweh's ideas of what constitutes a “good life” (as expressed in David's Psalm) and Muhammad's are diametrically opposed to each other. Knowing what Islam is all about brings a certain degree of clarity to the issue of choice. With Yahweh, a logical choice results in life, longevity, goodness, honesty, and real peace with God and man. Without Him, human logic (if Islam is any indication) leads to covetousness, premature death, misery, poverty (even if one amasses a great deal of wealth—poverty of soul), deceit, war with your fellow man, and enmity with God.

Our attitudes toward war can be illuminating. If the polls are to be trusted, Americans overwhelmingly honor their fighting men and women, but despise the politicians who send them into harm's way with one hand tied behind their backs—burdened with “rules of engagement” that all but preclude any semblance of “victory.” But naïve solutions like “give peace a chance” aren't the answer either. Yahweh is not a pacifist, but He is very selective about why and how He

asks His people to go to war, and His motivations and methods are the antithesis of political correctness. Check the record: Yahweh goes to war *only* (1) to eradicate irredeemable evil, (2) to protect His people from contamination (or destruction), and (3) with the goal of the enemy's complete and utter destruction. In other words, Yahweh doesn't wage wars to gain territory, resources, or subjects. He doesn't do "police actions" designed to keep people who dishonor Him from hurting each other. He doesn't fight to prop up dictators expected to show favor to Israel or Christianity. He doesn't do it in order to impose democratic forms of government on people. He doesn't ally Himself with pagans to fight apostate Judaism, Crusaders to fight Saracens, Communists to fight Nazis, or Islamists to fight Muslim megalomaniacs. He doesn't compromise, negotiate, or keep "strange bedfellows." People who self-righteously declare that "God is on our side" are invariably mistaken. Unless I've forgotten something, Yahweh has only authorized His people to wage one "war" in the entire history of man: the conquest of Canaan by Israel—a war against seven specific (and now-extinct) nations, confined to a tiny flyspeck of territory hugging the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, and intended to be over within a single generation (if only Yahweh's people had been faithful)—not stretched out over half a millennium.

No, war for Yahweh is an exceedingly rare tactic. His usual *modus operandi* is to teach us how to love each other, one on one. For instance, **"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."** That seems simple enough, notwithstanding the fact that the whole unredeemed world is apparently living instead by the vendetta, saying "Don't forgive, just get even—and then some." But in the same breath, Yahshua goes on to caution us about our attitudes and motivations: **"And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others."** (Matthew 6:14-16) It's not enough to perform "good works," He says. In order for our deeds (like forgiving others, or fasting) to have any real merit, they must be done in the context (not to mention the power) of God's love. Good works done for any other reason—like the praise of men, American-style tax write-offs, Catholic-style bribes, or Islamic-style forced alms (whether the obligatory *zakat* or the onerous *jizyah* imposed upon dhimmis)—are worth nothing. They are their own reward.

It should be patently obvious that life, longevity, goodness, honesty, and peace—the natural results of one's relationship with Yahweh—are going to be elusive goals if we don't share God's love with our neighbors. That's why the "golden rule" is such an important and oft recurring theme in scripture: **"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."** (Matthew 7:12) Note that it's not how we *feel* about them that matters; it's not the extent of our philosophical agreement or similarity in religious practice. It's what we *do* that matters. It is thus—once again—a matter of choice:

the conscious determination to treat those we meet with love and respect—to the extent that we can do so without violating Yahweh’s commandments to remain holy and to turn away from God’s overt enemies (as described in II Timothy 3:1-5, as we saw a few pages back).

Part of that “love and respect” that we are to “do unto others” is to be honest and open about who it is that we worship: if we’re followers of Christ, we should make that fact evident to those we meet, in our words and our walk: **“So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven....”** As I see it, we needn’t be obnoxious and pushy about our faith (since we can’t drag people kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of Heaven anyway), but we shouldn’t be “chameleons,” either. That is, we should present ourselves as who we really are, without regard to the crowd among whom we find ourselves. Ask yourself: do I behave the same way when I’m in Las Vegas for the annual industry convention as I do when I’m in church? If not, something’s wrong.

That’s not to say being consistent and forthright as a believer won’t make some folks uncomfortable: **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”** That’s not a call for bloodshed, but rather a provocative way of stating our need for holiness—separation from the world’s values and standards. **“For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.”** (Matthew 10:32-36) Being at peace with God clearly outweighs remaining at peace with people, if that “peace” entails denying or concealing one’s relationship with Christ. But the “war” we wage with the lost of the world should be one-sided. They can (and do) attack what they don’t understand—what they’re afraid of. But it is our job to turn the other cheek: we believers should never forget that **“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”** (Proverbs 15:1) How we respond to attacks against our faith is a matter of choice. Even if you hate the message, love the messenger.

Though we are held responsible by God, by virtue of the free will He has given us, to make moral choices in this life, it does not follow that He doesn’t care which option we choose. Our bad choices don’t hurt *Him*, of course—not directly, anyway—but He nevertheless instructs us incessantly on how to choose wisely, for our choices carry consequences. Why does He do this? Because He loves us: He desires that we enjoy the good things in life—beginning with a relationship

with Him. Yahweh knows (having built our world) that disobedience to His precepts will *naturally* result in a less-than-ideal outcome for us. You don't have to "punish" someone for disobeying your "command" not to jump off a rooftop: the consequences he'll suffer when he hits the ground are natural and inevitable—not to mention avoidable. God has "commanded" that we refrain from jumping to our deaths. But He refuses to chain us to the guardrail to ensure our compliance. The choice, in the end, is ours alone.

So, although it may seem odd for a God who built us with free will to always be telling us what to do, that's precisely what we see from one end of the Bible to the other. Actually, Yahweh's commandments are given to us *because* we have the intrinsic capability to do as we please. I have been known to "command" my grown children to drive safely, but I could (theoretically) keep them safe by simply locking them in a closet so they couldn't go out and encounter danger in the wide world. We say we trust God, and that's a very good thing. But it may come as a shock to discover that God trusts us as well. Like any good parent, He trains His children, instructs us, equips us, but then He trusts us to make good choices, choices that reflect the nurturing that He has lavished upon us.

That being said, it should be obvious that not everyone is a child of Yahweh. So when we walk out of our Father's front door to face the world, we're going to encounter people who will contradict everything He's taught us. He has warned us about them as well: **"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of Yahweh, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers...."** To be "blessed" (Hebrew: *'esher*) is to be happy, fortunate, in a joyful state of mind—he is to be congratulated. The *Theological Wordbook* notes, "To be 'blessed,' (*'esher*), man has to *do* something," hence, the exercise of choice is implied. The consequences of *not* keeping evil company, behaving as unredeemed sinners do, and mocking the path of righteousness, is to be happy and prosperous—precisely the opposite of what the world would have us believe. The passage goes on to describe this state of blessed contentedness as being observant of Yahweh's instructions, thoughtful, and productive.

But what of the scoffing sinners whose counsel we were warned to avoid? **"The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand [i.e., endure or prevail] in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."** (Psalm 1) No matter how much "air time" the scoffers are given, their lives and influence are a flash in the pan; their opinions won't hold up to scrutiny or to the test of time. They're dead where they stand. And once again, their

disastrous end will be the direct result of having made bad use of the God-given privilege of free will.

The degree of intelligence each of us has is a measure of Yahweh's individual gifting, like athletic ability or physical attractiveness. So what are we to make of *this*? **"The stupid man cannot know; the fool cannot understand this: that though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever."** (Psalm 92:6-7) The "stupidity" (Hebrew *ba'ar*) being spoken of here is not simply a low I.Q., but rather (according to the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages*), "senselessness, stupidity, folly, i.e., to lack understanding, implying arrogance or stubbornness...pertaining to lacking understanding, but implying other negative moral imperfections as well." In other words, this is the kind of stupidity one brings upon himself. If I may offer a bit of personal insight, among my adopted children, several proved to be of "average" intelligence, two were so mentally (and physically) handicapped their I.Q.s were in *single digits*, two hovered in the 60-80 range—low functioning by any standard—and two were extremely bright. In other words, my kids run the gamut. Of the brightest of my children, one is a now successful and productive professional woman, well traveled, respected in her field, and extremely well paid. The other is doing a 128-year stretch in a California prison for his crimes. Intelligence is apparently what you make of it. And of my "slow" kids, both display a trust in God (despite their cognitive challenges) that comprises eloquent testimony to His mercy and grace. As the Psalmist says, **"Yahweh preserves the simple."** (Psalm 116:6) So I must conclude, one's native intelligence has nothing to do with his ability to discern right from wrong, or his choice of which moral path to follow. These things, rather, are a matter of attitude and free will.

Providing balance, Isaiah provides another look at the contrast of consequences between those who choose to do good and those who do evil: **"The meek shall obtain fresh joy in Yahweh, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel...."** The word translated "meek" (*'anaw*) means humble, unpretentious, showing humility—the quality of sincere and straightforward behavior. And "poor" is the Hebrew *'ebyown*, meaning needy, in want, subject to oppression or abuse. The prophet's point—something not really addressed in Psalm 1—is that our temporal circumstances here on earth are not necessarily the only criteria by which the blessings of choosing Yahweh's path might manifest themselves. We can, even in humble or adverse circumstances, have joy in Yahweh's love. We can celebrate in triumph, for we have an eternity of blessed fellowship with our God to look forward to, no matter how oppressed we are at the moment.

Conversely, it matters not how prosperous our oppressors seem to be: their time is short. **"For the ruthless shall come to nothing and the scoffer cease, and all who**

watch to do evil shall be cut off, who by a word make a man out to be an offender, and lay a snare for him who reproveth in the gate, and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right." (Isaiah 29:19-21) Basically, Isaiah is revealing the specific consequences of violating the Ninth Commandment: **"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."** (Exodus 20:16) Is it just me, or do I detect a stern rebuke here against the way politics and jurisprudence are conducted in America these days? Slander and betrayal are evidence of having chosen badly. I suppose the ultimate example of this would be the betrayal of Christ—not only what Judas Iscariot did, but what we humans do every time we refuse to rest in Yahshua's finished work. **"The Son of Man goes as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."** (Matthew 26:24)

David too discusses the consequences of man's poor choices: **"They [the wicked] hold fast to their evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly, thinking, who can see them? They devise iniquities, saying, 'We have perfected a shrewd scheme, for the inward mind and heart of a man are deep!'"** Yes, the arrogance of man is thing of wonder sometimes. Not that it has any basis in reality: **"But God shoots His arrow at them; they are wounded suddenly. They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them; all who see them will wag their heads. Then all mankind fears; they tell what God has brought about and ponder what He has done."** (Psalm 64:5-9) Of course, we haven't seen the second half of this passage come to fruition yet. Man, for the most part, is still under the illusion that he has God outsmarted. But the story isn't over. The consequences of our choices are yet to be revealed.

Here and there throughout scripture, we're given glimpses of how these consequences can play out. One such scenario involved a man named Korah, who led a rebellion against the God-ordained leadership of Moses and Aaron in Israel. Moses (who hadn't really wanted the job in the first place, but who accepted the role when faced with the reality of Yahweh) recognized Korah's insurrection for what it was: rebellion against God Himself. So rather than defending himself before Israel, he merely asked Yahweh to personally confirm His own choice—and do it dramatically. **"Moses said, 'Hereby you [Israel] shall know that Yahweh has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then Yahweh has not sent me. But if Yahweh creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised Yahweh.'** And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up." (Numbers 16:28-32) Lest we assume that this is just an interesting bit of history (or worse, a mere myth), I would be remiss in failing to point out that a similar miraculous disaster (actually, a whole series of them) is scheduled to descend upon the world in which we now live—and for virtually the

same reason: rejection of Yahweh's sovereignty in favor of man's solutions. In fact, the coming Antichrist (a latter-day "Korah" if there ever was one) is prophesied to meet his end in roughly the same way: by being cast *alive* into hell. (See Revelation 19:20.)

Korah and his co-conspirators *chose* their fate—even if they were blissfully unaware of the consequences of their actions until it was too late. And the same thing is true of our generation. The basics haven't changed since Yahweh began interacting with man in the Garden of Eden. But it was Moses who really laid it out for us, in terms no sane person could misunderstand. **"And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that Yahweh, the God of your fathers, is giving you...."**

These statutes, rules, precepts, and laws were Instructions for life and blessing. Our keeping them did nothing for God, and very little for the people He placed in positions of responsibility. (Note: I didn't say "positions of power." *No one* had political power in Israel's theocracy.) All the "rules" did for the priests and Levites was give them a ton of work to do, while putting their prospects for temporal prosperity squarely in the hands of the people, who were *instructed* by God to take care of them through faithfully rendering the tithe. No one would ever get rich off the tithe, but if the people failed in their responsibility, the Levites suffered. No, the instructions benefited only one group of people: those who chose to follow them. And, as I have mentioned before, for the system to work as Yahweh intended, the nation as a whole would have to observe the Torah—it wouldn't do much practical good for a few scattered individuals to adhere to the statutes if everybody around them ignored God's law.

So Moses admonishes Israel, **"See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as Yahweh my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people....'"** Here, a second purpose for all these statutes and precepts is introduced, and it draws us closer to their true and ultimate purpose. The laws weren't really intended to be an end unto themselves (though many of them were eminently practical, resulting in a well-ordered society), but they were, rather, to be symbolic of a larger reality, an overarching, earthshaking truth: they described how fallen mankind could be reconciled to a holy God. That explains why, for the vast majority of precepts, there was no overt enforcement provision, at least none that people were instructed to carry out. There was no police force, standing judiciary class, or penal system. A guilty person's *status* might change (he might be "cut off" from his people, sent outside the camp, or be forced to seek shelter in a city of refuge), and he might be required to make restitution for something he had stolen or destroyed, but only in very rare instances was a "sentence" (like burning at the

stake or stoning) to be carried out by the congregation—and then invariably in response to overt idolatry or an act (like adultery) that *symbolized* idolatry. The point was that the surrounding nations—that’s everybody else, the gentiles—were to observe Israel’s idyllic life under Yahweh’s law, and realize that it was infinitely superior to whatever they were doing. It was, in fact, a window on the ultimate spiritual truth—the only such window in all of creation.

The consequences of idolatry—which in the end is anything that takes precedence over Yahweh in our affections or motivations—were spelled out as well: **“If you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of Yahweh your God, so as to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And Yahweh will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where Yahweh will drive you.”** As usual, Yahweh doesn’t say *how* the punishment will be effected, only that it will. Both literally and figuratively, the consequences of our poor choices are *natural* phenomena. God doesn’t have to “punish” you for stepping out in front of a moving bus. **“And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But from there you will seek Yahweh your God and you will find Him, if you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”** (Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-6, 25-29) What’s the punishment for idolatry? Ironically, it’s that you’ll end up worshiping *idols* instead of Yahweh. But while life (whether individual or national) remains, repentance is possible. If we seek Yahweh sincerely and intently, He will make Himself known—even to those who have wandered away. That being said, if someone has received Satan’s spirit instead of God’s—a condition known as “the unforgiveable sin” (see Matthew 12:31-32)—repentance is precluded: such a person *never* seeks Yahweh. But the truth should be self evident: if we keep our eyes and hearts focused on Yahweh and His Messiah, we’ll never fall into idolatry in the first place.

The ultimate “idol” is not some false deity like Ba’al, Allah, or even Satan. It’s *humanity itself*, the “god” of the most insidious religion of all: atheistic secular humanism. As he puffs out his chest and declares proudly, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul,” man is merely demonstrating that he has a head of wood and a heart of stone—just as Moses had warned him. Jeremiah’s message was a bit more direct: **“Thus says Yahweh: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from Yahweh. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land....”** The Mephistopheles legends notwithstanding, nobody really trusts Satan (although that may change in the Last Days). During the past century or so, however, it has become fashionable to worship man. The Communists in Russia and China developed this man-centric,

anti-god philosophy into an art form, and their populations (just as Jeremiah had predicted) shriveled and died by the hundreds of millions. Nazism, though pagan at heart, is another political religion that “trusts in man and makes flesh his strength,” and we all know what happened to Germany under the rule of Hitler’s “master-race.”

Another example of this principle: the “purest” popular form of Satan worship on the planet today is Islam, in which people are told they must submit to Allah and express their prophet’s hatred for Jews and Christians (and everybody else) by fighting in Allah’s cause with their lives and property—“with full force and weaponry,” as the Noble Qur’an phrases it—a phenomenon called *jihad*. But for some odd reason, it never occurs to Muslims that their god does *nothing*: he doesn’t fight their battles, provide for the needs of life, or answer prayer—or at least, he never has in any demonstrable way. If Muslims want something—even if it’s the destruction of their god’s enemies—they have to get it for themselves. Allah doesn’t help—*ever*. All he does for them (if the Islamic scriptures are to be allowed as evidence) is threaten eternal torment in hell for everyone whom he didn’t personally *predestine* to inhabit paradise. In Islam, god does nothing productive; man must do everything. So the shocking fact is, Muhammad didn’t really honor Allah at all. The black rock of the Ka’aba was merely recruited as a focal point, a means to get everybody bowing in the same direction. No, Muhammad “trusted in *man*, and made flesh his strength.” He and his followers are therefore “cursed” to endure a dry, barren existence. It is my experience that the poorest follower of Yahshua is “richer” than the wealthiest Muslim.

In contrast, **“Blessed is the man who trusts [*batach*: to have confidence in] Yahweh, whose trust [*mibtach*: security or safety] is Yahweh. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.’ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it? I, Yahweh, search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”** (Jeremiah 17:5-10) There is a place for work, of course—for human endeavor leading to prosperity and security. God *expects* us to work. Adam had a job to do even before he left the Garden. But the issue isn’t who’s performing the labor; it’s who we’re trusting for the increase. The natural man trusts himself; the child of Yahweh trusts his heavenly Father. We all have “enemies,” whether of the human variety, our temporal circumstances, or our own mortality. The man who goes about his life’s work trusting Yahweh to bring it to fruition is blessed. He who doesn’t, isn’t. It’s the lesson of the Sabbath: in the end, we can’t work to obtain favor with God; we must rather rest in His grace.

Consider the words of Yahshua: **“I tell you, everyone who acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who**

denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” (Luke 12:8-9) What does it mean to “acknowledge” Him before men? To admit that He once lived upon the earth, taught in the streets of Israel, and died like a criminal upon a Roman cross? No, those are mere historical facts, like admitting the sky is blue or water is wet. “Acknowledging” Christ is personally embracing the fact that He was the fulfillment of the Torah’s sacrificial symbols, the means provided by Yahweh to redeem us from our bondage in sin and to reconcile us to Himself. Furthermore, it includes taking a stand before men, publicly expressing one’s faith in this truth. Notwithstanding the fact that you can get folks to say almost anything you want by torturing them, it is impossible to publicly deny Christ while privately receiving Him. And by the way, the converse is also true: it is impossible to convincingly and consistently pose as a child of God while denying Him in your heart. Oh, you may deceive some of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool Yahweh for a nanosecond.

That which we believe will invariably be revealed by what we do and what we say. A classic example of this is the report of the twelve spies who were sent in to the promised land to assess its potential and its pitfalls. They all agreed that it was a bountiful place, a land of milk and honey. But ten of the spies, being of a mind to “trust in man and make flesh their strength” (as Jeremiah would later put it), perceived only well armed giants in “a land that devours its inhabitants.” Pharaoh and the Egyptian army hadn’t exactly been pushovers either, but the ten spies had completely forgotten the miraculous circumstances through which Israel had left their chains behind. Only Joshua and Caleb factored in what they all should have remembered: that Yahweh was fighting their battles for them. Recalling the scene later, Moses said, **“Yahweh’s anger was kindled on that day, and He swore, saying, ‘Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed Me, none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed Yahweh.’”** (Numbers 32:10-12) “Wholly following Yahweh” doesn’t mean that Joshua and Caleb were sinless. It means that they trusted Yahweh to be as good as His word. The spies had all seen the same thing. Canaan was a fertile, well-watered land that had been promised to their ancestors by God Himself, but at the moment it was overrun with hordes of large lads with bad attitudes. Joshua and Caleb “acknowledged Yahweh before men” and lived to enter the promised land—kicking some serious nephilim butt in the process. The other ten proclaimed their “secular humanist” proclivities before the congregation, so they died in the wilderness, suffering the inevitable consequences of their own poor choices.

Let us not deceive ourselves. Although we all like to imagine that we would have sided with Caleb and Joshua when the chips were down, in the real world the issues are often not quite so clearly delineated. Have you ever been tempted to

compromise your integrity at work for fear of the unemployment line? Have you ever noticed your “patriotic duty” conflicting with the will of God? What do you do when you feel you ought to vote, but the only choices offered on the ballot are a godless weasel and a self-serving moron? Do you “play it safe” when an opportunity to serve God looks like it might be politically incorrect or financially unwise? Paul admonishes us: **“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?”** (Romans 2:1-3) While it is our responsibility to judge between alternative responses to life’s challenges, we are not to condemn other *people* who make bad choices. People do dumb things. We should consider their experiences to be valuable lessons for us, knowledge we can apply to better our own lives. If we examine the consequences of the choices others have made, we might be able to use the information to make the world a better place. Identifying mistakes can be helpful; placing blame seldom is.

The consequences of our choices, whether bad or good ones, are not restricted to ourselves. They also affect those around us. Yahshua told His disciples: **“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”** (Matthew 5:13-16) Other people see what we do. They perceive our motivation, and they weigh the good we intended against the unintended consequences of our actions—and lay the blame (or credit) at the feet of the God we say we’re following. (This is true no matter what deity we claim to follow, whether Yahweh, Zeus, Allah, Brahma, or the guy in the mirror—true God or false, it doesn’t matter.) It therefore behooves Christians to walk circumspectly in the world, for the people who see what we do will either bless Yahweh or curse Him, based solely on what *we* do. I know: it’s not fair. Deal with it.

For His part, Yahweh never fails in His “responsibilities.” That is, He always keeps His promises, for better or worse. The young King Solomon, fully intending to honor Yahweh throughout his reign, prayed that Yahweh would keep the promises He had made to David his father: **“O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no God like You, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to Your servants who walk before You with all their heart, who have kept with Your servant David my father what You declared to him. You spoke with Your mouth, and with Your hand have fulfilled it this day. Now therefore, O Yahweh, God of Israel, keep for**

Your servant David my father what You have promised him, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to sit before Me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before Me as you have walked before Me.' Now therefore, O God of Israel, let Your word be confirmed, which You have spoken to Your servant David my father." (I Kings 8:23-26) God eventually did precisely what He had promised, but Solomon should have paid more attention to his own words. The line of kings—ending in the Messiah—would be contingent upon David's sons "paying close attention to their way, and walking before Yahweh as David had walked before Him." As an old man, Solomon would (in order to please his foreign wives) allow and facilitate idolatry in Israel. So in keeping His word, Yahweh saw to it that the Messianic line would be traced not through Solomon, but through his faithful half-brother Nathan, whose direct descendant was Mary, the mother of Yahshua. The consequences of Solomon's poor choices in later life cost him dearly. Legally, the Messiah would still be his royal heir (since Yahshua's adoptive father, Joseph, was of Solomon's line). But biologically, Solomon had disqualified himself by abandoning the exclusive worship of Yahweh. There's a lesson for us in there somewhere.

Once we get past the rather surprising fact that Yahweh uses "man" as a symbol with which to communicate one facet of His own nature—inherent volition—we shouldn't let the thought pendulum swing too far in the other direction and begin imagining that God and man are somehow equals, evenly matched on some level, whether as colleagues or adversaries. That would be as big a mistake as concluding that since God is infinitely greater than we are, He couldn't possibly relate to or care about us on a personal level. We are neither gods nor worms, but are rather sentient creatures uniquely equipped to respond to Yahweh's love.

The Bible therefore goes out of its way to make sure we know the score. God and humanity are contrasted at every turn. We must resist the temptation to ascribe human foibles to Yahweh, the way the ancient Greeks imagined their gods: evocative of universal human character traits or natural phenomena, powerful but petty, emotional, venal, selfish, and covetous. The God of the Bible is nothing like that. He is not a product of the universe, but external to it—its Creator and Sustainer. So Moses informs us, **"God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind."** (Numbers 23:19) Later, we read, **"The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for He is not a man, that He should have regret."** (I Samuel 15:29) Of course, there are several instances in scripture in which Yahweh apparently *did* change His mind, stating His intention to destroy a group

of people, only to relent in the face of genuine repentance or the sincere prayers the righteous on behalf of the guilty. Is there an inconsistency here? Not really, when we factor in the omniscience of Yahweh. Not only are His “threats” *designed* to encourage repentance leading to restoration, and not only does His foreknowledge (the ability to see things that haven’t actually happened yet) render Him incapable of miscalculation, but His very character—love personified—makes it impossible for Yahweh to remain angry with us when we have genuinely turned away from our sins. Forgiveness is in His nature (though we should always remain cognizant of the *natural* consequences of disobedience—things in which the purposeful “wrath” of God plays no role at all, such as the diseases that can visit us as a consequence of violating His dietary instructions).

It was a constant source of amazement to the writers of scripture that Almighty God was interested in man. Part of it was our comparative fragility, the consequence of our fallen nature: **“O Yahweh, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.”** (Psalm 144:3-4) Part of it was our apparent inability to live in holiness—no matter how much we wanted to: **“What is man, that You make so much of him, and that you set Your heart on him, visit him every morning and test him every moment?”** (Job 4:17-18) Part of it was our utter insignificance in comparison to what we can perceive of Yahweh’s creation: **“When I look at your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; You have put all things under his feet.”** (Psalm 8:3-6) We weren’t even the “best” kind of creature God made. There was an entire order of created being that had capabilities far in excess our own—by God’s design. Why then would He assign *us*, and not the more powerful angels (literally: messengers), to administer His affairs here on earth? We are admittedly the “B” team, the junior varsity. But we are gifted with one attribute the angels do not have: the privilege of choice. Angels are *ordered* to obey Yahweh; we are *asked*.

It’s not unheard of for men to mistake angels (or their fallen counterparts, demons) for “gods.” The Hindu pantheon lists millions of them. But although they’re considerably more capable than people, angels can’t be equated with Yahweh any more than we can. **“Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water!”** (Job 15:15-16) Yahweh is in a class of one: Creator, not creature; Sovereign, not subject; Source, not derivative; eternal, not temporal. So when mere men demand to be worshiped as if they were deity, the One True God is not amused: **“The word of Yahweh came to me: ‘Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, thus says the Sovereign Yahweh: ‘Because your heart is proud, and you have said, “I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,” yet you are but a**

man, and no god, though you make your heart like the heart of a god.” (Ezekiel 28:1-2) It’s not just the ludicrous comparison, it’s that people under the control of such an arrogant madman are invariably robbed, to some extent, of their free will.

So Yahweh cautions us not to heed men as we would God, rendering undue honor, deference, or obedience to them. Rather, **“Stop regarding man [Hebrew: *adam*] in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?”** (Isaiah 2:22) The word translated “breath” here is our old friend *neshamah*, the attribute of Adam’s race that distinguishes us from mere animals, gives us volition, and defines us as having been made in the image and likeness of God. We are told to “stop regarding” men, that is, cease treating them like gods, abandon our receptiveness to their pretensions, refrain from empowering them, and refuse to see them—even the best of them—as anything more significant than fellow creatures in need of God’s love. We tend to idolize our heroes and vilify those who disappoint us. If we heeded Isaiah’s admonition, however, we would tend to demand less of our fellow man at his best, and be more forgiving of him at his worst, for we all have the same potential for greatness—and for failure. Stop *regarding* man; loving him is quite enough.

As Scottish poet Robert Burns reminded us, “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft a-gley.” Wise men know, however, that Yahweh’s plans *never* go awry. As Solomon put it, **“The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from Yahweh.... The heart of man plans his way, but Yahweh establishes his steps.”** (Proverbs 16:1, 9) God and man both share the attribute of volition, but only Yahweh also has the ability to carry His plans out: what He wishes, how He wishes, and when He wishes. Perfect foreknowledge allows God to avoid any and all unforeseen or unintended consequences. Why then, you may well ask, do things go wrong in our world? Much of it is that He has turned over to His children—*us*—the keys to the workshop. He could easily hammer that nail into the board by Himself, but He wants us to learn how to do it. So He hands the hammer to His six-year-old and tells him to take a swing. Sometimes we hit the nail on the head; sometimes it even sinks into the wood a little. Sometimes, however, we hit our thumbs, or worse, our brother’s thumb. But how else are we to learn, to progress, to mature?

We don’t have all of the answers. As a matter of fact, we often don’t even know what questions to ask. It should not be surprising, then, to discover that we are usually poor judges of our own motives. **“All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but Yahweh weighs the spirit. Commit your work to Yahweh, and your plans will be established.”** (Proverbs 16:2-3) The better we come to know our God, the more adept we’ll become at assessing what we ourselves are doing. A personal illustration may help to get the point across. As a teenager, my eldest son was very interested in cars; no big surprise there. As a loving parent, I didn’t want him

making the same sorts of mistakes my generation had—building high powered hot rods and racing muscle cars (the kind of thing immortalized in innumerable Beach Boys songs). But I didn't want to stifle his creative spirit, either. So (in addition to surrendering my garage to him for two years so he could restore an ancient Volkswagen) I taught him how to use my radial arm saw and other woodworking tools, knowledge he used to build a custom speaker enclosure for the woofers in his car's stereo. Next thing I knew, he had a full-blown cottage industry going, building earsplitting automotive sound systems for his friends: I had created a monster. Sure, my son's "ways were pure in his own sight," but there were things he hadn't factored in—like the fact that we lived in a quiet, peaceable neighborhood, and I wanted to keep it that way. I didn't make him shut down his fledgling little business, but I did insist that he familiarize himself with our city's noise abatement ordinances, and prohibited him from "test-firing" his thumping Richter-scale 4.0 creations in our driveway. (I never did tell him of my own noisy adventures as a garage band guitarist when I'd been his age.) Somehow, we all survived my son's "boom box" phase, because he "committed his work" to his father's broader, more comprehensive outlook. We too would do well to heed *our* Father's (i.e., Yahweh's) advice and counsel in matters we don't fully understand—like life itself. If we do, our "plans will be established."

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, "Don't follow me. I'm lost." Outside of the knowledge and experience that can only be gained by walking with Yahweh, all of us could well say the same thing. Jeremiah puts it like this: **"I know, O Yahweh, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps. Correct me, O Yahweh, but in justice; not in your anger, lest You bring me to nothing."** (Jeremiah 10:23-24) This speaks to the fundamental dichotomy that exists between man and God. We are not able to save ourselves, to guide ourselves, to give ourselves life in any lasting sense. Only Yahweh is able to do that. But in order to access the life we intuitively know is possible, we must voluntarily submit to His direction. He corrects our course through life not because He wants to maintain control over us, but because we won't—we *can't*—find our way home any other way.

Finding our way in life is a multi-step process. First, we need to figure out where we ought to be headed. Any destination other than Yahweh Himself will prove to be less than ideal—a dead end, a waste of time and effort. Second, we must determine how to get there. Yahshua the Messiah (as He informed us in John 14:6) is the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to Yahweh except through Him. Third, we must choose to be born of the Spirit of God—that is, we must *act upon* the fact that Yahshua is the way to God. Simply knowing about it is not sufficient: we have to receive Him, trust Him, rely upon Him, and assimilate Him. It's like food: *having it* is not enough. You have to *eat it* if you want it to do you any good.

Reliance upon Yahweh doesn't happen in a vacuum, however. Our adversaries aren't necessarily nebulous circumstances of nature like hunger or thirst, heat or cold. Sometimes they're *people* who neither honor God nor love their fellow man, people who play by a different set of rules than we do. It's one thing for us to admit that we must rely upon Yahweh; it's something else entirely to have to deal with people who rely only upon themselves—rendering the rest of us potential collateral damage. Ignorance may be bliss, but only for the ignorant. Those who get in their way can find it downright inconvenient. So we read, **“Asa cried to Yahweh his God, ‘O Yahweh, there is none like You to help, between the mighty and the weak. Help us, O Yahweh our God, for we rely on You, and in Your name we have come against this multitude. O Yahweh, You are our God; let not man prevail against You.’”** (II Chronicles 14:11) That last thought is awfully sagacious. It points out something we all too often forget: if men *seem* to be “prevailing against God,” it's not because they actually *are*. It's only because Yahweh has allowed His people to experience a setback at the hands of His enemy—invariably in order to teach us something important. Asa understood that our best defense against this eventuality is absurdly simple: first, learn what He wants us to know through His instruction, so He won't have to use ungodly people as a rod of correction; and then, *ask God not to let it happen*. However, we shouldn't make the mistake of assuming that “God is on our side.” God is on *His own* side: it's incumbent upon us to align ourselves with Him, not the other way around. But if we have done this, we have earned the right to ask Him, **“Arise, O Yahweh! Let not man prevail; let the nations be judged before You! Put them in fear, O Yahweh! Let the nations know that they are but men!”** (Psalm 9:19-20)

No one who knows Yahweh would want to find himself at odds with Him or with those He loves. People who *don't* know Him, however, have no qualms about attacking Israel, suppressing Christianity, and doing whatever can be done to keep lost sheep lost. So Isaiah offers this bit of encouragement from Yahweh: **“Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is My law; fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool; but My righteousness will be forever, and My salvation to all generations.”** (Isaiah 51:7-8) The caveat there, of course, is that we must “know righteousness” and revere God's Instructions, for if we don't—if we're merely following manmade religious tradition instead of Yahweh's actual word—we might find ourselves like the proverbial moth-eaten wool sweater in the end: with lives full of holes.

Does this mean we must become perfect, sinless creatures in order to enjoy “Yahweh's salvation to all generations”? Yes and no. God is under no illusions: we're works in progress. No one attains *real* sinlessness in this life. What we *can* attain, however, is a cloak of innocence—a garment of light through which Yahweh chooses not to see our shortcomings. This metaphorical “robe of

righteousness,” referred to over and over again in scripture, is available only as a gift from God: it cannot be purchased by man with gold or good deeds, for it is far too costly for us to even comprehend. Its price is *beyond* price: life itself, the shed blood of the Messiah, just as the Torah’s sacrifices and offerings predicted a hundred times over.

Men used to understand the vast dichotomy between God’s righteousness and our feeble attempts to do the right thing. In the Book of Job, the oldest writings in scripture, this principle is expressed time and again. Eliphaz the Temanite asks, **“What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?”** (Job 15:14) **“Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker? Even in His servants he puts no trust, and His angels He charges with error; how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like the moth.”** (Job 4:17-19) If Yahweh can’t even trust His angels—who are brilliant and powerful but have no inherent free will—to do what He requires of them, how can He trust man, who is relatively weak and clueless?

Job himself struggled with the same problem: **“How can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to contend with Him, one could not answer Him once in a thousand times.”** (Job 9:2-3) Job, being “blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil,” (Job 1:1) did not wish to “contend” with Yahweh in the sense of arguing with or challenging Him (though he *did* want to know why God was contending with him—Job 10:2). But his circumstances forced Job to defend himself before His God as he was asked (as he had feared) a “thousand” impossible questions, none of which could he—or anybody else—adequately answer. The lopsided discussion is recorded in chapters 39-41. Tellingly, we read, **“Yahweh answered Job, and said: ‘Shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it.’ Then Job answered Yahweh and said: ‘Behold, I am vile. What shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further.’”** (Job 41:1-5) The point of all this confrontation was to remind Job (and his friends) that they were mere men, while Yahweh was Almighty God.

We’re supposed to know the difference, but this is something that modern man has largely forgotten (or chosen to ignore), to our shame. We arrogantly attempt to convince ourselves that God doesn’t exist, or if He does, is as we imagine Him to be rather than the way He revealed Himself. We are told that He’s a “friend of sinners” and we jump to the conclusion that He’s a lot like us, more Buddy than Sovereign. We hear that He is a God of love and mercy, and we irrationally take that to mean that He must have no standards, no opinion, and certainly no intention of punishing the wicked. So naturally, we can’t figure out why it rains on the just and the unjust alike, and why God doesn’t use His “magical powers” to extricate us from every predicament. If God has standards,

why hasn't He crushed us in retribution for our transgressions? And if God loves us, why do we still face trials? The answers take us back to who Yahweh is and how He has made us—creatures of free will whose primary responsibility in this life is to decide what to do with the love He has showered upon us: reciprocate it, or reject Him. His love precludes Him from forcing us to do anything.

Even the most hardened atheist senses, deep down, that he has character flaws—that he has failed to meet some standard of moral perfection that is apparently common to our race. Why does he *know* that stealing small children and eating them is wrong? Why does he congratulate Mother Teresa and castigate Adolph Hitler? He'll try to chalk up his attitudes and trepidations to evolution, of course, but refuses to recognize that nowhere else in the animal kingdom is there even a hint of the god-sense (and resulting conviction of moral guilt) that he finds so uncomfortable, that he tries so hard to suppress. So (unless he's mentally ill) his conscience convicts him. If there's a God, he asks, why has He not punished me? David provides the answer: **"As a father shows compassion to his children, so Yahweh shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more...."** That's the natural order of things: we're born, we live, and then we die.

But since Yahweh is not only living, but is *life itself*, we can, if we choose, partake of that same essential life by becoming part of Yahweh's family. **"But the steadfast love of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments."** (Psalm 103:13-18) The reason God does not summarily destroy us the first time we step over the line into sin is that we're *born* into this sorry state, whether we realize it or not. Yahshua called it being "condemned already" in John 3:18. Our mortality—the fact that left to our own devices, we'll die at the end our lifespan—is a curse under which we all come into the world. But life needn't end when our bodies die. Our souls can live on for eternity—if we have received Yahweh's Holy Spirit by "keeping His covenant" and "doing His commandments." That may sound like "doing good works," but it's not. The covenant and commandments are personified in the life and sacrifice of Christ, who kept God's promise and fulfilled the requirements of the Law on our behalf. Therefore, if we have received His Spirit by allowing His blood to atone for our sins, we have indeed kept Yahweh's covenant.

That's not to say the whole thing isn't awfully counterintuitive. Man *never* could have dreamed up such an elegant and unlikely salvation scenario. Yahshua Himself pointed this out to His disciples: **"And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He said this plainly. And Peter**

took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’” (Mark 8:31-33) Peter was “only trying to help.” He thought that perhaps the Messiah was becoming discouraged, disheartened, even despondent. It never occurred to him that Yahshua wasn’t depressed about His prospects for success. He was merely revealing Yahweh’s plan for the salvation of mankind—explaining how the commandments of the Torah would all come to fruition in His own bloody sacrifice.

Still, it sounded terribly harsh to call Peter “Satan.” Was he really calling His disciple *the devil*? Not really. “Satan” actually means “adversary.” It’s not Lucifer’s name (actually, *Lucifer* isn’t really the devil’s name either) but his title, his job description: he is our adversary, our opponent, our accuser. By suggesting (in his ignorance) that Christ should sidestep the cross, Peter had placed himself in an adversarial position with the plan of God. Yahshua was right to slam the brakes on this line of thought—*hard*. As logical as they may have sounded rolling off the tongue, man’s solutions to sin had always been ill-conceived, self-centered, and inadequate. Yahweh’s solution, meanwhile, was unexpected, counterintuitive, horribly expensive (for God), and perfectly efficacious. I for one am willing to cut Peter a little slack here: *nobody* saw this coming. He merely blurted out what everybody was thinking. We should not forget that it was also Peter (not two minutes before this) who had been the first to blurt out the truth about Yahshua’s identity: “**And Jesus went on with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they told Him, ‘John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.’ And He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered Him, ‘You are the Christ.’**” (Mark 8:27-29) Yes, He was Yahweh’s “Anointed One.” What no one understood—yet—was the role He had been anointed to fulfill. King? Conqueror? Priest? All of those things would have to wait. For now, He was anointed to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Lest we lose sight of our destination while walking toward it, let us pause to review the past few pages. We’ve been exploring how Yahweh uses *man* as a symbol to reveal something about Himself to us. Although we’re infinitely inferior to our Creator in every way, we do share something in common—an attribute He placed within us: volition, the privilege of free will. It’s something no other creature possesses, and it’s largely what defines us as having been made “in the image and likeness of God.” Why does God let men choose our individual destinies? After all, there is risk involved: the privilege of choice implies our

ability—even *permission*—to choose poorly. But it’s a risk Yahweh is willing to take, because it allows us, as nothing else could, to participate in *His own* fundamental character trait: love. Love requires free will, both on the giving and the receiving end. It is impossible, in fact, to share a loving relationship with a being who cannot choose whether or not to reciprocate it.

However, just because we’re free to choose our own fate, it doesn’t follow that it doesn’t matter (to God *or* to us) which fate we choose. There are natural consequences to our actions, which explains why Yahweh expends so much time and energy “telling us” what to do. His “commandments” pepper the Bible from one end to the other, but they don’t inhibit choice; they facilitate it. Yahweh’s instructions provide a clear look at the options. They help us choose whether or not to reciprocate the love He’s lavished upon us. But since love is a rather nebulous, ill-defined concept, He couches our choices in terms we’re more likely to understand: His precepts allow us to opt between blessing and cursing, between life and death. We therefore have a responsibility to make wise, well-reasoned choices—and to teach others (if they’ll listen) about their options as well. We can’t make other people’s choices for them, but we can give them sound advice—*if* we know the truth.

And that brings us to our final area of inquiry concerning man as a symbol. If we are to exercise our volition, if we are to make good choices, we must first understand what our needs are. I’m not talking about the sorts of things every animal knows by virtue of the instincts God has built within them—the need for food, water, shelter, procreation, and survival. I’m talking about needs unique to beings who have free will—things that are essential not merely in our mortal lives, but also in the essential, eternal lives God has made available to us. Our bodies tell us we need food, but the rumbling of our empty souls informs us of another, more basic need. Moses reminded Israel, **“He [Yahweh] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh.”** (Deuteronomy 8:3, cf. Matthew 4:4) Our first, most essential need is divine instruction—the word of God. We cannot think, work, buy, or meditate our way into Yahweh’s presence: we must, rather, listen to His voice, believe what He’s told us, and rest in His covenant.

Second, because we’re sinners, we all need forgiveness. Thus Solomon prayed, **“Whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all Your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven Your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart You know, according to all his ways (for You, You only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind).”** (I Kings 8:38-39) The “house” to which he referred, of course, was the newly built temple. But since the temple isn’t so much a building

as it is a comprehensive symbol of Yahweh's plan for our reconciliation with Him, the concept of praying "toward this house" is still valid, though the temple no longer stands. It means petitioning Yahweh in the context of His will, in reliance on His strength, in compliance with His plan, and in reference to His love.

We shouldn't skim over that phrase "to each whose heart You know." Our prayers—whether for forgiveness, intercession, or adoration—are only as good as our own attitudes. We may be able to feign sincerity before men, but Yahweh knows how we really feel: **"Do not look on his appearance.... For Yahweh sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks on the heart."**

(I Samuel 16:7) This highlights the third universal human need: wisdom, discernment, common sense—the need to be honest with ourselves and realistic about our Creator. Solomon had a great deal to say about wisdom—and man's need for it. For instance, **"Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."** (Proverbs 9:9-10) One thing we tend to forget is that worldly success (what might be referred to as "the outward appearance") does not necessarily imply wisdom. In fact, the pride that so often accompanies worldly wealth is an impediment to godly insight. **"A rich man is wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has understanding will find him out."** (Proverbs 28:11)

This dichotomy of arrogant blindness vs. humble wisdom will come into sharp focus as we approach the last days. Jeremiah prophesied, **"O Yahweh, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble, to You shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say: 'Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things in which there is no profit.'" Don't look now, but it appears as if the world has, to a great extent, begun to come to this uncomfortable realization. After decades—or centuries—of enduring the religious dogma, the political philosophies, and the economic theories of godless men, the world (though it still has no solutions) is finally waking up to the fact that what their fathers told them is mostly lies. Unfortunately however, our race hasn't yet summoned the wisdom to understand Jeremiah's next observation: **"Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods!"** At the moment, mankind, while rejecting the false gods of past generations, is still of a mind to make all new false gods for itself, instead of turning to the true and living God. So Yahweh says, **"Therefore, behold, I will make them know, this once I will make them know My power and My might, and they shall know that My name is Yahweh."** (Jeremiah 16:19-21) It's a vicious cycle: because man did not revere Yahweh, he never gained wisdom, but made himself a fool, *incapable* of knowing God. This cycle, however, will be broken during the coming Tribulation, when Yahweh will show the men in no uncertain terms who He is, and what's in store for them if they reject His covenant. We have always had the means to perceive Yahweh's**

“power and might,” but most of us have ignored the evidence, the entreaties, and the instructions. So during the last seven years of this age, God will *make* them know. The evidence will, for once, be unmistakable—which is not to say many won’t choose to remain “mistaken” until the bitter end.

Walking hand in hand with wisdom is mankind’s fourth fundamental need: moral courage—the determination to do what we know is right even if we can expect negative consequences. There were those who fell into this trap when Yahshua walked the earth: **“Many even of the authorities believed in Him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”** (John 12:42-43) The Pharisees were the opinion-shapers of Israel. They were the ones whose way of thinking “counted” among the masses and in the halls of power, for although their numbers were small (there were never more than six thousand of them, in a nation of several million) they had convinced the populace that they—by virtue of their strict observance of the Torah and traditions of Israel—had God in their back pocket. Yahshua, of course, understood that they had missed the point of the Torah entirely—that it wasn’t a set of onerous rules and regulations designed to appease God, laws that could only be kept (more or less) through herculean effort and single minded determination, but rather a prophetic picture of what He Himself had come to accomplish—nothing less than the salvation of mankind.

Thus the Pharisees compelled folks in positions of authority to make a choice: keep your mouth shut and remain a respected member of society, honored in the synagogue and esteemed by the masses, or openly acknowledge your belief in the mission and identity of Yahshua—and suffer expulsion from the synagogue (the rough equivalent of excommunication) and the loss of prestige among the people. It was the same sort of “cover-your-butt” attitude that had originally prompted Nicodemus (a member of the Sanhedrin) to wait until nightfall to approach Yahshua with his questions. Nicodemus didn’t stay “in the closet,” but many did. It was a subtle form of idolatry. By refusing to openly acknowledge their beliefs concerning Yahshua, these leaders were stating, ever so eloquently, “You may be the Messiah, Yahweh’s emissary, the chosen One—but we hold the cultural clout of the Pharisees in even higher esteem. Anointed or not, you’re not worth the risk of losing our positions of prominence in this community.”

This ugly phenomenon is still endemic in American society—a place (one of the last) where nominal Christianity is still tolerated. If an “authority,” that is, someone who holds a position of leadership or influence in our nation, comes out publically in favor of an unabashed, unmitigated view of who Christ is—a position in line with scripture—then he or she can *expect* to be vehemently attacked in the mainstream media as being unbalanced, narrow-minded, and

bigoted against people of other faiths. The “powers that be” in this country are happy to tolerate any belief system that honors a manmade caricature of god, a feel-good watered-down religious philosophy, or a shades of gray situational moral code. But it’s impossible to hide their obvious squirming discomfort with an unapologetic alliance with the true and living God—Yahweh and His Messiah, Yahshua. Ordinary folks are left alone, of course, for we don’t represent a threat to the status quo. We’re written off as being eccentric but harmless—as long as we have no voice, to speak of, in the world.

On the other hand, in many places in our world today, being an unapologetic public proponent of Yahweh can get you killed. Israel may have rejected Him first, but they were merely ahead of the curve. Nowadays, the whole world rejects Yahweh and His Messiah, except for small pockets of believers with an unshakable testimony but little real influence (as prophesied of the Church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:8). This too was prophesied: **“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you [Israel], the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”** (Acts 4:11-12) I am happy to report that Israel will *remain* ahead of the curve as the world reawakens to the reality of Yahshua’s sovereignty during the Tribulation of the Last Days. They will be the first nation to turn back to Yahweh, at last gathering the moral courage to stand for the truth they have belatedly come to believe. And they will remain steadfast throughout the Millennial reign of King Yahshua.

The fifth fundamental need of man—also linked to our volition—is empathy. Among all of God’s creatures, man alone is given the privilege of interceding with Yahweh on behalf of our fellows. In scripture, we frequently see godly men imploring Yahweh to have mercy on other people, as long as they’re not hopelessly wicked. Abraham enquired of God how few righteous men would have to be found in Sodom for God to spare the city: his empathy for his nephew Lot would have gladly extended to others in Cesspool Central, if there had been any. In the wake of Korah’s rebellion, Yahweh’s intention (as far as Moses could tell) was to destroy all of Israel. But I’m pretty sure God merely wished to elicit an expression of empathetic intercession from Moses, and He was not disappointed: **“Yahweh spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ‘Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.’ And they fell on their faces and said, ‘O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and will you be angry with all the congregation?’”** (Numbers 16:20-22)

Moses knew all too well that no one in the entire congregation was without sin—beginning with himself. Yahweh therefore had a perfect right to “consume” them all in His anger—as He does us, for we have all sinned against Him. So what, precisely, was the basis for Moses’ request for mercy (for everyone except

the leaders of the rebellion)? It was that Yahweh, being a loving and merciful God, had shown empathy toward us: **“As a father shows compassion to his children, so Yahweh shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.”** (Psalm 103:13-14) He had already provided His people the means of atonement and cleansing, knowing that we mortals could not maintain sinlessness for a New York minute. It would therefore have been contrary to His own nature to destroy the people before they had had a chance to avail themselves of Yahweh’s forgiveness—first by performing the symbolic sacrificial rites of the Torah, and ultimately by receiving what those rites prophesied: the offering up of God’s Messiah on our behalf. So far, so good, but why, then, weren’t Korah and his co-conspirators similarly spared, anticipating their potential repentance? It’s because they had *already* exercised their free will by choosing to defy Yahweh to His face. Our empathy need not extend to God’s overt enemies (by His definition, not ours). But the world’s victims, the lost, the sleepers, the apathetic, the foolish, the oppressed, and those being lied to are all the proper subjects of our compassion, our intercession, and our love.

The ultimate expression of empathy, of course, is Yahweh Himself, in the form of Yahshua our Messiah. He not only fulfilled the requirements of the Torah by offering Himself up for our transgressions, in doing so He became the ultimate intercessor between God and man—the High Priest from heaven: **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”** (Hebrews 4:15-16) Yahshua didn’t have to partake in our *sin* to experience our painful predicament. But He did have to subject Himself to every temptation we do, and assume our *guilt*—all of it.

This sacrifice made Christ the ultimate solution for the sixth universal human need: leadership. As Isaiah prophesied, **“He [Yahshua] was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.”** This was all necessary because **“All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way; and Yahweh has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”** (Isaiah 53:5-6) If we hadn’t been lost sheep, in desperate need of divine leadership, Yahshua (theoretically) wouldn’t have had to play the roll of “good shepherd”—you know: the one who takes his job so seriously he lays his life down to protect the sheep.

In a scene fraught with prophetic portent, we see Moses, near the end of his long life, worried about the fate of the nation he had led for the previous four decades. Having spent the forty years *before that* tending his father-in-law’s flocks in the wilderness of Midian, he knew what kind of trouble unsupervised sheep could get themselves into. **“Moses spoke to Yahweh, saying, ‘Let Yahweh, the**

God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of Yahweh may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.' So Yahweh said to Moses, 'Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him.'" (Numbers 27:15-18) On the surface, this is no particular surprise. Joshua had been Moses' protégé and "chief of staff" for the previous forty years—ever since the Israelites' defeat of Amalek on their way out of Egypt (Exodus 17). But closer examination of Moses' request, and Yahweh's answer, reveal a much more far-reaching truth. Moses asked God to provide a leader for Israel—the nation being symbolic of humanity in general—one who would protect them (i.e., *us*), guard them, and guide them. And Yahweh specified "Joshua, the son of Nun" as the right man for the job. Most folks know that "Joshua" is actually the same name invariably translated "Jesus" in the New Testament, so Yahweh's selection of a leader for Israel was undoubtedly more significant than it appears at first glance. More on that name in a moment.

But first (since names in Hebrew are usually significant and often prophetic), what does Nun mean? The proper name is based on a Hebrew verb that means (according the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*): "to continue, always be, i.e., a state or indefinite period of time occurring that does not end." Thus we read, "His [Yahweh's] name shall endure forever; His name shall continue [*nun*] as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in Him; All nations shall call Him blessed." (Psalm 72:17) The concept of "Nun," then, is that of being perpetual, continuing, eternally propagating, ever increasing—an apt description of Yahweh Himself. "Joshua" is said to be the "son" of this person.

And what of the name of God's designated leader-shepherd—Joshua/Jesus, the one I've been referring to in this book as Yahshua? As you might imagine, rendering Hebrew names into English is often as much art as it is science, and as if to prove my point, there are innumerable variants in the lexicons, Bible versions, and common usage. Depending on who you consult, the name in question is alternatively rendered Yahowsha', Yahuwshuwa', Yahushua, Yəhowsu'a, Yāhowshuwa', Yāhowshu'a, Y'howshu'a, Yehoshua, Yēhōšūā', Yeshua, Yahoshua, Yeshuwa', Y'shua, or Yahshua. Thus it's not particularly surprising that the name has invariably been transliterated in English into something that can actually be pronounced by someone who doesn't speak Hebrew—as Joshua or Jesus. But the "J" didn't appear in the English language until the 17th century—even the King James Bible didn't start rendering the Messiah's name "Jesus" until the 1629 edition; before that, it was Iesus.

The purist (or the merely pedantic) may disagree with me, but I have settled on "Yahshua" as a good way to render the Messiah's name, not so much because it's the definitive version of the name (that is, more correct than any other variant,

which I'm pretty sure it isn't), but for far more practical reasons. While sounding similar to the familiar "Joshua" (and at the same time allowing us to distinguish *which* Yâhowshuwa` we're talking about—there are about ten of them in scripture, not counting the Messiah) "Yahshua" incorporates (as does the original Hebrew) the self-revealed name of God: Yah—the short form of Yahweh (alternatively rendered Yahowah, Yehovah, or Yahuweh—or the relatively recent English variant, Jehovah).

To my mind, the only really important thing is what the name *means*. And here there is no disagreement in the reference works: Joshua / Jesus / Jeshua / Yahshua (or however you render it for English ears) means "Yahweh is salvation." So when Yahweh selected Joshua to lead Israel, He was telling us (in so many words) that the "man He would appoint over the congregation," His designated Leader and Shepherd, would be characterized—even personified—by what the name means: "Yahweh is Salvation." It's what gives Yahshua (however you choose to pronounce it) the right to lead.

If humans have a need for leadership, then it is axiomatic that we will (and must) follow someone: it's how we're built. It is critical, therefore, that we choose our leader carefully. Christ's disciples did: **"Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, [Yahshua] saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed Him."** (Mark 1:16-20) Yahshua wasn't a stranger to these men. They had all heard John the Baptist declaring Him to be "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." They had seen (or at least heard about) the baptism of Yahshua, when the Spirit of God had descended upon Him in the form of a dove—the very sign John had been told to expect—and Yahweh Himself had audibly voiced His approval from the heavens. In the person of Yahshua of Nazareth, the disciples found the leader they had been seeking, and much more. He met *all* of the needs that had arisen in light of mankind's signature characteristic—volition: Yahshua provided divine instruction, showed us how to obtain forgiveness, imparted godly wisdom, demonstrated moral courage, and personified the ultimate expression of empathy—that of Almighty God for fallen man.

There was but one fundamental human need left to be met: the seventh—relationship. Humans are rare (if not unique) among God's creatures in this respect. We are *designed* to mate for life. The human gestation period is unusually long, and both parents are personally involved in the enterprise. We expend an extraordinary amount of time and resources raising our young, and even when

they're all grown up, they're still considered family members until someone dies. The death of a family member (though inevitable) is considered a tragedy, an event for which mourning is appropriate, even necessary.

All of this is a product of the way we're built—a biological metaphor of Yahweh's would-be relationship with us, either as individual children or as a beloved bride. John saw it in these terms in his apocalyptic vision: **"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready. It was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure'—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.'** (Revelation 19:6-9) The simile of the bride is seen in slightly different terms a bit later: **"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'"** (Revelation 21:1-3) Don't let the shifting imagery throw you. In God's eyes (I suspect) the city—the New Jerusalem—is equivalent to the redeemed people who dwell there. We are His beloved bride, His wife, the object of His affection, the focus of His attention.

But only if we choose to be. Here too, volition—the exercise of our free will—plays a central role. The God of love is pursuing us as an ardent suitor, but it is our privilege, our right, to rebuff His advances if we choose to—to consider Him not a suitor, but a stalker. If we tell Him to “get lost” often enough, He will stop asking, stop calling, stop sending flowers and candy. That will leave us with two choices, neither of them pretty. We can either remain unattached for the rest of our short, miserable lives, finally dying alone, unattached, and unmourned, or we can hook up with the local “bad boy,” that coarse, crass, abusive hoodlum our mother warned us about.

That's the thing about choice. Just because we humans have been given the ability and privilege to make up our own minds, it doesn't follow that all of the options before us are equally beneficial. Choose wisely.

LION

❧ 3.2.7 ❧

The Voice of Authority

Considering its current endangered status, I was surprised to learn that the lion used to be the most wide ranging large land mammal on earth, after humans. Lions were once common over most of Africa, across Eurasia from western Europe to India, and even in the western hemisphere, from the Yukon to Peru. Their presence in the Levant is frequently attested to in scripture, which is not to imply that they were any less capable of killing you back then than they are today. If a hungry five hundred pound bundle of feline fury wants what you've got, there isn't a lot you can do about it. So the lion's fearsome roar became a natural metaphor for "speaking with authority," for that roar was backed with teeth and claws, and the lion wasn't squeamish about using them.

This animal we refer to as "the king of beasts" is recruited as often in scripture to describe the "bad" permutations of its attributes as it does the "good" ones. The lion metaphor is used to describe both Yahweh and Satan, both ruthless men and triumphant Israel. This particular symbol has nothing to do with moral values, holiness, or issues of good and evil. It has only to do with *power*. The emphasis here is on the lion's intrinsic ability to do what it wants, when it wants, with no regard for the opinions or efforts of lesser creatures.

So just as the lion is undaunted by puny human presence, Yahweh is unconcerned about His enemies: **"For thus Yahweh said to me, 'As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey, and when a band of shepherds is called out against him is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so Yahweh of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion and on its hill. Like birds hovering, so Yahweh of hosts will protect Jerusalem. He will protect and deliver it; He will spare and rescue it.'"** (Isaiah 31:4-5) In context, Yahweh is admonishing Israel not to rely upon Egypt for aid against the Assyrians, but rather to trust in Him alone. In history, He proved His point in the events of Isaiah 37. But this thought also carries profound last-days ramifications, for Egypt represents the world, while Assyria symbolizes militant evil. In terms germane to our present predicament, Yahweh is warning Israel not to rely on the United Nations (which, unless I miss my guess, will be the tool the Antichrist will use to control the world), or even on America, to help her against the irrational antagonism of the Muslim hordes bent on destroying her. God Himself will rescue Israel, and He will do so with impunity and authority. (The prophetic evidence can be found in Ezekiel 38 and 39—the description of a war yet to be fought.)

But Yahweh isn't the only "lion" on the scene. Human despots can also exert their will over their hapless subjects—albeit temporarily. Solomon reminds us,

“Like a roaring lion or a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people. A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor, but he who hates unjust gain will prolong his days.” (Proverbs 28:15) Authority (like some other things I could name) rolls downhill. In the end, it all emanates from Yahweh Himself. If you’ll recall, God gave Adam dominion over the animals—*but not over other men*. That means that any form of human government that does not acknowledge Yahweh as its supreme ruler is by definition idolatrous and insubordinate. Furthermore, ever since the resurrection, the issue of who’s actually in charge has been brought into even sharper focus, for Yahshua announced, **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.”** (Matthew 28:18) The risen Christ—the coming King—is the only one who rightfully wields the scepter. Presidents and potentates in this world are merely placeholders. Human rule is a temp job.

Although we aren’t to covet power (which is God’s alone to wield and His to delegate) it doesn’t mean there isn’t work to do. The “lions” in our life, whether literal or figurative, aren’t to prevent us from using our “six allotted days” to mankind’s advantage and God’s glory. In my experience, Americans (in recent years) have been trained to dread risk. In Ben Franklin’s day, it was “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Later, it was, “You win some, you lose some.” But in these last days, the entrepreneurial spirit is under siege. Now (apparently) it’s as Solomon observed: **“The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!’”** (Proverbs 22:13, cf. 26:13) Sloth masquerading as caution is another subtle form of idolatry. It’s tantamount to saying, “Yahweh isn’t smart enough or strong enough to bless my sincere and godly efforts—either through success or through surviving painful lessons that will guide my steps in the future.” What ever happened to Job’s attitude: **“Though [God] slay me, yet will I trust Him.”** (Job 13:15)

The roar of the lion—the voice of authority—must be heeded, which is not to say it must be obeyed. That is, when we hear it, we have no option but to pay attention, to take notice. But *choice* comes into play when we evaluate who it is wielding the authority—God or some lesser entity. Both eventualities are described in scripture. Amos, for example, informs us why prophets prophesy: **“Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster come to a city, unless Yahweh has done it? For the Lord Yahweh does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets. The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord Yahweh has spoken; who can but prophesy?”** (Amos 3:6-8) Whatever happens, he suggests, is known by Yahweh. Events in our world come about either through His volition or His permission. But when Yahweh reveals what will happen before it does, His prophets are compelled to report what they’ve seen. Why? Because He speaks with *authority*: the Lion has roared.

This authority is often delegated by God to others, like the lawful authority of a city government being wielded through a police officer. In one extreme example, we witness (in John's prophetic vision) the very forces of nature responding to the roar of God's designated "lion," an angel—a spirit messenger: **"Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded."** (Revelation 10:1-2) His heavenly origin and accoutrements—like the rainbow and the shining countenance—tell us that this angel is speaking with the authority of Yahweh Himself. And although we're left to ponder the precise nature of the message and creation's response to it, it is clear that "business as usual" is no longer going to be the paradigm: God is preparing something big—something unusual, climactic, and *literally* earth-shaking. So John the Revelator, like Amos, asks "Who can but prophesy" in the light of such momentous events?

I hasten to add, however, that Yahweh and His angels are not the only ones wielding authority on this planet. Satan is called **"the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience."** (Ephesians 2:2) The ultimate expression of Satanic authority on earth, however, is still in the future—found in the one commonly known as "the Antichrist." John describes him like this: **"And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority."** (Revelation 13:1-2) That sounds grim, and it is—or at least *will be* for the hapless inhabitants of earth who'll have to deal with him, most of whom will choose to submit to his "great authority." Those who don't will die—if he can catch them.

Two things must be kept firmly in mind. First, the Antichrist's authority—a voice like a lion's—is derived solely from power usurped from God by Satan—identified here as "the dragon." And second, like any human despot, his authority is temporary: he will rule for only three and a half years. **"And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months."** Of course, that will seem like the *longest* three and a half years in history for those who find themselves living through it. **"It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming His name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. Authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."** (Revelation 13:5-8) After the Antichrist's allotted time is up, ultimate authority on earth will revert

to Yahweh through His Christ. This, I suspect, is why we were taught to pray to our heavenly Father, **“Your kingdom come, Your will be done in earth as it is in heaven.”** (Matthew 6:10)

The Antichrist’s agenda, once unmasked, will be to deceive Yahweh’s chosen people, Israel, into believing he’s their Messiah; and if that doesn’t work (it won’t, by the way) to simply slaughter them. Either way, Satan could claim victory, for it would prove Yahweh’s prophecies to have been in error. But what will *actually* happen is Satan’s worst nightmare: Israel will, after all this time—*millennia* of apostasy and error—be restored and regathered. In a process that has already begun (but is by no means complete) Israel will return in blessing and forgiveness. Even more amazing, the passage is focused on “Ephraim,” the ten tribes of the supposedly “lost” northern kingdom: **“They shall go after Yahweh; He will roar like a lion; when He roars, His children shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares Yahweh.”** (Hosea 11:10-11) It’s a fascinating picture. Earlier in the chapter, Yahweh is seen “drawing them gently, with bands of love.” That didn’t work as well as it should have. But now, at the end of the Tribulation, Yahweh is seen raising His voice, roaring with the irresistible authority of a Lion. And finally, they’ll get the message. Note, by the way, where the “ten lost tribes” have been “hiding out” all this time: in Egypt, Assyria—modern Iraq and Syria—and “the west,” America, unless I miss my guess.

It shouldn’t come as a particular shock that the majority of “lion” references in the Bible refer not to Yahweh or His Messiah, but as a warning against usurpers—dangerous and deadly forces operating in our world. As I said, this particular symbol has nothing to do with one’s worthiness or the right to rule, but only with the exercise of power—authority that can be derived as easily (in the short run) from brute force and intimidation as it can from inherent merit. Scripture’s negative presentations of the lion’s roar should serve as a warning that not everyone who wields temporal power in this world is worthy of the scepter, nor is he necessarily operating as a beneficent surrogate for God. We are to be discerning: our reverence (and ultimately our obedience) belongs to Yahweh alone. Submitting to one another in love and living in peace with our fellow man (insofar as it’s possible without betraying our God) may keep us off the radar screens of the “lions” of this world, but we should always keep firmly in mind whose authority we’re *really* heeding when we “obey those who rule over us” (Hebrews 13:17). There’s more than one lion in this zoo.

The most formidable of these beasts is Satan himself. Peter admonishes us to **“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”** (I Peter 5:8-10) It’s a jungle out there, he says, and we need to remain vigilant. The core component of our resistance against Satan is our faith—that is, the sure knowledge that the God who has redeemed us through the sacrifice of Christ is also able to restore and protect us against the devil’s schemes. We aren’t alone in this struggle.

Paul said roughly the same thing, this time from personal experience: **“But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. To Him be the glory forever and ever.”** (II Timothy 4:17-18) We need to ponder what Paul and Peter meant with their descriptions of God’s deliverance. Does being “rescued from every evil deed” mean Paul expected to live forever? Does Christ’s promise to “restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish” us imply that Peter expected to escape the vagaries of Roman injustice? No, on both counts. Shortly after writing this, Paul would be beheaded for his testimony, and Peter would be crucified upside down (according to legend). Is suffering a cruel death what Peter called “suffering a little while,” or what Paul characterized as being “brought safely into His heavenly kingdom”?

Actually, it is, or at least, it can be. We need to realize that the “lions” of this world can only terrorize these mortal bodies. Believers, however, possess life that extends infinitely beyond the pale reflection that our mortal lives represent. All the growling, roaring, clawing, and biting the world can inflict on us won’t have the slightest effect on the *real* life every child of Yahweh experiences by virtue of the Holy Spirit dwelling within him. So when Paul or Daniel (see Daniel 6:16-24) speak of having been delivered out of the lions’ mouth, we should understand that these literal, historical events are—as far as God is concerned—only dress rehearsals for the deliverance that awaits all of us who rest in Him.

We tend to assume that these lives we live in bodies of flesh upon the earth are the “real” ones, since it is here that we feel pain and pleasure, make our choices before God and man, and ultimately face our common enemy—physical death. David, however, knew that the only *real* life is that found in the safety of Yahweh’s eternal arms—where the lions of this life can’t reach us: **“O Yahweh my God, in You do I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers and deliver me, lest like a lion they tear my soul apart, rending it in pieces, with none to deliver.”** (Psalm 7:1-2) This is where the shadow and the reality that casts it come together: if we do not take

refuge in Yahweh *in this life*, the “lions” we encounter can “tear our souls apart.” Our “pursuers” can come in many guises: not only overt enemies, but also worldly philosophies, silly distractions, or the cares of this world—attractive heresy or slothful apathy. Yahweh is our refuge from all of this and more—if we’ll avail ourselves of the shelter He has provided.

Of course, sometimes the lions of human adversity come *because* we’ve turned our back on Yahweh. At least, that was Israel’s experience: **“Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say, ‘Blow the trumpet through the land.’ Cry aloud and say, ‘Assemble, and let us go into the fortified cities!’ Raise a standard toward Zion, flee for safety, stay not, for I bring disaster from the north, and great destruction. A lion has gone up from his thicket, a destroyer of nations has set out; he has gone out from his place to make your land a waste; your cities will be ruins without inhabitant. For this put on sackcloth, lament, and wail, for the fierce anger of Yahweh has not turned back from us.”** (Jeremiah 4:5-8) The “lion” in this case was Babylon, described here as “the destroyer of nations.” Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t merely *allowed* to sack Jerusalem; he was (though he doubtless didn’t know it) purposely sent by Yahweh to chastise His people.

The Babylonian lion of judgment had been called to Judah in response to Yahweh’s anger—just as Assyria had been summoned to Israel’s northern kingdom a century and a half previously. In reference to Assyria, however, we’re given more information about the nature of being the lion of Yahweh’s judgment: if you exceed your mandate—if you attack your assigned prey too viciously—you will become prey yourself: **“Desolate! Desolation and ruin! Hearts melt and knees tremble; anguish is in all loins; all faces grow pale! Where is the lions’ den, the feeding place of the young lions, where the lion and lioness went, where his cubs were, with none to disturb? The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses; he filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh. Behold, I am against you [Nineveh—the capital of Assyria], declares Yahweh of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard.”** (Nahum 2:10-13)

Jeremiah specifically compares Assyria with Babylon, tarring them both with the same brush: **“Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones. Therefore, thus says Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing punishment on the king of Babylon and his land, as I punished the king of Assyria.”** (Jeremiah 50:17-18) It was a one-two punch: Assyria’s king Sargon II had carried Israel off into captivity in 722 B.C. Who, then, broke into the lair of Assyria’s young lions? It was Babylon (in 612 B.C.), who would later treat Judah just as harshly as Nineveh had Israel (Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 586). Thus Babylon would suffer the same fate as had Assyria, at

the hands of Medo-Persia, in 539. Do the math: kingdoms who are overly aggressive in punishing God's people—even when they're functioning as the rod of Yahweh's anger—don't last very long.

The world hasn't seen the last of aggressive beasts being unleashed upon the world in retribution for the mistreatment of Yahweh's beloved. Under the heading of the fifth trumpet judgment (putting it, by my reckoning, a bit past the halfway point of the Tribulation, *after* the Antichrist has assumed dictatorial control of the whole earth) we read this terrifying description of a demonic plague being unleashed upon the earth: **"In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon."** (Revelation 9:7-11) It remains to be seen where, on the scale of literal vs. figurative, the description of these nasty critters will fall, but several things are clear: they're hard to kill, have the ability to fly in great swarms, can sting with scorpion-like tails causing agonizing pain, and they can also bite, since they're equipped with "teeth like those of lions." Oh, and they're finicky: they attack "only those men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads." (verse 4) If it wasn't obvious before, it should be now: being under the protection of Yahweh is essential. Forewarned is forearmed.

Israel in scripture isn't always on the "receiving end" of the lions' attentions. Sometimes, *they are* the lions, whether in a positive or negative light—that is, they are the ones seen flexing their muscles and pouncing upon prey. Moses prophesied that two tribes in particular would share this trait: **"Of Gad he said, 'Blessed be he who enlarges Gad! Gad crouches like a lion; he tears off arm and scalp. He chose the best of the land for himself, for there a commander's portion was reserved; and he came with the heads of the people, with Israel he executed the justice of Yahweh, and his judgments for Israel.'" (Deuteronomy 33:20-21)** As Moses intimated, Gad had a "me first" attitude, opting to seize some prime Ammonite grazing land *east* of the Jordan for their tribal territory (something that Yahweh had specifically forbidden—see Deuteronomy 2:19). Although they helped their brothers secure the promised land west of the Jordan, their own "commander's portion" was never really theirs. Thus we read, **"In those days [during Jehu's reign, 842-815 BC] Yahweh began to cut off parts of Israel; and Hazael [King of Syria] conquered them in all**

the territory of Israel from the Jordan eastward: all the land of Gilead—Gad, Reuben, and Manasse—from Aroer, which is by the River Arnon, including Gilead and Bashan.” (II Kings 10:32-33) Within 130 years of Solomon’s death, God had removed from Israel’s control all those territories east of the Jordan that should never have been theirs in the first place—having made permanent enemies of Moab and Ammon.

The other “lion-like” tribe was Dan, of which Moses said, **“Dan is a lion’s cub that leaps from Bashan.”** (Deuteronomy 33: 22) Dan’s assigned tribal territory had been in Amorite hands, located along the coast near present day Tel Aviv. But the Amorites proved too tough for the faithless Danites, who eventually pulled up stakes and moved to the far north of Israel (near Bashan, which lies to the east), seized a poorly defended city named Leshem, renamed it Dan, and promptly adopted a pagan culture lascivious enough to make an Amorite blush. Dan, it appears, cultivated the lioness trait of attacking the weakest individual in the herd. Sometimes, you are what you eat.

On a more positive note, the prophet Balaam (working in traitorous collusion with the pagan Moabite king Balak) noted that it was impossible to successfully curse what Yahweh had blessed: **“For there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel; now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, ‘What has God wrought!’ Behold, a people! As a lioness it rises up and as a lion it lifts itself; it does not lie down until it has devoured the prey and drunk the blood of the slain.”** (Numbers 23:23-24) **“He [Israel] crouched, he lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up? Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”** (Numbers 24:9) As long as Israel was faithful to Yahweh, they would be unassailable. Balaam knew it, and he told his employer as much. King Balak was not amused. So in order to earn his paycheck (one he didn’t live long enough to spend, by the way), Balaam devised a way to get the men Israel to betray their God, using as his weapon of choice the seductive wiles of Moabite women (roughly the same tactic used by Hugh Hefner in the 1950s). Unfortunately, the ploy worked: twenty-four thousand Israelites perished in the ensuing plague, sent by God to punish them for their idolatry. Variations on this theme have been one of the biggest hammers in the devil’s toolbox ever since: if you can’t get God to curse His people, get His people to forsake their God.

Although so many of the lions of Israel got “spayed or neutered” (so to speak) that day, the nation is prophesied to once again rise to be a formidable force in the world. This time, however, the lions of Israel are seen as Diaspora—scattered among the nations, yet remaining distinct, separate, and a force with which to be reckoned: **“Then the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples like dew from Yahweh, like showers on the grass, which delay not for a man nor wait for the children of man. And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations, in the midst of many peoples, like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep,**

which, when it goes through, treads down and tears in pieces, and there is none to deliver.” (Micah 5:7-8) It never ceases to amaze me that although Israel has been scattered, living “in the midst of many nations” for the past two millennia—the result of their disastrous rejection of Yahshua the Messiah—they have not been absorbed or dissolved into the cultures among whom they sojourn. And perhaps even more remarkably, the nations who have welcomed the Jews have been blessed by their presence—“like dew from Yahweh.” (The converse is also true: nations who persecute their Jewish populations eventually—and inevitably—suffer dire consequences.) The second half of Micah’s prophecy (the part about Israel’s lion-like character being displayed among the nations) is yet to be fulfilled, which is not to say it won’t be. That is, I think we’ve seen the last of “the Jew as victim” in this world. Never again will we see them compliantly boarding boxcars headed for Auschwitz. The last great wave of anti-Semitism our sick world will see (if my reading of prophetic scripture is at all accurate) will result in Jews emigrating to *eretz Israel*—but on their own terms and on their own schedule, well armed and well financed.

One more prophecy connecting “lion” imagery to a tribe of Israel focuses (we can see in retrospect) upon one person who was to be born into that tribe. Jacob, when giving the traditional “deathbed blessing” to his sons, singled out Judah for an amazing legacy: **“Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience [or the gathering] of the people.”** (Genesis 49:9-10) Remember, symbolically, the lion “does what he wants, when he wants.” This gives him peace through power, thus the rhetorical question, “Who shall rouse him?” It is a well known fact that after the death of its first king, Saul, every legitimate king over Israel (represented after the post-Solomon revolt by the two southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin) was a descendant of King David, who was (as prophesied here in Genesis) of the tribe of Judah. So the “scepter” didn’t ever depart from Judah to be wielded by some other tribe. Even though later “kings” ruled Judea, none of them were descendants of Jacob. (For example, Antiochus was a Seleucid Greek; The Hasmonean dynasty—the Maccabees—of the tribe of Levi led Israel not as kings but as priests under Seleucid hegemony; Herod was an Idumean, not a Jew.)

So far, so good. But then we encounter that little word, “until.” That indicates the end of the line, the culmination of Judah’s promise. This is where that mysterious word “Shiloh” comes into play. Most translations simply transliterate the word from the Hebrew (which doesn’t help much). But (according to *Strong’s, Baker & Carpenter*, and others) *Shiloh* is a noun meaning “he whose it is,” or “that which belongs to him.” The word also denotes “tranquility,” being derived (it is presumed) from the verb *shalah*: “to be at rest, to prosper, be quiet or at

ease.” It is the imagery of the lion, therefore, that makes sense of all this: the lion (i.e., Judah’s ultimate offspring) is tranquil and at rest because of the authority he wields by virtue of his power—nobody can make him do what he doesn’t want to do. “That which belongs” to the lion is the proverbial scepter—the right to rule backed by unassailable strength.

Everybody “knows” (or ought to) that this king—the Lion of Judah—is ultimately Yahshua the Messiah. Isaiah predicted His reign: **“The government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and of peace [there’s the tranquility enjoyed by “Shiloh”] there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom.”** (Isaiah 9:6-7) But let’s face it: the last time anybody actually *saw* Yahshua, He had not done anything to exercise temporal authority upon the earth. Yes, He had proved His anointing—and indeed, His deity—by the life He lived, up to and including rising from the dead under His own power, but He didn’t *physically* rule over anything prior to His ascension.

That is all about to change. John saw the prophetic vision revealing the return of the royal Lion of the tribe of Judah—He to whom the scepter belongs: **“Then I saw in the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that He can open the scroll and its seven seals.’”** (Revelation 5:1-5) A few factors bear mention. (1) Although the angel announced “the Lion of the tribe of Judah,” the one whom John subsequently saw (v.6) looked like a lamb. The two symbols—representing authority and innocence—are thus manifested in one person, Christ. Both attributes are required in order to open the seals. (2) The Lion of Judah is said to be the *root* of David, though we know He was also (humanly speaking) David’s descendant. We can draw but one conclusion: the personage in question is Yahweh—the source and origin of all life. (3) The Lion is said to have conquered, making Him worthy to break the seals and open the scroll of destiny. But at this point in John’s narrative, we’ve seen nothing of the Tribulation events that will dominate the next dozen chapters; in other words, Armageddon, the final battle, is still a long way off. So what has the Lion of Judah “conquered?” He has defeated death itself, demonstrating that fact by rising from the dead under his own authority. All of the rest of it then, the battles, the plagues, the pitiful power grabs by Satan and his minions, are a bit anticlimactic (though they certainly won’t *feel* like it to those trying to survive the times). The story is, in fact, over before it begins: the Lion has conquered.

So the “Lion of Judah” is actually God incarnate. After all, the lion is one of the four symbolic creatures Yahweh has recruited to reveal His character as He interacts with man—in both Revelation and the book of Ezekiel. We’ve already seen two of them, the ox (the powerful servant) and man (the maker of choices). We’ll explore the symbol of the eagle shortly. But for now let us review the salient visions to determine where the Lion fits in. John saw it this way: **“And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature [better translated “being”] like a lion, the second living [being] like an ox, the third living [being] with the face of a man, and the fourth living [being] like an eagle in flight. And the four living [beings], each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’”** (Revelation 4:6-8) It’s a remarkable scene. The picture we’re being shown in Revelation 4 and 5 is that of God appearing before God in the presence of God. Count ’em up. We’re seeing seven manifestations of Yahweh together in the same room: the four Living Ones, the Lion of Judah, and the Lamb of God—all appearing and interacting in the presence of the One seated upon the throne.

It’s hard to be dogmatic, but the order in which the Living Ones are introduced may be significant. The Lion is listed first, for His authority (by virtue of His identity) is that of Yahweh Himself, hence His to wield from eternity past. The Ox is listed second, telling us that the ultimate act of service that Yahshua performed was not so much what He *did* as a man, but the initial act of *becoming* one. It demanded a degree of empathy and self-sacrifice that’s incomprehensible to mortal man. That said, what Yahshua achieved as a Man—the third symbol—is what got us to where we are now: redeemed, restored, and reconciled with our Creator, if only we’ll trust His finished work to be efficacious. Yahshua’s true identity as the “lord of the heavens,” symbolized by the fourth living being, the eagle, is something we haven’t been privileged to see with our waking eyes—yet. To this day, we must perceive Yahshua’s deity through the eyes of faith. But the day is coming when faith will be replaced with sight, though only for those who exercised faith when it was the only game in town. For God to have arranged it any other way would be tantamount to abridging our free will: He will not force us to accept or embrace the deity of the Messiah.

Ezekiel’s parallel vision stresses the human form of the coming Messiah (the face of a Man), but the other three components are there as well, though presented in a slightly different way than John saw them: **“As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures [i.e., beings]. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.... As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the**

right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.” (Ezekiel 1:4-6, 10) From what appears to be a “Shekinah” manifestation—in other words, a view of God as spectacular and impressive as He can present without killing us (though this was seen in a vision)—four living beings emerge. (Again, “creatures” is a most unfortunate translation: there is nothing about them to suggest that these are created or derivative beings. They represent Yahweh’s Messiah.)

As we saw previously, each of the four living beings had four faces—symbolizing the same four aspects of the Messiah’s character that John was shown. They moved together as a unit, wingtip to wingtip, the direction being determined by which Messianic characteristic (if any) was being stressed at the moment. The position of the faces seems to point out the inherent “contradictions” of the Messiah’s persona. The opposite sides depict what we might otherwise assume were mutually exclusive traits: the human countenance and the eagle’s (representing deity) are facing opposite directions, as are the ox (the servant) and the lion (the king, the one wielding authority). If I’m seeing this correctly, Yahweh is telling us that as puzzling a conundrum as this may seem, *all of these things* are accurate portraits of Yahshua the Messiah. We can surmise that the Jews who crucified the Christ were looking for the Lion and the Eagle—the reigning Messiah. They were totally unprepared for the Man and the Ox.

When the time comes at last for the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” to receive his earthly throne (and I’m convinced that we don’t have too much longer to wait) the *literal* lions of the earth will be happy to assume a subservient role in His presence. This amazing prophecy from the pen of Isaiah predicts an unprecedented paradigm shift toward perfect peace as Yahshua the Messiah reigns: **“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea.”** (Isaiah 11:6-9, cf. Isaiah 65:25) As the man said, “Things ain’t what they used to be.” This may be a restoration of the Edenic state, but I sort of doubt it: I’m not sure this paradigm of peace *ever* existed upon the earth before.

EAGLE

❧ 3.2.8 ❧

Lord of the Heavens

We have so far explored three of the four “living beings” that together prophetically represent the characteristics of the Messiah—the ox (the servant), the man (the maker of choices), and the lion (the one who wields authority). It is now time to look at the last of them: the eagle. Ezekiel recorded in his first vision, **“As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle.”** (Ezekiel 1:10) Later, in the “wheel within a wheel” vision, the same truth was expressed like this: **“And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub [a powerful servant, like the ox, but this one is angelic—a spiritual servant], and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle.”** (Ezekiel 10:14)

John’s apocalyptic vision contained the same imagery: **“Around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living [beings], full of eyes in front and behind: the first living [being] like a lion, the second living [being] like an ox, the third living [being] with the face of a man, and the fourth living [being] like an eagle in flight.”** (Revelation 4:5-7) All four creatures enlisted to comprise this composite picture of God’s Messiah have their own strengths, their own unique symbolic characteristics. John points out the eagle’s signature trait: flight. The eagle is not earthbound, but is at home in the heavens. He can not only fly, but *soar* at great altitudes, effortlessly riding the air currents and thermals for hours on end. But although this ability removes him far from the earth, the eagle’s astoundingly sharp vision compensates for the lack of physical proximity: though separate from the earth, he nevertheless sees quite clearly what’s happening down here on the ground. The eagle makes his nest in the highest crags of the mountains or in the tallest trees—inaccessible to man and beast. All of this conspires to make the eagle an effective symbol to communicate the fourth and final attribute of the Messiah—He is God incarnate, lord of the heavens. Without this essential element, the rest would be meaningless.

The eagle presents a picture of absolute freedom, of untouchable autonomy. Solomon noted, **“Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin.”** (Proverbs 30:18-19) The eagle goes where he wants, when he wants. It is thus with some irony that Solomon, one of the richest men who ever lived, speaks of the propensity of wealth to fly away from its owner, without so much as a “by your leave.” **“Do not toil to acquire wealth; be**

discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven.” (Proverbs 23:4-5) Been there, done that. I don’t know why I find this verse so humorous, but I do.

Job was challenged by Yahweh to comprehend the way He had designed the eagle, and to match the skill with which He had made this magnificent raptor: **“Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars and spreads his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high? On the rock he dwells and makes his home, on the rocky crag and stronghold. From there he spies out the prey; his eyes behold it afar off.”** It’s interesting that God then caps His challenge by pointing out that the eagle is not only a hunter, but also a scavenger. He is equipped with a hooked beak and razor sharp talons, and he uses them with great skill. **“His young ones suck up blood, and where the slain are, there is he.”** (Job 39:26-30) This is a perfect setup for an enigmatic observation Yahshua the Messiah would make two thousand years later, something we’ll discuss in a bit.

The fact that the eagle both pursues the living and disposes of the dead makes him a perfect metaphor for some of the military surrogates Yahweh has enlisted to chastise His errant nation. Israel’s breakaway northern kingdom, a.k.a. Ephraim, rebelled against God’s instructions from their idolatrous beginning under Jeroboam until their bitter end at the hands (or should I say, claws) of the Assyrian eagle. So Hosea writes, **“Set the trumpet to your lips! One like an eagle is over the house of Yahweh, because they have transgressed My covenant and rebelled against My law. To Me they cry, ‘My God, we—Israel—know you.’ Israel has spurned the good; the enemy shall pursue him. They made kings, but not through Me. They set up princes, but I knew it not. With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.”** (Hosea 8:1-4) Israel presumed they were alive, since they had “history” with Yahweh. They thought they knew Him. But God knew better: the eagle He sent—Assyria’s king Shalmaneser (II Kings 18:9-12)—was assigned not so much to hunt down and kill them as it was to pick clean their already lifeless spiritual corpse.

The magnificent autonomy of eagles—their ability to do what they want, when they want—is the basis of the following prophetic parable from Ezekiel, in which two eagles are seen in competition. (Fortunately, the parable is explained in the verses following the passage. I’ll fill in the blanks.) **“The word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of Israel.”** It’s nice when Yahweh tells us up front that He’s using symbols. He employs them all the time, but He seldom says so. **“Say, thus says the Lord Yahweh: A great eagle [this would be Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon] with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon [figuratively, the place of pride] and took the top of the cedar. He broke off the topmost of its young twigs [i.e., Judah’s proud king Jehoaichin and his princes] and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants.”** That’s Judah’s Babylonian captivity, beginning in 597 BC. **“Then he**

took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters.” This reference is to Zedekiah, the puppet king Nebuchadnezzar then installed in Jerusalem. **“He set it like a willow twig, and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs....”** That is, for a time, Zedekiah served Nebuchadnezzar (whom Yahweh had sent to punish Judah for its apostasy) as he was supposed to.

But the story wasn’t over. **“And there was another great eagle** [this time, Egypt is in view] **with great wings and much plumage, and behold, this vine [Zedekiah] bent its roots toward him** [the Egyptian eagle] **and shot forth its branches toward him from the bed where it was planted** [Jerusalem], **that he [Egypt] might water it. It had been planted on good soil by abundant waters, that it might produce branches and bear fruit and become a noble vine....”** In other words, Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar’s vassal king in Jerusalem, sought help against his master by appealing to Egypt. It was a mutiny, and since Yahweh had empowered Babylon as His rod of correction (as had been revealed by His prophets) the rebellion was actually against God Himself. The whole thing is thus a picture of what it means to reject the discipline of true God in favor of the empty promises of a false one.

This may seem counterintuitive in the extreme, considering what Babylon (as a symbol) means: systematic false worship—manmade religion. But Babylon *per se* is *not* being used as a symbol here: it is not mentioned in the parable. Rather, the two unnamed “eagles” are seen vying for Judah’s affections. Specifically, the question is whether Judah will accept (and even embrace) Yahweh’s rod of correction—which, after all, is said to be “padded” with fertile soil and abundant waters to prevent it from being too terribly painful—or reject God’s chastisement, refusing to return to Him, repent of their idolatries, or mend their ways. In the parable, it was made clear what the rebellions Zedekiah would do: he’d turn to Egypt, the rival eagle. So the parable’s moral is stated: **“Say, thus says the Lord Yahweh: Will it thrive?”** That is, will Jerusalem find respite from its self-inflicted troubles by rejecting Yahweh’s uncomfortable but temporary discipline? **“Will he [the first eagle, Nebuchadnezzar] not pull up its roots and cut off its fruit, so that it withers, so that all its fresh sprouting leaves wither? It will not take a strong arm or many people to pull it from its roots. Behold, it is planted; will it thrive? Will it not utterly wither when the east wind strikes it—wither away on the bed where it sprouted?”** (Ezekiel 17:1-10) Within eleven short years from the exile and installation of the puppet king, Jerusalem *was* “withered by the east wind” from Babylon: Nebuchadnezzar’s forces utterly destroyed the city *and the temple* in 586 BC. By allowing His temple to be torn down, Yahweh was telling the rebellious Judah, ever so eloquently, “Since you have chosen to reject My instructions, My provision, *and* My discipline, I won’t force you to look at My temple—the architectural metaphor for My entire plan for mankind’s redemption—any more. After all, free

will is yours to wield, for better or for worse. But you have chosen the worst possible option.”

The lesson for us: be careful whom you choose as allies, whether national or personal—especially when enduring a period of divine discipline. There is no refuge other than Yahweh. The Psalmist describes how it was *supposed* to work: **“You have dealt well with your servant, O Yahweh, according to your word. Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.... It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn Your statutes.”** (Psalm 119:65-68, 71) Accepting God’s rod of correction in humility—and even thanking Yahweh for applying it—is the only wise course of action open to us, presuming we learn from our mistakes and retain the lessons, no matter how painful they might seem. It’s not as if Yahweh’s discipline is unwarranted or unfair—or even overly harsh. He, after all, *invented* the concept of “Let the punishment fit the crime.” But the door to God’s “woodshed” is never locked. We can leave if we want; we can flee from His uncomfortable attentions. However, our Father would have us to know that there are worse fates than having to submit ourselves to His will and wisdom.

The swiftness of the eagle is a recurring component of its scriptural symbology. Job, for instance, saw his good life escaping from him with the swiftness of an eagle, his days carried away and lost to him through forces he could not control. **“My days are swifter than a runner; they flee away; they see no good. They go by like skiffs of reed, like an eagle swooping on the prey.”** (Job 9:25-26) On a more positive note, David eulogized the fallen King Saul and his son as eagles in battle, swift warriors and strong leaders: **“Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles; they were stronger than lions.”** (II Samuel 1:23) This swiftness brings with it the element of surprise, a speed against which an adversary cannot adequately defend himself. The Nazis called it *blitzkrieg*—lightning war.

Yahweh warned His people Israel that this kind of rapid assault would come against them if they failed to heed His Instructions: **“All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of Yahweh your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes that He commanded you.... Yahweh will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the**

young. It shall eat the offspring of your cattle and the fruit of your ground, until you are destroyed; it also shall not leave you grain, wine, or oil, the increase of your herds or the young of your flock, until they have caused you to perish." (Deuteronomy 28:45, 49-51) Although left unspecified in this prophecy, this "swooping eagle" would turn out to be Assyria (in the case of Ephraim) and Babylon (in the case of Judah).

The warning had been delivered during the Exodus, but nothing had changed nine hundred years later, when Jeremiah saw the eagle of Babylon up close: **"At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem, 'A hot wind from the bare heights in the desert toward the daughter of My people, not to winnow or cleanse, a wind too full for this comes for Me. Now it is I who speak in judgment upon them.'** Behold, he comes up like clouds; his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles—woe to us, for we are ruined! O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?" (Jeremiah 4:11-14) Even now, Yahweh was pleading with Judah to repent, to turn back to Him. But His entreaties fell on deaf ears. Judah remained in stubborn denial about the swift eagle of Nebuchadnezzar—even after he had swooped in for the attack not once, but *twice*, in 601 and 597 BC. If they had "washed their heart from evil" as Yahweh had implored them to do, Judah could have spared itself the devastating siege and utter destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, in 586 BC.

The history of the thing is revealing—if not exactly straightforward. First, we read that **"In his days, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim became his servant three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him. And Yahweh sent against him bands of the Chaldeans and bands of the Syrians and bands of the Moabites and bands of the Ammonites, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of Yahweh that he spoke by his servants the prophets."** The Jeremiah 4 passage we just saw was only one of many prophetic warnings. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, and others also got their two bits in. And *why* was Yahweh so angry with Judah? **"Surely this came upon Judah at the command of Yahweh, to remove them out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed. For he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and Yahweh would not pardon."** (II Kings 24:1-4) Yahweh *hates* the shedding of innocent blood. From Abel to the Tribulation martyrs, He never lets it go unanswered—*ever*.

I haven't left the topic of eagle symbology. We were just told of Moabite raiding parties helping Nebuchadnezzar. (This took place in 602-601 BC.) Yahweh didn't fail to notice what was going on: **"For thus says Yahweh: 'Behold, one shall fly swiftly like an eagle and spread his wings against Moab; the cities shall be taken and the strongholds seized. The heart of the warriors of Moab shall be in that day like the heart of a woman in her birth pains. Moab shall be destroyed and be no longer a people, because he magnified himself against Yahweh.'**" (Jeremiah 48:40-42) The principle is that even though a nation is used of God to punish His people (as was the case

with Assyria, Babylon, Syria, Moab, and Ammon), unwarranted enthusiasm in doing so will in turn result in Yahweh's judgment upon the implement of discipline. There's always a bigger eagle.

Habakkuk also wrote of the speed of the coming Babylonian onslaught: **"Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"** (Habakkuk 1:8-11) But this prophet, like so many others, speaks not only of the impending invasion of Judah, but sees it as a harbinger of future judgment: the issues are universal and the ramifications extend to the end of the age. Yahweh told him, **"Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith."** (Habakkuk 2:2-4)

The eagle, as "lord of the heavens," is, not surprisingly, a sarcastic epithet sometimes given to people or nations who see *themselves* as untouchable or invincible. Yahweh, through Habakkuk, continues to rail, not against a nation, but against a class of men who through *financial* manipulation seek to gain hegemony and autonomy over the whole earth. This is precisely the ploy of what conspiracy buffs refer to as the *Illuminati*—a powerful and secretive cadre of bankers, industrialists, and politicians who are now well on their way toward achieving their goal—codified in Adam Weishaupt's 1776 manifesto—of "owning" the whole world. **"Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, 'Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own—for how long?—and loads himself with pledges!...'"** World monetary structure today is built on a house of cards called debt. Even the "wealthiest" nations are awash in debts they will never be able to pay back. And who loaned them all this money? Central banks, who are, illogically enough, given the power to create funds out of thin air, based on debt, and then to lend the money to their respective national overlords *at interest*. It's fiscal insanity on a worldwide scale, and only a fool could fail to see that it can't be sustained forever.

So the prophet asks, **"Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them."** Obviously, it is in the central bankers' perceived self interest to loan as much money as possible to their respective governments (whose plan it is to recoup the money by taxing their people). So it should come as no surprise that the same bankers, industrialists, and politicians

who run the system have a vested interest in making sure there are always expensive wars going on—**“the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.”** Nor should it surprise us that Yahweh saw the whole fiasco, and its inevitable end, several millennia before it happened. As I write these words, the human race appears to be poised at the very edge of the cliff, peering into the chasm of chaos that awaits it. The Illuminati (or whatever you want to call them—the scriptural term is “Babylon,” in its financial permutation) see themselves as eagles, safe and invulnerable in their lofty perches of power. But God has ordained their end: **“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.”** (Habakkuk 2:6-10)

The international elite are only one variation of this sin of collective pride, of course. Many nations throughout the course of history have imagined themselves to be invincible—eagles living above the mundane fray, invincible and indestructible. Some (like Imperial Rome, Nazi Germany, and the United States, to name but a few) have even adopted the eagle as a national talisman. Yahweh would have them (and us) to know that it’s all an illusion: we all live in the shadow of *His* wings; we are all subject to *His* judgment. The prophet Obadiah speaks of Edom—the descendants of Esau—in this light. **“Thus says the Lord Yahweh concerning Edom: We have heard a report from Yahweh, and a messenger has been sent among the nations: ‘Rise up! Let us rise against her for battle!’ Behold, I will make you small among the nations. You shall be utterly despised. The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, in your lofty dwelling, who say in your heart, ‘Who will bring me down to the ground?’ Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares Yahweh.”** (Obadiah 1-4) The mightiest of men are less than navel lint in Yahweh’s estimation. Pride is therefore the most idiotic of institutions.

Jeremiah expands the thought—still speaking of Edom while providing universal admonition to the rest of us: **“The horror you inspire has deceived you, and the pride of your heart, you who live in the clefts of the rock, who hold the height of the hill. Though you make your nest as high as the eagle’s, I will bring you down from there, declares Yahweh. Edom shall become a horror. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters.”** It wasn’t so much Edom’s actual strength that God objected to, but her pride in it. As Solomon once noted, **“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. “As when Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighboring cities were overthrown, says Yahweh, no man shall dwell there, no man shall sojourn in her. Behold, like a lion coming up from the jungle of the Jordan against a perennial pasture, I will suddenly make him run away from her. And I will appoint over her whomever I choose....”** This is how it worked out historically: originally Edom was due south of the Dead Sea, in modern-day southern Jordan. Edom is often identified in scripture with Mt. Seir, in the mountain range just east of the

Arabah (the rift valley running north and south between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba). But if you'll check a good Bible atlas, you'll notice that the nation slowly crept west, then north, as time went on—eventually supplanted geographically by the Nabataeans, then the Byzantines, and then the Arabs. By the time of Christ, the name Edom had morphed into Idumea, and their territory extended from Gaza (only a few miles from the Med) to the Dead Sea (now its *eastern* border). In other words, it ended up smack in the middle of ancient Judah. Edom basically evaporated into the surrounding cultures.

Yahweh goes on to explain: **“For who is like Me? Who will summon Me? What shepherd can stand before Me? Therefore hear the plan that Yahweh has made against Edom and the purposes that He has formed against the inhabitants of Teman. Even the little ones of the flock shall be dragged away. Surely their fold shall be appalled at their fate. At the sound of their fall the earth shall tremble; the sound of their cry shall be heard at the Red Sea. Behold, one shall mount up and fly swiftly like an eagle and spread his wings against Bozrah, and the heart of the warriors of Edom shall be in that day like the heart of a woman in her birth pains.”** (Jeremiah 49:16-22) The final swift eagle deployed against Edom (or at least Edomite territory—Teman is a city about 60 miles due south of the Dead Sea; Bozrah is north and a bit east of Teman) will apparently be the returning King Yahshua. Isaiah reports (in 63:1) that the winepress of God's “day of vengeance” will be “trodden out alone” by Yahweh (in the person of the risen Messiah, we may safely presume)—beginning in Edom, at Bozrah. This is evidently the first engagement of the Battle of Armageddon, for Yahweh through Isaiah reports (in 63:6) that “I have trodden down the *peoples* (plural in the Hebrew: *amim*—families, nations, or armies) in My anger.” As in, more than just Edomites.

The eagle is recruited as a scriptural symbol fairly often in reference to the Last Days. One of the more enigmatic of these is found in the Olivet Discourse, in which Yahshua answered a question from His disciples with a remark about eagles (or vultures—the word *aetos* can mean either thing). Matthew's version is a bit cryptic: **“For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever the corpse is, there the eagles will gather.”** (Matthew 24:27-28) Luke's, however, makes it clear that the four disciples whom Yahshua was addressing had asked a question about *two* contrasted prophetic eventualities, both of which were answered by the “eagle” comment. Yahshua said, **“Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left.”** What He was describing is the lightning-sudden separation of the redeemed from the rest of humanity at the rapture. **“And they said to him, ‘Where, Lord?’ He said to them, ‘Where the corpse is, there the eagles will gather.’”** (Luke 17:33-37)

Yahshua's answer explained the nature of the rapture, both "where they (the redeemed, those who were okay with 'losing' their lives on Christ's behalf) are taken" *and* "where they (the lost, those who sought to preserve their mortal lives at all costs) are left." The key word is the Greek word *soma*, translated "corpse" here. Thayer's lexicon explains that *soma* can mean the body of a man or animal, dead or alive; a star or heavenly body; a group of people, such as a family, or organization such as the Church; or the thing that casts the shadow, as opposed to the shadow itself. In other words, it means pretty much what "body" does in English. "Corpse," then, is probably too narrow a translation, especially in light of the fact that *soma* is related to the verb *sozo*: to save or keep safe, to rescue from danger or destruction.

Yahshua had told them, "One will be taken and the other left." And they answered with a question: "Where, Lord?" His reply was a play on words answering *both* questions, that is, "Where will they be taken?" and "Where will they be left?" The first answer could be rendered, "Where my followers—the body of Christ, those who are safe in My love—are found, that is where My Spirit will have gathered them together." The second answer would be, "Where those left behind are found, that is where the carrion birds will come together to feast upon their corpses." Or words to that effect.

There is one more side to the eagle symbol that we need to explore: the idea that the eagle, being the autonomous "lord of the heavens," has the ability, not to mention the desire, to shelter his offspring from harm. The eagle is portrayed caring for its young, providing shelter, and renewing its strength—what we might call "getting its second wind"—in the face of adversity and danger. Using this imagery, Moses presents a poignant picture of God's role in Israel's preservation as that of an eagle: **"Yahweh's portion is His people, Jacob His allotted heritage. He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness. He encircled him, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, Yahweh alone guided him; no foreign god was with him."** (Deuteronomy 32:9-12) Immediately after the exodus, Yahweh described to Israel what He had done for them: **"Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself."** His continued care, however, depended upon their willingness to remain in the nest. **"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples, for all the**

earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:3-6)

God’s care over Israel is an echo of the way Yahweh’s Spirit attended to the creation of the fledgling universe. **“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”** (Genesis 1:2) Contrary to the opinion of agnostic theorists who are perhaps willing to admit the *possibility* of a God, but only in a distant, impersonal role, we are informed that Yahweh takes a personal “hands-on” interest in our world—and in us. And contrary to the estimation of atheistic secular humanists, man has no knowledge or power that he didn’t ultimately receive from His Creator: **“Who has measured the Spirit of Yahweh, or what man shows Him his counsel? Whom did He consult, and who made Him understand? Who taught Him the path of justice, and taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding?”** (Isaiah 40:13-14) The Spirit, like the eagle, has no use for man’s flawed wisdom.

The same picture—that of the Holy Spirit “hovering” over its work-in-progress—is presented in Yahshua’s lament over the fate of the holy city in the wake of it’s rejection of His Messianic credentials: **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen [or a mother eagle?] gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see Me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of Yahweh.’”** (Matthew 23:37-39, quoting Psalm 118:26) That’s not like saying, “...until hell freezes over,” by the way. Israel will at last—after two thousand years of pathological denial—see her Messiah, and recognize that Yahshua has indeed “come in the name of Yahweh,” on the definitive Day of Atonement—unless I’ve completely misread Yahweh’s heavy-handed prophetic clues, on October 3, 2033.

The fact that Israel has not yet recognized or received her Messiah will not prevent Yahweh from keeping His word to protect her as He did during the exodus, “bearing her on eagles’ wings and bringing her to Himself,” as we read above. The “eagle” metaphor is once again employed to describe God’s shelter of Israel during the second half of the Tribulation, when (as Daniel puts it) “the power of the holy people is completely shattered.” **“And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman [Israel] who had given birth to the male child [Yahshua]. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent [Satan] into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time [i.e., three and a half prophetic years—1,260 days].”** (Revelation 12:13-14) This allegorical vignette dovetails nicely with the broad sweep of Last Days prophecy. Briefly: the demon-controlled Antichrist will become “dictator of planet earth” near the midpoint of the Tribulation—at an event known as the “abomination of desolation.” At this time,

he will attempt to impose a mark and oath of loyalty upon the whole world (beginning with Israel, I'm guessing). But they (stubborn to the end) will reject his Messianic claims and "fly (with God's assistance) from the serpent into the wilderness," where they will be miraculously fed, protected and taught—"nourished," as the Revelation 12 passage puts it—for forty-two months by Yahweh's angelic host. When it's all over, they will be prepared at last to meet their true Messiah—the One they rejected two millennia previously. Better late than never, I guess. The timing, by the way, was revealed by the prophet Hosea: **"Come, let us return to Yahweh; for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days [i.e., two thousand years] He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live before Him."** (Hosea 6:1-2)

That's not the only "eagle activity" going on during the Tribulation. The following scene is connected with the fourth trumpet judgment, which by my reckoning would put it somewhere close to the midpoint of the Tribulation—the same general timeframe as the "great eagle's" rescue of Israel. But here, the eagle is warning the rest of the world of the plagues to come. **"Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, 'Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!'"** (Revelation 8:13) The messenger here is described as an eagle, but a bit later, three *angels* are seen delivering very similar news to the hapless inhabitants of earth as the Great Tribulation (the second half) is about to begin. Could it be that what was described as "an eagle" in Revelation 8 was actually an angel? Remember, the word translated "angel," in both Greek and Hebrew, simply means messenger, so it's certainly a plausible conjecture—not that it really matters: this was, after all, seen in a *vision*.

Anyway, the three angels of Revelation 14 have very specific messages to deliver: **"Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead [precisely as the eagle of the three woes was described], with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water....'"** This is a timely message indeed, for at this juncture, the Antichrist is about to try to force everyone on earth to bow to him and worship the dragon-demon who empowers him. Satan, who created nothing, is about to be outed as the false god he is, for the true and living God, Yahweh, is about to mess with everything He made for man's enjoyment and survival: the heavens (i.e., the sky), the surface of the earth, the oceans, and the world's fresh water sources—just to show everyone who the *real* deity is.

"Another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.' (Revelation

14:6-8) The second angel announces the fall of what scripture calls “Babylon,” not just the city (which fell some time ago) but “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots,” that is, the collective expression of mankind’s idolatry, whether religious, cultural, political (the lust for power), or financial. The “sexual immorality” (some translations read “fornication”) of which the prophet speaks encompasses far more than literal illicit sex (though it no doubt includes it). This is the consistent scriptural metaphor for our unfaithfulness to Yahweh—in a word, idolatry. It isn’t “theological mistakes.” It’s purposeful systematic adoration and devotion to something—*anything*—that isn’t Yahweh.

On a more specific note, the fall of Babylon against which the angel is warning the world here signals the catastrophic collapse of the world’s financial infrastructure—economic meltdown on a global scale. Why *now*, exactly? After all, anybody with his eyes open nowadays can see it coming. Even as I write these words, the world’s governments are saddling their populations with multiplied trillions in debt they will never be able to repay. Remember Habakkuk 2:6-10, the passage I quoted a few pages back? John now reports the fruition of Habakkuk’s prophecy: **“Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you.”** Yes, they will. And the “suddenness” of which Habakkuk speaks is echoed in Revelation 18, where the judgment of financial or commercial Babylon is described as happening “in one hour.”

The Antichrist will capitalize (if you’ll pardon the pun) upon the economic chaos, using other people’s money—stolen, ironically enough, from the bankers of Babylon—to finance his own megalomaniacal aspirations. The heart of his plan (as far as controlling the populace is concerned) will be to implement what is known as “the mark of the beast,” a combination oath of loyalty and identification-for-commerce system that, on paper anyway, promises to eliminate the worldwide debt crisis, streamline commerce, prevent theft and fraud, and reign in the anarchy characteristic of the times. The sinister truth, however, is that the mark officially allies the bearer with “the dragon,” a euphemism for Satan, our adversary. Thus we see a third angel, like an eagle soaring untouched through the heavens, screeching out a warning to the hapless citizens of the earth below: **“Whatever you do, *do not* receive the Antichrist’s mark!” And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.’”** (Revelation 14:8-10) Alas, we are told that all over the world, multitudes of people will ignore this warning. John informs us, **“And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming His name and His**

dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. Authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.” (Revelation 13:5-8)

At this point, it all looks exceedingly grim. Satan has been given three and a half years to have his way with the earth, and God’s people (that is, those who came to faith after the rapture) are subsequently faced with mayhem or martyrdom, the ultimate trial (cf. Revelation 3:10). But even now, when things are worse than they’ve ever been (which is *sayin’ something*), God offers hope: **“Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”** (Psalm 103:1-5) Those on earth who heeded the eagle/angels’ warnings, who turned to Yahweh before it was too late, will be given the strength the times require—strength to face hunger, thirst, terror, and environmental disaster, strength to fight against impossible odds, and strength to hide from a world irrationally bent on their destruction. Many will even be given the strength and courage to face martyrdom for their faith. Whether or not their tormentors ever figure it out, the Tribulation faithful—the “Church of repentant Laodicea,” as I like to call them—will prove impossible to defeat. The very gates of hell will not prevail against them. Even though their bodies can be slain, their souls cannot: whether in life or in death, their **“youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”**

Daniel was told (in 12:7) that before these things are finished, “the power of the holy people will be completely shattered.” They will have no political authority, no cultural influence, and no financial clout. They will be, as far as the world is concerned, non-persons: either fugitives living off the grid or prisoners awaiting execution. But the world doesn’t know the God they serve: **“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might He increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for Yahweh shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.”** (Isaiah 40:29-31)

We who wait on Yahweh may die, but we’ll never stop living.

BIRD

❧ 3.2.9 ❧

The Consequences of Choice

At first glance, it seems a stretch to assign a symbolic meaning to birds in scripture. After all, they are, as a category, a veritable study in contrasts: clean vs. unclean, predator vs. prey, large vs. small, carnivorous vs. vegetarian, domesticated vs. wild, captive vs. free, or flying vs. flightless. No other class of created being is represented in scripture with as many distinct variations—in alphabetical order: buzzards, cormorants, doves, eagles, falcons, hawks, hens, herons, hoopoes, jackdaws, kites, ostriches, several varieties of owls, partridges, pelicans, pigeons, quails, ravens, roosters, sparrows, storks, swallows, swifts, turtledoves, and vultures. (The list may vary, of course, depending on what translation you're using.) Beyond that, birds are as often as not mentioned in the same context as other animals. "Birds and beasts" together are commonly employed as a euphemism for "living things comprising God's created biosphere." So perhaps the symbolic significance we'll discover applying to birds can be extended to the rest of the biosphere as well.

But it is this very diversity that leads me to the conclusion that Yahweh is using birds to teach us something significant about our lives: the things we do, the choices we make, result in a wide variety of consequences, but they basically break down into two broad categories, good and bad. The most obvious tip off, perhaps, is the Levitical dietary instructions, that say it's okay to eat poultry, but then go on to list quite a few specific birds that are forbidden as food. The lesson here is to be discerning—our actions have consequences.

Four words are used in scripture to designate birds in general, two in Hebrew and two in Greek. Not surprisingly, one variant in each language is based on a corresponding verb meaning "to fly." The Hebrew *'owph* is derived from *'uwph*, meaning to fly, fly about, or fly away. Thus it is used in the broadest sense of any creature capable of flying, including winged insects and bats (a usage that explains why God included bats among the "birds"—*'owph*—on the dietary no-no list. In Hebrew, the usage is perfectly accurate). In Greek the word based on the ability of flight is *peteinon* (again, from a verb meaning "to fly"). The other Greek word translated "bird" is *orneon* (a generic designation for fowl). And in Hebrew, *tsippowr* is the word used to describe small birds that hop about (e.g., sparrows). It's derived from the verb *tsaphar*, meaning to go early, or depart.

The creation account gives birds (i.e., flying creatures) a starring role on the fifth day: **"And God said, 'Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.' So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to**

their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.' And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day." (Genesis 1:20-23) Since *'owph* is the word used here, this would of course include flying insects and reptiles like pterodactyls and archaopteryxes, which God apparently introduced long before the warm-blooded feathered variety we know as "birds" today. This fact broadens the scriptural definition of "birds" beyond what we're used to thinking, adding weight to my contention that they symbolically represent the broad range of possible consequences—often unexpected or unforeseen—that our choices can precipitate.

The whole thing begins to come into focus when we learn of man's assigned role in managing Yahweh's creation: **"And God blessed [Adam and Eve]. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"** (Genesis 1:28) In case you were wondering (as I was), that word "subdue" *is* accurately translated. *Kabash* is a verb meaning to subject, control, subdue, dominate, tread down, or bring into bondage. This doesn't mean we're being commanded by God to abuse the environment, however. Rather, its well being has become our responsibility. More to the point, we're being given insight into what birds (and all the rest) were supposed to signify to us: we are being instructed to bring our free will under submission—to control it, subdue it, and exercise dominion over it. In other words, we are not to live like animals, allowing our instincts and passions to rule us. Revealingly, the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages* notes that the phrase *kabash 'aown* means to "remove sin, formally, subdue wrongs, i.e., remove guilt from wrongdoing, implying relationship, as a figurative extension of conquering a people or nation." For example, **"He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."** (Micah 7:19)

So David notes, **"You have given [man] dominion over the works of Your hands. You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!"** (Psalm 8:6-9) In linking our derived dominion over the "works of His hands" to the majesty of Yahweh's name, David has revealed God's game plan: our free will, our God-given ability to select our own destiny, defines mankind. It puts us in a unique position in all of creation, for we alone may make moral choices. We alone may determine what deity we will serve. (Note that David specifically designates Yahweh as "our lord" here—there is no question in his mind who *he* has chosen to serve.) Our dominion over the earth's birds, beasts, and sea creatures is a metaphor for the power we hold as the possessors of free will. It is a power not to be taken lightly. There are consequences to everything we do.

The principle is established, then: we are to rule over our own choices (and thereby control their consequences). That is, we are not to be ruled by animalistic instincts, passions, lusts, and desires, but rather bring them under submission and keep them under our own control. Our free will is the tool Yahweh has provided us to enable us to do precisely that. Of course, as with any tool, we have to be willing to wield it: the nail will not drive itself. And it would be silly, not to mention unnatural, for the nail to say to the carpenter, “You must hammer me in at the time and place of my choosing.” The carpenter, after all, is the one wielding the hammer—his free will. Yahweh warned us against this very thing, in so many words: **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.”** (Exodus 20:4-5) The things “in heaven above” are birds (and perhaps even angels—see Revelation 14:6). The admonition precludes making *any* image of *anything* for the purpose of worship, for Yahweh had purposed to provide His own image: Yahshua the Messiah. Our obeisance and service are to be rendered to Him alone.

Moses later brought it into focus: **“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, [or] the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air.”** (Deuteronomy 4:15-17) Nobody *really* worships birds and beasts, of course. In bowing down to “carved images,” they’re actually paying homage to some concept they have *assigned* to the image. In the final analysis, it’s absurdly simple: mankind’s worship of “carved images” invariably boils down to a desire for one of three things: power, prosperity, or pleasure. Or, stated as a negative, it entails the wish to evade oppression, poverty, or pain.

Man’s erroneous worship practices are often based on the illusion that our mortal lives are all there is to it. But because the soul (if indwelt with an immortal Spirit) will outlive the body, to base one’s eternal outlook on “getting good stuff in this life” is the dumbest strategy imaginable. On the other hand, if this mortal life begins to look hopeless (as it does for the vast majority of mankind), then the paradigm slops over into a variety of afterlife scenarios based on the same sort of desires. The Muslim longs for avoidance of Allah’s hell fire, and to instead be given sex-starved virgins and rivers of wine as a reward for his “martyrdom”—performing acts of unspeakable horror in this life. The Hindu or Buddhist dreams of achieving nothingness—that is, nirvana, the state of feeling nothing, of needing nothing, of knowing nothing, of being nothing (the “no pain is gain” philosophy). The pagan Christian expects mansions in glory, a heaven with streets of gold, having no conception how hard those might be to walk on if you’re not “shod with the preparation of the good news of peace.” The secular

humanist harbors visions of utopia, which I'd define as the irrational desire for man's bad choices to somehow cease precipitating their normal disastrous consequences.

All of this is “carved images of birds and beasts,” mankind's desperate manifestations of errant theories based on illusive (or unattainable) goals. Yahweh, strangely enough, promises us none of these things—neither power, nor prosperity, nor pleasure. What He offers us, rather, is a personal relationship, a loving familial bond, that of a parent to His beloved child or a husband to His bride. And yet, since He is the omnipotent Creator of the universe, we find ourselves intimately associated with the greatest power imaginable. Since He owns *everything*, we His children are declared heirs to His vast fortune. And since He loves us unconditionally, we can enjoy the exquisite pleasure of perfect peace, even as the world around us tears itself apart.

As I said, our choices carry consequences.

The Torah's dietary laws divide birds into two groups, those that are approved for food, and those which are not: Israel was required to make a distinction between bird species; they were to exercise discernment in their poultry choices, based on Yahweh's “nutritional counsel.” Funny how omniscience works: when Yahweh offers “advice” it can't help but take on the proportions of a commandment. In Deuteronomy, the precept looked like this: **“You may eat all clean birds. But these are the ones that you shall not eat: the eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, the kite, the falcon of any kind; every raven of any kind; the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind; the little owl and the short-eared owl, the barn owl and the tawny owl, the carrion vulture and the cormorant, the stork, the heron of any kind; the hoopoe and the bat. And all winged insects are unclean for you; they shall not be eaten. All clean winged things you may eat.”** (Deuteronomy 14:11-20) I should point out that the ESV's mention of the “ostrich” is almost surely a mistranslation. It should read ossifrage, i.e. a lammergeyer or osprey. The NIV renders it “horned owl.” The point is that it's a carnivore, a predator, while the ostrich's diet consists of seeds, shrubs, grass, fruit and flowers. And that, the birds' diet, is the single differentiating factor between “delectable” and “detestable.” The unclean birds all hunt or scavenge meat—mammals, other birds, or fish—while the clean birds are primarily vegetarians (give or take the odd bug or worm).

The list in the original Leviticus instructions looked very similar: **“And these you shall detest among the birds; they shall not be eaten; they are detestable: the eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, the kite, the falcon of any kind, every raven of any**

kind, the [ossifrage], the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind, the little owl, the cormorant, the short-eared owl, the barn owl, the tawny owl, the carrion vulture, the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.” (Leviticus 11:13-18) This would leave domestic “barnyard birds” like chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese, as well as wild seed-eaters like quails, doves, pigeons, partridges, pheasants, grouses—and yes, ostriches and emus—on the approved list.

At one time or another, I’m pretty sure, our mothers told each and every one of us, “Don’t touch that: you don’t know where it’s been.” The Torah’s dietary laws are sort of the converse of that. Yahweh is telling us, “I *do* know where that has been, and it’s not good. Don’t eat it.” **“You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to Me, for I, Yahweh, am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.”** (Leviticus 20:25-26) What one eats is a thinly veiled euphemism for anything he assimilates into his life. Between the lines, Yahweh is instructing us to welcome innocence, harmlessness, and goodness, and to reject iniquity, destructive behavior, and evil. Just as we risk illness if we eat crows and vultures, we put ourselves needlessly in harm’s way if we don’t make an effort to discern and draw distinctions between the moral influences with which we are confronted in this world. As with the birds of the air, we are not to assume that all things are beneficial to us in the same way, just because God placed them before us in His creation. Buzzards have a job to do, but unlike chickens, that job is not to be food for people.

But that brings up an interesting point: even what God has deemed “good” for us can become evil if misused. There is a line between enjoying prosperity and pursuing greed, between having a roof over your head and dwelling in pointlessly ostentatious luxury, or between getting a drink of water and drowning in it. The Israelites of the exodus learned this lesson the hard way. Having been rescued from their chains, they irrationally began questioning Yahweh’s ability to provide for them—*after* He had begun giving them manna every morning. The Psalmist Asaph summarizes: **“They spoke against God, saying, ‘Can God spread a table in the wilderness?’ ... He rained meat on them like dust, winged birds like the sand of the seas. He let them fall in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings. And they ate and were well filled, for He gave them what they craved.”** (Psalm 78:19, 27-29) The point here is that they craved what God had not supplied, even though His provision was sufficient, adequate, and perfectly suited to their needs. In a world obsessed with non-essentials, this is a lesson we would do well to heed.

The Numbers narrative tells us how our craving for things Yahweh has *not* seen fit to provide—even “good” things—can get us into trouble. **“Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving.”** The desire for meat, in itself, was neither

evil nor unnatural. It had been a normal part of man's diet since the days of Noah. What was wrong was the way Israel expressed their longing—through whining and complaining. **“And the people of Israel also wept again and said, ‘Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at....’”** This is the classic “grass is greener on the other side of the fence” scenario. A couple of weeks out of Egypt and they had forgotten all about the bondage and forced labor; all they remembered, all they craved—faced now with a steady diet of manna—was some kind of food that could make their breath stink. Like us (all too often), they were fixated not on what God had provided, but on what they *didn't* have. No wonder Yahweh polished off His Ten Commandments with “You shall not covet.”

Moses, meanwhile, was beginning to think maybe he should have kept his shoes on at the burning bush—so he could have run away. **“Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, ‘Give us meat, that we may eat....’”** Nobody seriously thought Moses was God, you understand. He was merely the only available target—God's appointed human representative. Don't look now, but we believers are performing the same role on behalf of our Messiah today: we're *His* representatives among men. So, as with Moses, don't be surprised if people (1) blame us for their troubles, real or imagined, (2) expect us to do miracles, whether or not God has ordained them, and (3) hate us just as they hate our God, just because He doesn't perform like a trained monkey for them.

Yahweh's poetic response was to teach His people to be careful what they wish for because they just might get it, though it's seldom what they were expecting, exactly. **“You shall not eat just one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out at your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have rejected Yahweh who is among you and have wept before Him....”** The manna He had already given them was nutritionally perfect, and tasty to boot. It was everything they needed, and considerably more than they deserved; it just wasn't what they wanted. Note that in whining to Moses (God's appointed representative) they were actually demonstrating their rejection of Yahweh.

It would transpire that the “meat” Yahweh sent to the ungrateful Israelites came in the form of birds—low-flying quail, apparently *millions* of them. **“Then a wind from Yahweh sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day's journey on this side and a day's journey on the other side, around the camp, and about two cubits above the ground.”** In other words, they were sent flying through the camp and its environs at about waist level: “poultry in motion.” All the people had to do was go out and club them out of the air as they flew by. No game wardens; no bag limit. **“And the people rose all that day and all night and all the**

next day, and gathered the quail. Those who gathered least gathered ten homers.” A “homer” (not to be confused with the much smaller “omer”) was a large unit of dry measure—roughly the weight a donkey was supposed to be able to carry. Depending on who you’re asking, it was somewhere between 6½ and 11 bushels, i.e., between 220 and 394 liters. Picture a big oil drum—that’s one homer. Multiply that by ten, and you’ve some idea how many quail each family knocked out of the air—not to mention the hysterical greed that had set in. And to give you a further idea of the scope of the miracle, factor in that there were upwards of half a million households in Israel at the time. That’s a *whole lot* of poultry. The Israelites, having no refrigeration, apparently decided to make quail jerky: **“And they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.”** But any way you slice it, that’s way too much meat to consume before it goes bad. So as the Israelites stuffed themselves with the unexpected bounty, the meat began to spoil. **“While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of Yahweh was kindled against the people, and Yahweh struck down the people with a very great plague.”** (Numbers 11:4-6, 13, 19-20, 31-33)

What are we to learn from all this? (1) Although God expects us to petition Him for what we need (and yes, even for what we’d merely *like*), don’t whine, and don’t grumble. His grace is quite sufficient. (2) Don’t be greedy with what He provides. Remember, Yahweh’s resources are not limited; He owns “the cattle on a thousand hills”—for starters. So if He has given us more than we need, we should assume that the excess bounty is there for us to distribute to others in need. And (3) overabundant blessings (represented here by birds flying through the camp) should remind us that our choices carry consequences. It would have made sense to take half a dozen quail home for one’s feast, to be eaten with thanksgiving and praise to Yahweh. But to kill *hundreds* of birds, just because they were available (and in truth, because you didn’t trust Yahweh to provide for you tomorrow as He did today) was just plain dumb. The Israelites killed so many quail in their feeding frenzy, the meat started to spoil **“while the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed.”** And before it was over, their greedy little nostrils were filled with the unmistakable, *unforgettable* odor of rotting bird carcasses. If nothing else, it made them happy to be manna-vegans for the next forty years—*anything* but quail! I can’t help but reflect on the past blessings of my native land, America. We have been given immense resources, but like the Israelites, we have too often squandered or hoarded the bounty that Yahweh bestowed upon us. Choices have consequences, and we have rarely chosen to honor God as we should have. Does He not have the right to “strike down the people [of America] with a very great plague?” We need to repent, folks.

Of course, America is not alone in our national propensity for making poor choices. The whole world has, by and large, systematically turned its back on its Creator, leaving those who choose to honor Yahweh an isolated and beleaguered

minority. This pervasive system of idolatry bears a scriptural code word: God calls it “Babylon,” an entity that is destined to grow more and more powerful—right up until the moment it’s destroyed. And here too, birds play a role in describing the nature of the beast. John writes, **“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. And he called out with a mighty voice, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.”** (Revelation 18:1-3) “Babylon the great” has several faces—religion, politics, and finance or commerce—all of which are alluded to here.

Remember the definition of an “unclean bird.” It’s one who kills for a living, or who feasts on that which is already dead—a predatory carnivore or carrion bird. Figuratively, Babylon is where such unclean birds congregate. In other words, Babylon, the world’s collective expression of systematic idolatry (i.e., adoration of things other than Yahweh and His Messiah) is home to those who thrive on the carnage and death of their fellow creatures, who glean advantage from the misfortune of others. In the case of religion, it’s the elevation of the clergy and their system over the God they purport to represent, obfuscating the truth in order to exert temporal influence over men—even if it costs them their souls. In the case of politics, it’s the exercise of power for power’s sake, resulting in the loss of liberty. In the case of the financial and commercial side of Babylon, it’s the accumulation of wealth into the hands of a powerful elite class. Each of these permutations are driven by pride, self-absorption, and greed—the very antithesis of godly love. Babylon is the sum total of the bad choices in mankind’s experience—and as I said, choices carry consequences. But remember what the angel prophetically announced: “Babylon is fallen.”

If unclean birds roost in Babylon, where do clean birds find themselves at home? Not surprisingly, in the rites and rituals of the Torah, all of which conspire to inform us about Yahweh’s plan for our reconciliation with Him. Clean birds were not only approved for use as food, they were also authorized for offerings. For example: **“If his offering to Yahweh is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or pigeons. And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He shall remove its crop with its contents and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes. He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering [literally, an offering by fire] with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 1:14-17) A “burnt offering” (Hebrew: *olah*) was a voluntary sacrifice made for atonement, homage to Yahweh, and celebration before Him. Total dedication is

implied, for the offering was to be completely consumed by fire. Unlike the peace offering, guilt offering, trespass offering, firstborn offering, or tithe, the burnt offering was not to be eaten. The *olah* represents the total, unreserved dedication of the Messiah as He offered Himself up for the sins of mankind.

We've all heard the expression "It's the thought that counts." In the case of the burnt offering, this is quite true. Under normal conditions, bulls, sheep, or goats were specified—always males without blemishes. But these animals were expensive, the kind of "currency" by which a landowner in agrarian Israel would measure his net worth. But not everyone owned flocks and herds. What then? Yahweh didn't want to exclude anyone from offering his heartfelt worship just because he was poor. So turtledoves or pigeons (which could be purchased quite cheaply) were specified as alternatives to the normal sacrificial animals. In this case, a poor man's choice to honor Yahweh was to be accommodated by the Levitical priesthood with just as much deference as if a wealthy man had brought a prize bull. **"God shows no partiality."** (Acts 10:34; cf. Deuteronomy 10:17)

Leviticus also offers a long and complicated set of instructions concerning how one may be declared clean after being afflicted with "leprosy." Here birds play a very similar role to that of goats in the rites of the Day of Atonement: one is slain, while the other is set free. **"Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall look....'"** This was not a cure for the disease, you understand, but rather a way to verify that healing had indeed taken place—something for which we have no scriptural record of *ever* happening under Torah rules—*until* Yahshua began curing lepers. Although the word "leprosy" is used for convenience (Hebrew: *sara'at*), the malady being referred to is not restricted to Hansen's Disease, but encompasses a wide range of malignant skin diseases. (It even describes mold or mildew infestations in houses). The infected person was to dwell separated from "clean" society, and was to cover his mouth and issue a verbal warning to anyone who approached, for these diseases could be quite contagious (not that Moses or anybody else understood how *that* worked). So the leper couldn't come into the camp (or the city) for this procedure; rather, the priest had to go out to him. Since "leprosy" is a symbol for the spiritual sickness that infects the world, I hear echoes of the Great Commission in that provision: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to every creature."

Sin *is* a curable condition, so the instructions continue: **"Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds [*tsippowr*—smallish "hopping" birds] and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh [or running—literally, "living"] water. He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop,**

and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field.” (Leviticus 14:1-7) This precept is so rich in symbolism, I could happily sniff about all day like a blind dog in a meat market, but I’ll try to contain myself and concentrate on the two birds. As with the two goats on Yom Kippurim, one is clearly seen as a substitute for the other—one bird is slain, while the other is set free to enjoy its liberty, though bearing the stain of the first bird’s sacrifice. The live bird is literally *baptized* in the blood of the slain sacrifice. In light of Yahshua’s finished work, you’d have to be comatose to miss the symbolic significance of this.

The Hebrew text draws a clear distinction between being “healed” and being “cleansed.” Healing—the actual curing of the disease—is achieved by God alone. “Cleansing,” on the other hand, denotes being *declared* cured by the priest, something that logically can only *follow* being “healed.” So the ritual describes what happens in the salvation process. Christ’s sacrifice healed all of us. (That is, *everyone*’s sins have been paid for, whether we know it or not, and whether we accept it or not.) But if we have subsequently been cleansed—if we have come to terms with our spiritual disease, accepted God’s provision of its healing, and asked to be admitted into fellowship with our Healer—then we are free to enter the “camp” of the saints. Like that second bird, we have been set free to “go and sin no more.”

The whole thing is reminiscent of the layout of the tabernacle courtyard: before someone could enter the sanctuary (where illumination, provision, intercession, and ultimately fellowship with God took place), he first had to encounter the altar, where innocent blood was spilled on his behalf (read: healing) and use the bronze laver (where cleansing was provided).

Lest we lose sight of what the birds signify, note that the act of healing our spiritual sickness (sin) is Yahweh’s prerogative alone, but going before the priest to be declared clean is a choice the former leper must make for himself. The consequences of choosing to do this are that he may rejoin the congregation of faith. But although he has been healed (since *all of humanity* was “healed” when Yahshua went to Calvary) he will not be *declared clean* until and unless he chooses to be. If he wishes to continue living like a leper, an outcast from the house of God, that is his privilege. Why anyone would do this, however, is beyond me.

The “birds” specified in the ritual for leprosy cleansing were *tsippowr*, the word usage that stresses flight, freedom, and escape to the skies. It’s a recurring theme in scripture—this tension between being caught in the snare of sin and death, versus flying away to safety like a wary little bird. David, for example, writes, **“Blessed be Yahweh, who has not given us as prey to their teeth! We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers. The snare is broken, and we have escaped! Our help is in the name of Yahweh, who made heaven and earth.”** (Psalm 124:6-8) The “fowler” of course is Satan our adversary—who would rob us of our liberty in grace and enslave us in a cage of iniquity if he could. Yahweh is He who breaks the snare, who releases us from the traps set for us by the devil, and who (as Paul would later put it) provides an avenue of deliverance: **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** (I Corinthians 10:13)

Each of us intends to escape from the evil circumstances that confront us. The question we must all face is how we intend to do that. What mode of flight will we choose? David puts it into perspective: **“In Yahweh I take refuge. How can you say to my soul, ‘Flee like a bird to your mountain?’”** (Psalm 11:1) Here again, birds symbolize the consequences of our choices. David, being a man of war, might have relied on his own valor when faced with enemies foreign and domestic—from the heathen Philistines to his own king Saul—in our case, that would be “enemies internal and external.” But he chose instead to rely on Yahweh, to find shelter and refuge in Him, to fly to his God (and not to his own devices) in times of trouble.

One needn’t be in immediate physical danger, however, to yearn for shelter in Yahweh. Another Psalm makes this clear: **“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Yahweh of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of Yahweh. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Yahweh of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in Your house, ever singing Your praise!”** (Psalm 84:1-4) Sparrows and swallows are *tsippowr* who, however cautious and “flighty,” are nevertheless in the habit of coexisting with people—building their nests on or near our homes. Perhaps we should take that as a cue: though Yahweh is infinitely bigger and more powerful than we are, we are perfectly safe “dwelling in His house,” for He is a God of love and mercy. The consequences of choosing to build our nests “at His altar” are blessing, shelter, and joy.

That being said, it is our choice whether to remain near the nest or stray so far from it we have trouble finding our way back. Solomon reminds us, **“Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.”** (Proverbs 27:8) “Home” is the center of our universe, where whatever we value most is to be found. We just

saw that in David's case (as in mine) "home" is Yahweh Himself. That's not to say David spent every waking moment hanging out in the tabernacle courtyard, hiding from the world like a self-absorbed monk. He knew that Yahweh's presence was with him wherever he went (which is why he pleaded in his repentance, "Take not your Holy Spirit from me"). Solomon's point (I think) was that it's not *natural* for birds to stray from their nests. Every spring for the last few years, a pair of bluebirds have made their nest in a small newspaper cubbyhole beneath my mailbox. When there are chicks in the nest, I don't even have to peek inside to know it, because one of them will be warning me off with frantic chirping, or dive bombing me like a crazy two ounce flying mama grizzly, whenever I'm foolish enough to go out and retrieve my mail. This goes on as long as there's something to protect. When the fledglings have flown, the parents abandon the nest, but as long as they're there, they *never* stray very far from it. The question is: if we Christians consider our relationship with Yahweh to be essential, why on earth do we so often wander off into pointless pursuits and mindless distractions? What do bluebirds know that we don't?

Some of the "danger" we face in this world is (potentially, at least) self inflicted. Dire need, for example, is generally avoidable, if only you're willing to flee like a bird from the snare of indolence: **"Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber. Save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the hand of the fowler. Go to the ant, O sluggard. Consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man."** (Proverbs 6:4-11) Even if "hard times" are unavoidable, sloth leading to poverty is not. If I may use king David as an example again, even though he "trusted in Yahweh," and found "refuge" in Him, he still went out and fought the battles that needed fighting—he didn't presume that victory would fall into his lap like ripe fruit, without expending any effort. And the same principle holds true for our "work" in the kingdom of God: although good works have no role whatsoever to play in bringing us into the kingdom, the fact remains that our gratitude as "naturalized citizens" should compel us to be active and enthusiastic patriots once we make our homes here.

Some reading Solomon's words there (or mine, for that matter) might take offense, saying, "My poverty is not my fault; you have no right to accuse me of being a lazy sluggard. I've tried, but I just can't find a job." I can't speak for Solomon, but as for me, I'm accusing no one. I know from experience how hard it can be; I've endured lean times myself—interspersed (thanks be to God) with times when my family and I enjoyed the "fat of the land." Besides, accusations and curses won't stick if they're groundless. As Solomon (again) says, **"Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, a curse that is causeless does not alight."**

(Proverbs 26:2) The caveat, of course, is that we must be honest with ourselves, no matter what is being said by our peers. A “curse” that is well and truly earned will build a magnificent nest in our lives and refuse to leave, and all of our protests of innocence will avail us nothing. We needn’t defend or justify ourselves before men: Yahweh knows the truth. The curses mankind brings upon itself—those that “alight” because they are *not* “causeless”—are the consequences of the poor choices they’ve made. Bad times don’t just happen: they’re manufactured.

There will be (and have been) times, of course, when evil prevails even more than usual. Such times do not indicate that God has somehow lost control of his universe; they are merely punctuation marks in the “life sentence” of the human race, reminding us that what is true for individuals can also be true of entire societies. We would do well to remember that the “blessings and cursings” passages in the Torah are primarily *national* in scope—not personal. **“For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.”** (Ecclesiastes 9:12) For example, the second church on Christ’s mailing list in Revelation 2-3, that in the city of Smyrna, was warned of ten sporadic periods of overt persecution they would endure. (Historically, the prophecy would play out precisely as predicted: ten Roman mini-holocausts against the church were spread out over about 260 years between the reigns of Nero and Diocletian.) Whether living under peace or persecution, the snare of our own mortality awaits us all. But note that it is possible to suffer the consequences of *other people’s* choices, besides our own. **“Man does not know his time.”**

Israel has suffered perhaps more than any other nation in this regard, though the single disastrous choice that began it all—the rejection of Yahweh and His Messiah—was hers alone. The Psalmist predicts Israel’s plight: **“I am like a desert owl of the wilderness, like an owl of the waste places; I lie awake. I am like a lonely sparrow on the housetop. All the day my enemies taunt me. Those who deride me use my name for a curse.”** (Psalm 102:6-8) If you study this Psalm in detail, you’ll notice that it includes a remarkably accurate description of the Jews’ suffering under Hitler’s “final solution” during World War II. But the solitude, isolation, and persecution suffered by Israel—the ultimate consequences of their own choices as well as those of the Nazis—give way in the Psalm to a celebration of Israel’s ultimate redemption: **“He looked down from His holy height. From heaven Yahweh looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, that they may declare in Zion the name of Yahweh, and in Jerusalem His praise, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship Yahweh.”** (Psalm 102:19-22) Okay, we’re not quite there yet: neither Israel nor the nations worship Yahweh, and Jerusalem does not yet declare His praise. But we’re a whole lot closer than we were in 1944, you must admit. The verse from this Psalm that gives me hope for the short run is this: **“Let this be recorded for a generation to come [literally, the *last***

generation], **so that a people yet to be created may praise Yahweh.**" (Psalm 102:18) The "people yet to be created" to which the Psalmist refers are, I believe, the church, the *ekklesia*—the called-out assembly of Yahshua who would (and did) praise Yahweh because of what He did for Israel in the wake of the Nazi Holocaust—and what He is yet prophesied to do in our near future: reawaken, restore, and revive them like a valley of dry bones miraculously brought back to life.

That reference to "a valley of dry bones" is, of course, a prophetic reference (found in Ezekiel 37) of the eventual restoration and rebirth of the nation of Israel. But how did they get that way in the first place? As usual, the answer is found in the Torah. Yahweh told Israel—both before and after the wilderness wanderings—that if they refused to heed His word and follow His instructions, they would endure all sorts of "inducements" designed to wake them up to the responsibilities of maintaining a relationship with Yahweh. They include this grim prediction, one that proved as true on a personal level for many Israelites over the centuries as it was true in a figurative sense for their political existence as a nation: **"And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away."** (Deuteronomy 28:26) Thus we are introduced to one of the primary functions of unclean birds: they are designed as consumers of carrion—they clean up the aftermath of death. Without them, it would take far longer for dead bodies fallen in the wild to be reduced to skeletons. The world would be a measurably nastier place without the assistance of carrion birds. And as we already have already seen (in our study of eagles), the carnage of the last days will keep the birds busy indeed: "Where the body is, there will the eagles gather."

Joseph, in his role as the reader of dreams, recognized that birds could be a harbinger of death. He found himself in prison with Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, both of whom had fallen out of favor. Both of them had dreams one night, and Joseph, hearing of the cupbearer's vision, announced that it meant good news for him. So, **"When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, 'I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.' And Joseph answered and said, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you."** (Genesis 40:16-19) If nothing else, the fact that both dreams came about precisely as Joseph had interpreted them (using his God-given gift of discernment) proves that Yahweh's symbols *mean something*, and that it's up to discerning believers (like us) to

deduce what that is. More specifically in this case, the birds were a portent of the death of the one from whom they were stealing.

The mention of carrion birds in scripture needn't be quite *that* esoteric, of course. Sometimes it's a literal reference to the grim realities of life and death in a fallen world. When young David met the giant Goliath of Gath on the field of valor, it was assumed that one of them would end up as buzzard bait. **"And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. And the Philistine said to David, 'Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?' And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, 'Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field.'"** Talk is cheap, of course. But to all appearances, Goliath had a point. He was an experienced soldier, a proven slayer of mighty men, not to mention being a massive, muscular hulk of a man, and armed to the teeth as well. David was a skinny teenage shepherd boy who could barely lift Goliath's spear. **"Then David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day Yahweh will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that Yahweh saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is Yahweh's, and He will give you into our hand.'"** (I Samuel 17:42-47) I think David won the "trash talk" contest. Goliath had threatened one idealistic kid a third his size, but David called out the whole Philistine army.

We all know how it ended: David (in the power of Yahweh) stunned Goliath with one well-placed sling stone, and then cut off the giant's head with his own sword. Poetic. The point I'd like to make, however, is that the birds didn't really care who won. They would have been just as happy feasting on David's flesh. Carrion birds don't exercise judgment; they are not called upon to be the instruments of God's wrath. They merely clean up the mess. In the context of their scriptural symbolism, they deal with the consequences of the deeds of men, whether good or bad—and there are *always* consequences to deal with.

As if to make my point for me, the shoe was on the other foot in the Psalmist's lament: **"O God, the nations have come into your inheritance. They have defiled Your holy temple. They have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of Your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of Your faithful to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us. How long, O Yahweh? Will You be angry forever? Will Your jealousy burn like fire? Pour out Your anger on the nations that do not know You, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon**

Your name! For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation.” (Psalm 79:1-7)

Note that *God’s servants* and *His faithful* are said to be among the slain, upon whom the vultures were feeding. At first glance, this seems to run counter to the principle demonstrated by Lot’s deliverance from Sodom—the principle that God does not destroy the righteous with the wicked. What’s going on?

I think the distinction that must be drawn (admittedly a subtle one) is that of God’s overt judgment versus the natural consequences of poor choices—whether our own or of those close to us. It should be obvious: not *everything* bad that happens can be attributed to the hand of Yahweh in judgment. In point of fact, such occurrences are exceedingly rare in scripture: they happen just often enough to alert us to the possibility that they *can*, because God’s judgment on a worldwide scale *is* coming upon the earth. So the flood, the destruction of Sodom, and the earth swallowing up Korah and his rebels (Numbers 16) are examples of the direct hand of God in judgment upon men—examples that ought to serve as dire warnings of the Tribulation now looming upon the world’s horizon.

But most of what we see in scripture—lost battles, plagues, and so forth, up to and including the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests—are perhaps better characterized as the inevitable results of people making bad choices, reaping the consequences, and causing a certain amount of collateral damage as they do. That’s not to say Yahweh isn’t involved: the “blessings and cursings” passages of the Torah make it clear that He would, on some level, personally administer the curses that would befall Israel if they did not heed His Instructions. But the warnings are invariably couched in terms of cause and effect. Blessings follow obedience and curses follow rebellion as day follows night. Remember, the blessings and cursings are national in character: a tiny minority of faithful servants would not negate the consequences of the idolatry and apostasy that had been chosen by the vast majority of their fellow countrymen. The bad choices my neighbors make can negatively affect my life, even if I don’t agree with them. American elections effectively (and invariably) demonstrate this fact.

So isolated faithful servants like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jeremiah were unable to stem the tide of idolatrous mayhem that Judah brought upon itself. **“For the sons of Judah have done evil in My sight, declares Yahweh. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by My name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My mind. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares Yahweh, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away. And I will silence in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem the voice of mirth and the voice of**

gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, for the land shall become a waste." (Jeremiah 7:30-34, cf. 19:1-9) There's more going on here than meets the eye. Jeremiah is speaking of a place (just south of Jerusalem) where innocent children in ancient times were burned alive in homage to the pagan god Molech (a.k.a. Chemosh). By Christ's day, the place was the city's trash dump—including the ignominious disposal of the corpses of Roman crucifixion victims. Rubbish fires burned there perpetually. Thus it is not surprising that Yahshua used the designation "Gehenna" (a Greek place name derived from "Hinnom") to describe hell, the place of eternal torment reserved for Satan and those indwelt with his spirit. So what was once used as the dumping ground for the slain worshippers of Molech—where carrion birds fed on the flesh of the wicked—became a metaphor for the *eternal* "dumping ground" of hell. The tacit "suggestion" is that if you don't like the idea of birds unceremoniously picking your bones clean in the physical sense, then don't go to Gehenna in the spiritual sense.

Yahweh is merciful, but there is a point at which His patience with our poor choices reaches its breaking point. With Judah, it was apparently reached with the reign of Manasseh (though the Babylonians *still* weren't allowed to invade for several more generations). Manasseh was the son of the good king Hezekiah and grandfather of the good king Josiah, but he himself embodied all of the evil that Judah ever embraced, going so far as to "pass his sons through the fire" to Molech at Topheth, in the Valley of the sons of Hinnom (see II Chronicles 33:6). So Jeremiah pronounces Yahweh's grim assessment: Judah was beyond hope. **"Then Yahweh said to me, 'Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of My sight, and let them go! And when they ask you, 'Where shall we go?' you shall say to them, 'Thus says Yahweh: Those who are for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are for the sword, to the sword; those who are for famine, to famine, and those who are for captivity, to captivity.' I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares Yahweh: the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem."** (Jeremiah 15:1-4) Once again, we see carrion birds brought in to clean up the mess, to remove the idolaters' filthy carcasses out of God's sight, as it were.

Some would say, "Yes, but those were primitive and superstitious times. Nobody worships moldy Canaanite deities like Molech anymore. We have grown far too sophisticated and rational for anything like that to happen now. We now possess the scientific knowledge and diplomatic skills to avert anything like what Judah endured at the hands of the Babylonians." Are you sure? Forget for a moment that Molech worship *is still* alive and well in the practice of aborting unborn children because they're "inconvenient," snuffing out upwards of *forty million* innocent lives worldwide each year. The fact is that the future Yahweh has

predicted for mankind—all of it—makes the Babylonian conquest of Judah look like a paper cut. First, we're shown the course of the "Battle of Magog," in which the hordes of Islam will finally put their money (and blood) where their mouths are. They'll invade Israel in unprecedented numbers under the leadership of "the Mahdi" (known in Ezekiel's prophecy as Gog), just as their "scriptures" insist they must. It's the ultimate legacy of Muhammad's insatiable bloodlust against the Jews, born of a frustrated and unrequited Messiah complex, deep seated envy, insatiable lust, and unquenchable greed—all recorded in the Hadith and Sunnah.

So Yahweh tells his prophet: **"And I will turn you [Gog] about and drive you forward, and bring you up from the uttermost parts of the north, and lead you against the mountains of Israel. Then I will strike your bow from your left hand, and will make your arrows drop out of your right hand. You shall fall on the mountains of Israel, you and all your hordes and the peoples who are with you. I will give you to birds of prey of every sort and to the beasts of the field to be devoured. You shall fall in the open field, for I have spoken, declares the Lord Yahweh."** (Ezekiel 39:2-5) Left up to man, the cancer of Islam would spread throughout the world, either through immigration, conquest, or prodigious breeding. With a billion and a half souls now in bondage, it's well on its way already—so much so that "infidels" are beginning to wonder if the scourge of Muhammad can be stopped at all. Yahweh's word assures us that it will: the battle of Magog is how He intends to get the job done. **"As for you, son of man, thus says the Lord Yahweh: Speak to the birds of every sort and to all beasts of the field, 'Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth.... And you shall eat fat till you are filled, and drink blood till you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you. And you shall be filled at My table with horses and charioteers, with mighty men and all kinds of warriors,' declares the Lord Yahweh."** (Ezekiel 39:17-20)

As squishy as that sounds, the Muslims are just an appetizer for the birds. The Battle of Magog will escalate into World War III, a nuclear conflagration that will consume one quarter of the earth's population. And then *this* will happen: **"Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.'" This time, the carrion birds of the earth have an engraved invitation from God Himself to attend the biggest single flesh feast in the history of man. It's called Armageddon. **"And I saw the beast [i.e., the Antichrist and/or the demon who inhabits him] and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against Him [i.e., Yahshua the Messiah, who has returned in glory to the earth] who was sitting on the horse and against His army [the now-immortal saints, who had been raptured previously]. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which****

he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of Him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.” (Revelation 19:17-21) Yum.

By the time the Tribulation has run its course, well over half (actually, I’d estimate somewhere north of *six billion*) of the world’s human population will have died—far too many bodies to dispose of in the usual way by the comparatively few who remain. The un-battle of Armageddon is merely the last hurrah. (Well, actually, it’s the *next*-to-last hurrah, since the returning King will still have the separation of the sheep from the goats to attend to—see Matthew 25:31-46.) The seven-year buzzard banquet known as the Tribulation will, in the end, give way to Christ’s unending reign of peace and justice. Carrion birds, as a symbol, will go out of style. For a thousand years, man’s poor choices will be met with immediate corrective attention—they won’t be allowed to take on a life of their own as they do now, festering and growing until hardly anyone can perceive the truth anymore. Will vultures, like lions, eat straw like the ox (Isaiah 11:7) during the Millennial Kingdom? I don’t know, but when Yahshua finally reigns, there’s going to be precious little dead stuff for them to eat.

Birds display a great deal of intuitive knowledge concerning their environment. They instinctively know where sustenance might be found; they sense when to migrate to more hospitable climes; they are always alert to danger, remaining ready to fly away at a moment’s notice; they build their nests only where they feel safe; and species by species, they happily fulfill the roles their Creator assigned to them. All of this makes the term “bird brain” begin to sound like a compliment. We humans, by comparison, often seem out of touch, studiously insulated from (and insensitive to) the ramifications of our free will.

On the other hand, birds, operating on instinct rather than on intellect, can easily fall into clever traps. Yahweh’s simile makes that clear: **“Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria. As they go, I will spread over them My net; I will bring them down like birds of the heavens. I will discipline them according to the report made to their congregation.”** (Hosea 7:11-12) The “wisdom” birds seem to exhibit, then, has nothing to do with native intelligence. Rather, their instincts are implanted by God, sufficient for the task at hand—albeit predictable to someone who carefully observes their nature. Equally predictable are the consequences of the choices we make, especially in light of the warnings and admonitions Yahweh has given us.

Job asks, **“From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air....”** Birds don’t have to think. They just know. **“God understands the way to it, and He knows its place. For He looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When He gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when He made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then He saw it and declared it; He established it, and searched it out. And He said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’”** (Job 28:20-21, 23-28) It never occurs to birds and beasts to question their Maker, for their wisdom is not based on choice. A goose does not “choose” to fly south for the winter; it simply does. It’s “wisdom” is hard wired into the species. Man, on the other hand, must choose whether or not to heed his Creator’s instructions. Reverence for Yahweh is the “switch” that turns on human wisdom. **“Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you.... Who among all these does not know that the hand of Yahweh has done this? In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.”** (Job 12:7, 9-10)

Noah’s use of birds is instructive. **“At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth.”** The unclean carrion bird wasn’t terribly fastidious about what it was willing to land on. Any bloated carcass he found floating in the turbid sludge would do. In order to get any useful information about the world’s condition, Noah found that he’d have to use a clean bird, a dove. **“Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf.”** The olive tree, I’m told, germinates more quickly than most: this was an early sign that plant life was beginning to recover—somewhere within the dove’s flight range. I’ve always found it curious that because of this incident people consider the “olive branch” a symbol of peace. *Really?* To me, the olive branch is a grim reminder that God is not shy about destroying the whole world if that’s what it takes to cleanse it. But He won’t destroy the righteous with the wicked. He always has a back-up plan, a faithful and protected remnant with whom to start over. So on second thought, maybe they have a point: although Yahweh’s absolute authority being brought to bear on a sinful world is not exactly what most folks would call “peace” these days, it certainly gets the job done. **“So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore.”** (Genesis 8:6-12) Only when the clean bird was willing to

alight somewhere other than the ark did Noah know it was safe to disembark. You can't trust a raven to know what's good for you.

In the aftermath of the flood, the birds and beasts apparently developed a bit better intuition about just how dangerous fallen man could be. **"The fear of you [that is, mankind] and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered."** (Genesis 9:2) Since Adam's day, man's "job description" had been to **"be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."** (Genesis 1:28) That hadn't changed, but now the creatures of the earth—with good reason, I'm thinking—would no longer intuitively trust man to act in their best interests. They would become wary, suspicious, and if pressed, even hostile. (Having been added to man's dinner menu at this time didn't help. See Genesis 9:3.) It's as if God had warned the birds and the beasts that free will in the hands of man could be like a loaded gun in the hands of a three year old. You don't want to get too close, because it might go off: the consequences can be tragic.

In a fascinating and unforeseen development, Yahshua's reign of peace during the Millennium will undo this atmosphere of enmity between man and God's creation that began in Noah's day: **"And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you [Israel] to Me forever. I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. And you shall know Yahweh."** (Hosea 2:18-20) The Millennial mortals (the descendants of the "sheep" of Matthew 25:34) will apparently be regarded by the birds and beasts of the kingdom the way Adam and his progeny related to them—in an atmosphere of intuitive trust. It's not that mankind has gone back to a strictly vegetarian diet, either, judging by things like the animal sacrifices being reinstated in the Millennial temple (see Ezekiel 40-46) and mention of a fishing industry in—of all places—the Dead Sea during the Millennium (Ezekiel 47:10). Could it be that the physical presence of the Messiah/King will precipitate an unprecedented paradigm of wisdom—that mortal men (who will by all accounts still wield their freedom of choice) will overwhelmingly choose the path of peace with God? What a different place this world is going to be.

Man's prevailing propensity in this age, however, is to choose poorly. And the ultimate poor choice is to attack Israel, Yahweh's chosen people. So God has told us how the end will begin: **"But on that day, the day that Gog shall come against the land of Israel, declares the Lord Yahweh, My wrath will be roused in my anger. For in My jealousy and in My blazing wrath I declare, On that day there shall be a great earthquake in**

the land of Israel. The fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field and all creeping things that creep on the ground, and all the people who are on the face of the earth [Hebrew: *eretz*, the ground or land—not necessarily the whole planet], shall quake at My presence.” (Ezekiel 38:18-20) It is a well documented phenomenon that birds and beasts seem to have a sort of “precognition” when it comes to earthquakes: they know something is about to happen, even before the ground begins to violently shake. This particular temblor is listed as one of the prime causes of Muslim casualties during the war of Magog. We’re not told how, but Yahweh has intimated that the inhabitants of the land will somehow *know* that this earthquake is His doing, purposely directed against the invading hordes. The bottom line will be: **“And I will set My glory among the nations, and all the nations shall see My judgment that I have executed, and My hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am Yahweh their God, from that day forward.”** (Ezekiel 39:21-22) Israel will see the defeat of Magog for what it is: the mighty hand of God. The nations will know that *something* significant has happened, but they (if I may judge by the bulk or prophetic revelation) will remain in denial, clueless as to what it is. But the birds of the heavens, like canaries in a coal mine, will be among the first to get the message and “quake at His presence.”

During the Tribulation, Satan’s oft-attempted goal will be to wipe Israel off the face of the map, for if he can do that (he figures) he will have proved Yahweh to be a liar. But Yahweh is not a liar. Though much of Israel will suffer great loss, it will be delivered through the trial—especially Jerusalem, the only city that God *ever* vowed to protect. **“Like birds hovering, so Yahweh of hosts will protect Jerusalem. He will protect and deliver it. He will spare and rescue it.”** (Isaiah 31:5) As I write these words, the whole world is in turmoil because Iran is on the cusp of acquiring nuclear weapons, and everybody just *knows* they’re crazy enough to use them, consequences be damned. The madness of Islam runs particularly deep in that part of the world. I don’t know how (or even *if*) Iran (which, by the way, is a very good fit for the home of Ezekiel’s “Gog of the land of Magog”) will be stopped from becoming a nuclear power. I do know, however, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Jerusalem (and, I’m guessing, all of *eretz* Israel) will be spared nuclear attack from any quarter, even though one third of the world’s lands *will* suffer this fate. Yes, Yahweh has let Jerusalem be “trodden down by gentiles” for almost two millennia now, the direct result of Israel’s refusal to heed His word and receive His Messiah. But the fact remains, Yahweh hovers over His children and His city like a protective eagle: Jerusalem will certainly be attacked, but she will never be destroyed. **“He will spare and rescue it.”**

And what of Israel’s people? Many—even *most*—of Israel (in the biological sense—the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) aren’t even aware of their lineage today. Between the Assyrian conquest and exile of the ten northern tribes (a.k.a. Ephraim) in 722 B.C. and the later subjugation of Judah and Benjamin by

Babylon—from which only a relative handful ever returned—the majority of true Israelites in the world today have no idea who they really are. (The Roman evictions in 70 and 135 A.D. didn't help, either.) The common racial term “Jew” technically describes but one tribe of the twelve: Judah. (As a practical matter, however, Israelites of many if not all of the tribes identify themselves as “Jews.” The term as it's used in the Greek scriptures simply meant “Judean,” an inhabitant of the province of Judea.) But in the wake of the Tribulation's horrors, Yahweh has promised to gather Israel's children—*all of them*—back to Himself in the Land of Promise. Virtually every prophet predicts this, but Hosea gives us a glimpse of the newfound healthy “fear” of God that will drive their emigration:

“They [Israel and Judah] shall go after Yahweh.” As we read above, this will come about as the direct result of their national deliverance at the Battle of Magog. **“He will roar like a lion.”** Yahweh's undisputed authority will at last be recognized; but surprisingly to many, that “roar” will emanate from Yahshua the Messiah—the reigning King, the *only* form of Yahweh's persona that Millennial mortals will ever witness. **“When He roars, His children shall come trembling from the west.”** Half of the Jews who are aware of their heritage today live in America. **“They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares Yahweh.”** (Hosea 11:10-11) The trembling in awe at Yahweh's power, trembling that began with the killer earthquake that destroyed so many bloodthirsty Muslim invaders on the mountains of Judea and Samaria, will not have abated, it seems.

The real surprise is where the “stealth” Israelites will come from. Egypt and Assyria (i.e., modern Iraq and Syria) are in Muslim hands, and they have been for thirteen hundred years. Although they have throughout the centuries hosted small (and oppressed) Jewish minorities, the recent rise in Islamic fundamentalism (or is it the approach of the end of the age?) has forced many of their Jews to emigrate to Israel—an exodus that began in earnest in 1948 when Israel won her independence, prompting the Muslim governments in several nations to expel their Jews. (Gee, I wonder how *they* feel about the “right of return” issue that's so dear to Palestinian Muslims?) But they only exiled the Jews they *knew about*. God seems to be telling us that there are multitudes of Israelites living in “Egypt” and “Assyria” who have no idea that they're actually children of Abraham.

Since this is a book about symbols, it's worth mentioning that in the lexicon of Yahweh's metaphors, both “Egypt” and “Assyria” seem to mean something. Although I have no doubt that a large and clueless *literal* remnant of Israel dwells in *literal* Egypt and in Iraq/Syria, these places also indicate where Israel is *symbolically* exiled, at least for the time being. Egypt is indicative of “bondage in the world.” The symbol is obvious from the spectacular—dare I say, *miraculous*—deliverance of the Israelites from their four hundred year sojourn in

Egyptian bondage. There's something about this period of trial that we should never forget: it began not with the conquest of Israel (which was merely a nomadic family clan at the time) by a more powerful force. It began with one son of Israel, Joseph, saving Egypt (and through it, his own family) by honoring Yahweh, even in adverse circumstances. Israel became enslaved only when they became settled and complacent in their new home, forgetting God's promises, and to a large extent, forgetting God Himself. Today, dwelling in ignorance of their heritage and denial concerning their God and His Messiah, Israel (i.e., the hidden contingent) is indeed back in bondage in the world. But as before, Yahweh knows how to set the prisoners free.

Assyria is less clear cut as a symbol, but it seems to me to indicate a state of aggressive futility, of militant useless emptiness. The ten northern tribes that broke away from Judah and Benjamin after Solomon's death fell so thoroughly into idolatry and apostasy that Yahweh did to them what Yahshua did to the fruitless fig tree: He declared that it would never again bear fruit, at which point it dried up from the roots. Assyria's strategy was to exchange conquered populations in an effort to break their psychological attachment to their lands and nations. Ephraim was so completely absorbed into the Assyrian melting pot, they have ever since been called "the ten lost tribes." But they're *not* lost to Yahweh, even if they are to themselves. As with bondage in Egypt, Yahweh is prepared, in the end, to reverse the situation: Israel will once again bear fruit; they will at last be useful, productive citizens in the Kingdom of God. But first, they must learn to "tremble" like frightened little birds before Yahweh their God—to realize, accept, and come to terms with the consequences of the choices they and their forebears made. They must (as must we all) meet the requirements of the ultimate Day of Atonement: afflict their souls in repentance, and answer—respond to—the grace made possible by the sacrifice of Yahshua the Messiah.

The prophet characterized these birds as "doves" (not as eagles, or chickens). In the symbology of the avian world, doves seem to occupy a role parallel to lambs: they're innocent, sweet, and lovable, but they're also vulnerable, flighty, and none too clever. If Yahshua is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," we His followers might be characterized as the "doves of God whose sin has been taken away." Thus Solomon's torrid love poem revealing the visceral passion between the Messiah and His called-out assembly refers to the King's lover as a dove: "**O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.**" (Song of Solomon 2:14) She's a little shy, which only adds to the attraction He feels for her. He says, "**My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her.**" (Song of Solomon 6:9) Her "mother" can be none other than the Holy Spirit, who, like the King, sees us as better than we really are.

Estranged from our God—as we await the Messiah’s coming—we echo the words of Hezekiah: **“I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety!”** (Isaiah 38:14) As the weight of the world’s insanity oppresses us, we long for the ability to fly away to our God and King: **“Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. And I say, ‘Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest; yes, I would wander far away; I would lodge in the wilderness.’”** (Psalm 55:5-7) Whether we know it or not, we *do* have wings like a dove. And one of these days, the trumpet will sound, and we will be startled into remembrance of how to use them—caught up on the wings of grace to be with our Messiah in the heavens.

Alas, until that day, we all too often forget how to fly. Though escape is as close as our wingtips, we walk through life looking for answers down here on the ground, like Ephraim of old: **“Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to Assyria. As they go, I will spread over them My net; I will bring them down like birds of the heavens; I will discipline them according to the report made to their congregation.”** (Hosea 7:11-12) This “report,” the Torah, reveals how Yahweh gave us the means to escape our senseless, silly, sin-prone lives. The “discipline” of which He speaks is just that: the making of *disciples* of all the nations, as we are told to do in the Great Commission, **“teaching them to observe all things that I [Yahshua] have commanded you.”** (Matthew 28:20)

But while we remain on earth endeavoring to fulfill the Master’s command, we are as vulnerable as doves. So with the Psalmist, we pray, **“Remember this, O Yahweh, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles your name. Do not deliver the soul of Your dove to the wild beasts. Do not forget the life of your poor forever.”** (Psalm 74:18-19) Don’t worry. Yahweh will neither forget nor abandon us.

“For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is Mine.” (Psalm 50:10-11) One of the “perks” of being the Creator of the Universe is that whatever you make *belongs* to you. As significant as that may be with inanimate objects like, say, solar systems or galaxies, it is even more so with living things—and utterly earthshaking when you’re talking about living beings endowed with free will—*us*.

Of course, with ownership comes responsibility. That’s something we teach our children because we want them to learn how to be dependable and conscientious, but it’s an attitude we get directly from our Creator. Yahweh takes care of the world He’s built—and especially the living things within it. Left to its own devices, the ecosphere as God designed it tends to settle into a steady

equilibrium between birth and death, growth and decay, predators and prey, parasites and hosts. This seemingly perpetual cycle was, I believe, intended by God to be a metaphor describing our lives as mortal men in His world. We are born, live, reproduce, and die. But somewhere between the beginning and the end, we are expected to make the choices that will determine our eternal destinies, balancing what we've learned of our mortal existence against that which Yahweh has told us about the glorious immortal future that can be ours in His grace.

We are therefore faced with one undeniable fact: even though all mortal beings eventually die, God provides for them as long as they live. Our feathered friends are a perfect example of this. It matters not whether birds are clean seed-eating doves or unclean carrion-eating vultures: God provides for all of them. It's the same with people. Whether we're His children or not, Yahweh provides the necessities of life to all of us, clean and unclean alike. As Yahshua taught us, **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."** (Matthew 5:44-45) The point is that while life lasts, people have an opportunity to choose to receive and reciprocate Yahweh's love. But if we believers show hatred toward them—even *in the face of unjust persecution*—they will have no opportunity to witness the love of God reflected in our lives. So because God loves and provides for all of His creatures as long as life persists, going so far as to die to atone for the sins of fallen men, we who are His children are to reflect and transmit that love—even to those who count us as enemies. I realize that's a hard truth, and counterintuitive to our nature. But it's something our Father does on an ongoing basis.

The ramifications of this principle are illustrated in several ways by the birds of the air. First, our trust in God's provision should be implicit and unquestioned. It's the lesson of the Sabbath all over again: in the end, we can't obtain anything for ourselves that Yahweh Himself hasn't made freely available. Birds know this; why don't we? Yahshua says, **"You cannot serve God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"** (Matthew 6:24-26) It is an insult to our God (and an act of malice toward our fellow man) to act as if He is incapable of providing whatever we need to maintain life and godliness. (I hasten to add, however, that the key word there is "need." Birds are not given palaces to live in—they don't *need* them, and neither do we.)

Second, Yahweh knows what we need—even better than we do ourselves. **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered."** As much as

unregenerate man may irrationally complain that “it’s not fair,” pain and death—not to mention male pattern baldness—are part of Yahweh’s design for this world. They are there to teach us to trust Him, to rely upon Him, to know that His grace is sufficient even through trials. Man may act as if life is cheap; Yahweh would assure us that to Him, it most definitely is not. Not one drop of blood falls to the ground without His knowledge and concern. **“Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”** What makes us more valuable? Only our God-given ability to make moral choices. Thus Yahshua draws the intuitive conclusion: **“So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before My Father who is in heaven.”** (Matthew 10:29-33) As I said, with ownership comes responsibility. But the only thing that man really “owns” is his free will: he is thus responsible for making good choices. And in the end, the only choice that really matters is what we will do with God. Will we honor Him, ignore Him, or attack Him?

Third, God’s provision for our needs was costly to Him—painful and expensive beyond anything we can comprehend. Because Yahweh is God (and thus unlimited in power and resources), we sometimes tend to think of His “sacrifice” as a billionaire giving a hundred thousand dollars to some charitable cause—in other words, it’s wonderful for the recipient, but no big deal for the giver. But if I’m seeing this correctly, it’s not like that at all. It’s more like a virtuoso violinist donating his left hand. Only dire necessity driven by unfathomable love could compel Yahweh to do what He did for us. His sacrifice is permanent and total; it cannot be repealed or repeated. **“Now when Jesus saw a great crowd around Him, He gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to Him, ‘Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’”** (Matthew 8:18-20) God incarnate became *homeless*? Yes, and worse, for our sakes. If we really understood the lengths to which God went on our behalf, would *any* of us say (as so many do), “Thanks, but no thanks”? I think not.

As Yahshua noted, “the birds of the air have nests.” He also observed that *where* they choose to build their nests can be instructive. **“What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”** (Luke 13:18-19) Mustard plants are normally humble shrubs, growing in fields no more than a few feet in height. Under unusual circumstances, however, they can get out of control and grow to perhaps ten feet tall—making them, of course, more or less worthless as a cash crop, since the pungent seeds cannot be efficiently harvested from such an unwieldy, overgrown bush. The “kingdom of God” on earth in this present age is the church—the called-out assembly of Yahshua. And it has indeed grown so large, the “birds of the air” have come to nest in its branches—in terms germane to our present subject, it has

become home to the consequences of all sorts of choices, good and bad, clean and unclean.

There are lessons in there somewhere, I think. (1) In order for the mustard plant to have grown so large, the seed must have fallen on fertile soil indeed. The world is desperately hungry for what the kingdom of God represents—peace with God through the sacrifice of His Messiah. But the “tree” is out of control. One might say that it has absorbed more than its share of resources: it has taken unfair advantage of the other shrubs in the garden, hogging the nutrients in the soil and the sunshine overhead. (That being said, it *still* isn’t as voracious as the Islamic kudzu growing like a weed in the neighbor’s garden, threatening to overtake the entire town.) (2) Since the “mustard plant” is so much larger than it’s supposed to be, it is far less productive in relation to its sheer mass than it could have been. It was supposed to have been a source of flavor and delight to the garden’s Owner (Yahweh), but it has instead become a living monolith serving mostly itself. (3) Although smallish shrubs provide natural shelter for small, clean, “innocent” birds (the *tsippowr* of the Hebrew scriptures), the “tree” growing in this garden has attracted unclean crows, ravens, cowbirds, and even a hawk or two—birds representing the consequences of choosing to center one’s life on oneself, no matter the cost to our fellow creatures. (4) The mustard plant has been allowed to grow unabated by the garden’s Owner (for reasons of His own). But He has told us (in so many words) that when the time is right, He intends to get out His pruning shears and cut it back down to size.

Yahshua once used another agricultural metaphor employing birds: **“And He was teaching them many things in parables [which, if you’ll recall, is the whole point of this book], and in His teaching He said to them: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.’”** (Mark 4:2-4) What was being sown was the truth—the word of God. According to the parable, this truth was being scattered all over the place, in hopes that it would take root *somewhere*, even though the sower knew up front that some places were more likely than others to be receptive. In the case at hand, the birds (according to verse 15) represent Satan, who comes and **“takes away the word that was sown in their hearts.”** Why was Satan able to do this? Note where the seed fell: *along the path*. This is where the ground has become hard and unreceptive because men have walked all over it. Man’s solutions to our hunger for truth are inadequate and unsuitable. Our hearts are hard—inflexible and impervious to God’s word. In order to receive the truth, we must get off the beaten path of man’s theories and philosophies, and move into the field God has prepared. If we fail to do so, Satan will steal it from under our feet before it has a chance to take root.

Simon Peter learned this lesson the hard way. As the hour of Christ’s trial approached, Peter’s first instinct was to resort to conventional human solutions.

First, he suggested that Yahshua (whom he had just declared to be Yahweh's Messiah) shouldn't really have to go to the cross to get the job done—prompting the Master to refer to him as “Satan,” His adversary. *Ouch!* Then, when it became all too obvious that crucifixion was the path Yahshua would have to walk, Peter summoned all the human courage he could muster and declared—in so many words—that he was strong enough to accompany Christ in His trial, even if it meant his death. And once again (though more gently this time) Yahshua had to remind Peter that this would not be accomplished through man's strength or wisdom or courage. As God had told His prophet, **“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says Yahweh of hosts.”** (Zechariah 4:6)

You've got to love Peter's chutzpah, as misplaced as it was. But Yahshua had to give him the bad news: **“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”** Peter said to Him, **‘Lord, I am ready to go with You both to prison and to death.’** Jesus said, **‘I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know Me.’** (Luke 22:31-34) A few hours later, it all happened exactly as Yahshua had predicted, much to Peter's chagrin: **“Then they seized [Yahshua] and led Him away, bringing Him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, ‘This man also was with him.’ But he denied it, saying, ‘Woman, I do not know Him.’ And a little later someone else saw him and said, ‘You also are one of them.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I am not.’ And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, ‘Certainly this man also was with Him, for he too is a Galilean.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’ And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how He had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.”** (Luke 22:54-62; see also John 18:25-27) Another bird! The rooster's job is to announce the dawn. Though all seemed black to Peter at the moment, He did as Yahshua had instructed him earlier: he “turned again” and “strengthened his brothers.” By the day of Pentecost, the dawn of a new age of grace had broken upon the world, and Peter could declare with the prophet, **“Arise, shine, for your light has come! And the glory of Yahweh is risen upon you.”** (Isaiah 60:1)

PORPOISE/DOLPHIN

❧ 3.2.10 ❧

Concealment

Okay, let's see a show of hands. How many knew that porpoises were mentioned in the Bible, much less used as a significant symbol by Yahweh? *Anyone?* Don't feel bad. This is one of those hidden scriptural gems that you have to dig deep to find. Our problem stems mostly from the scholars of old trying to translate the Bible into English with inadequate knowledge of the cultural matrix in which the words were spoken. Neither John Wycliffe nor King James' 1611 translation crew would have known a porpoise from a coelacanth. So it's not really their fault that something beautiful got lost in translation. (I'm not claiming to be any smarter, more insightful, or more spiritually astute than any of my predecessors, you understand. The only reason I was able to see what William Tyndale could not is that I live in the information age—I have a library full of reference books at my disposal, not to mention the Internet and some really cool software. You can see a long way if you stand on the shoulders of giants.)

We see porpoises in only one context in scripture. Under Torah rules, these sea creatures were not to be used as food (since they had fins but no scales), nor could they be offered as sacrifices. But porpoise *hides* had been utilized by Middle Eastern peoples—including Egyptians and Israelites—since long before the exodus. The first time we encounter them in the Word, the Israelites had just left Egypt, and were encamped at the foot of Mount Horeb. Moses had gone up to the summit to receive Yahweh's Instructions. **"Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you shall take from them: gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and scarlet thread, fine linen, and goats' hair; ram skins dyed red, badger skins, and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it."** (Exodus 25:1-9 NKJV)

The reason you couldn't find "porpoise" on the list of materials needed for the wilderness tabernacle is that it was mistranslated as "badger." Although one rare variety (the honey badger) can be found in sub-Saharan Africa and the Levant, the animal so familiar to the translators in the British Isles was *not* the one specified in the text. The word is *tahas*, denoting a marine mammal indigenous to the Mediterranean and Red Seas—a porpoise, dolphin, dugong, or sea cow. (I have settled on the "porpoise" as a representative of the group, but only for

convenience. For the purpose of the symbol, I'm not of a mind to quibble over the species distinction, for reasons that will become self evident.) The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes: "Since the badger is rarely if ever seen in Sinai, and since Arabic *tuhpas* 'dolphin,' seems to be cognate to Hebrew *tahas*, most recent commentators translate the Hebrew word as 'dolphin, porpoise, dugong....' The bottle-nosed dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) is found in the eastern Mediterranean, while the dugong (*Dugong dugong*) is plentiful in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba; the skin of the latter is still used by Bedouin to make sandals. If (as seems likely) the *tahas* was the outermost protective covering of the tabernacle, the skin of a marine animal like the dolphin or dugong would have been eminently suitable, both for its toughness and for its waterproofing properties." The word is almost always accompanied with the descriptor 'owr, meaning skin or hide—it's the *leather* we're talking about. Because most English translations owe so much to the venerable (and errant, in this case) 1611 King James/Authorized version, I have opted to quote from the New American Standard Version for this section (which translates *tahas* as "porpoise.") My customary ESV translates it "goatskins," but admits in a margin note (Ryrie) that it probably means dolphin or dugong hides.

Yahweh didn't ask the Israelites to contribute anything toward the construction of the tabernacle that was unavailable to them. He didn't ask for sequoia redwood timbers, kangaroo hides, or moon rocks. Almost everything on the list was, in fact, something with which they would have left Egypt. Remember, by the time of their sudden departure, they knew they would never return, so they took everything they owned with them—not just the "parting gifts" of gold and silver their former neighbors had practically thrown at them on their way out of town (Exodus 11:2-3, 12:35-36). The Israelites had been "slaves" in Egypt for the past four hundred years, but that doesn't mean they all worked 24/7 building the pyramids (like in the movies). They—like us—needed to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves, or they would have died out in their first few years of bondage. The Egyptians' purpose had been to exploit them as a forced labor resource, not to exterminate them. So although life may have been hard under Egyptian bondage, it *was* sustainable.

My point is that among a nation of half a million families (all of whom owed a quota of labor to Pharaoh), there would have been a fair number of farmers, herdsmen, fishermen, bakers, weavers, tanners, metal smiths, carpenters and cobblers. Why, then, would the departing Israelites have had the skins of aquatic mammals in their possession, as Yahweh had requested? It's because that's what the cobblers—the shoemakers—would have used to make sandals for their countrymen. They still do in that part of the world. There were (no doubt) hundreds of them in Israel, each with his own supply of porpoise hides—his stock in trade. We are given a subtle reminder of their craft in the instructions for the

Passover feast: **“In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is Yahweh’s Passover.”** (Exodus 12:11) Those whose business it was to make those sandals would not have left their inventory behind in Egypt; they would have taken it with them when they departed, presuming, logically enough, that their people would still need new shoes in the promised land. But Yahweh requested that any Israelite shoemaker with a willing heart should donate his leather inventory as an offering.

At first, when Moses made known Yahweh’s “wish list,” the people didn’t know precisely how the materials God asked for were going to be used. All they knew was that their God had asked for it for something called a “tent of meeting.” And after all they had witnessed, how could they refuse? **“Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel departed from Moses’ presence. Everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him came and brought Yahweh’s contribution for the work of the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the holy garments....”** At this point, their sandals were still squishy from their little stroll across the bed of the Red Sea. The awesome power Yahweh had brought to bear in their deliverance was still fresh in their minds. It is little wonder that their “hearts stirred them.” What I can’t figure out is, in light of what Yahweh has done for *us*, why are we, living here in the shadow of Calvary, not similarly stirred.

So Israel responded to God’s request: **“Then all whose hearts moved them, both men and women, came and brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and bracelets, all articles of gold; so did every man who presented an offering of gold to Yahweh.”** Whether ornaments or investments, folks gladly gave up what they’d thought was valuable in response to God’s call. That same God has subsequently identified what *He* considers valuable: *us*. Don’t look now, but we who have a willing heart are still being asked to contribute for God’s glory what is valuable in His sight: *ourselves*. **“Every man, who had in his possession blue and purple and scarlet material and fine linen and goats’ hair and rams’ skins dyed red and porpoise skins, brought them.”** As we shall see in a moment, each of these materials was to be used in the covering of the tabernacle. **“Everyone who could make a contribution of silver and bronze brought Yahweh’s contribution; and every man who had in his possession acacia wood for any work of the service brought it....”** The infrastructure of Yahweh’s sanctuary (the tangible symbol representing His plan for our redemption) was built from what *men* had gratefully contributed. There’s a lesson in there somewhere.

“All the skilled women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun, in blue and purple and scarlet material and in fine linen. All the women whose heart stirred with a skill spun the goats’ hair.” Not only what we have, but also what we *do*, is valuable to our God if offered with a willing spirit, one moved and stirred by our recognition of and thankfulness for Yahweh’s deliverance. **“The rulers brought the**

onyx stones and the stones for setting for the ephod and for the breastpiece; and the spice and the oil for the light and for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense.” The rich and the comparatively poor, the influential gifted elite and the common folk alike were all invited to participate—and those with a grateful heart did so, without regard to their station in life. **“The Israelites, all the men and women, whose heart moved them to bring material for all the work, which Yahweh had commanded through Moses to be done, brought a freewill offering to Yahweh.”** (Exodus 35:20-29 NASB; see also Exodus 36:19 and 39:34.)

I should reiterate that using “command” and “freewill” in the same sentence does not constitute a contradiction. The “command” was merely that Moses should make the need known. But it was made abundantly clear from the outset that only those with a willing spirit were to bring their offerings. Those without such a spirit of gratitude were perfectly within their rights to keep all of their stuff for themselves. God would not punish them or even speak harshly to them if they didn’t respond. That’s not to say it wasn’t positively poetic that those who wanted to keep their treasures for themselves would be doomed to the *self-inflicted* punishment of lugging their precious hoard around the desert for the next forty years. There was nothing out there upon which one could spend his gold. And what of those shoemakers (if any) who opted to keep their stash of porpoise hides—figuring that Israel’s journey through the wilderness would create a booming market for their wares? In a classic example of “best laid plans going awry,” we read: **“You have seen all that Yahweh did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day Yahweh has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear. I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet. You have not eaten bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink, that you may know that I am Yahweh your God.”** (Deuteronomy 29:2-6) It was an unexpected miracle of preservation: nobody’s sandals wore out during the entire forty year wilderness marathon.

But if not for making shoes, why did Yahweh say He wanted the porpoise skins? Although we’ll have to save for a later volume our discussion of the tabernacle and its appurtenances, suffice it to say that the covering of the tabernacle was to be made of four layers, one laid atop another in succession. The inner layer was of linen (symbolic of imputed righteousness), which was to be embroidered with images of cherubim—angels—wrought in thread dyed with the costliest materials, blue, purple, and scarlet (a subject we’ll also have to save for later). The second layer was to be made of woven goats’ hair cloth, symbolic (if we may take our cue from the two goats of the Yom Kippurim rites) of sin. Because of the linen layer, our sin can’t be seen from inside the tabernacle. But because this goats’ hair layer is covered as well, it can’t be seen from *outside* the

tabernacle, either. In other words, according to the tabernacle's specifications, neither man nor God has any interest in—or access to—the sins of the redeemed. I don't know about you, but the very concept gives me goose bumps.

And what is specified to cover the goats' hair (sin) layer? It is a layer of rams' skins, dyed red. The ram is a rather obvious reference to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, but in a form that stresses His authority as the "leader of the flock" (as we saw previously). In other words, it represents Yahshua the Messiah, the red color stressing that He has been slain for our transgressions, establishing His right to rule: He has been "dyed red" with His own blood. So we read, **"You shall make a covering for the tent of rams' skins dyed red and a covering of porpoise skins above."** (Exodus 26:14 NASB) We believers revel in the fact that our sins (the goats' hair layer) have been covered (which is what "atonement" means) by the blood of Christ. The rams' skins *remove* something—our sins are no longer in evidence before God, no longer observable, no longer visible. At the same time, something is *added*: we are simultaneously endowed with imputed righteousness—the linen layer. But this fact is apparent only when viewed from *within* the tabernacle. That is, it cannot be perceived except by one who has encountered the altar of sacrifice, washed his hands and feet at the laver of cleansing, and has then lawfully entered the tabernacle—the plan of God for our redemption.

So the sins of the redeemed can't be seen (and more to the point, can't be used to condemn them) from *any* vantage point—either from within the plan of God or from outside it, from out in the world. But if that is the case—if the shed blood of the Lamb of God is so efficacious in covering our sins—why doesn't the world comprehend what has happened to us? Why don't they see what Yahshua did on our behalf? Why do they remain oblivious to (or antagonistic toward) the good news of Yahweh's Salvation (i.e., Yahshua) and our subsequent reconciliation? It's because there's a fourth and final layer covering the whole symbolic scenario: a layer of porpoise skins, concealing the stunning truth from those who don't wish to see it—from those who don't *choose* to see it.

Those who long for a painless, bloodless, all-inclusive philosophical meeting of the minds between men and God—in a word, *religion*—tend to see this concealment mechanism as unfair, inconvenient, and downright obstructionistic. Why must God be so exclusive, so secretive? Actually, He's not. Anyone and everyone is allowed to approach Him. But they must do so as He ordained, for He is holy. There is but one entrance to the sanctuary courtyard, and between that entrance and the sanctuary, the altar of sacrifice, followed by the laver of cleansing, stand as sentinels—they must both be addressed in turn before the tabernacle may be entered. Here again, there is only one way in. Once inside, the supplicant is shown several things. There is a golden menorah or lampstand on his left, with seven oil lamps (read: spiritual enlightenment) illuminating the place of

Yahweh's provision (the bread of the presence), on his right. The "walls" are dazzling—covered with pure gold. If he looks up, he'll see the inner layer of the tabernacle covering, embroidered linen indicating the imputed righteousness that characterizes the redeemed. Straight ahead stands a small altar—this one used for burning incense, representing prayer. It guards one final portal: the entrance to the "most holy place," where the glory of God is said to dwell (figuratively, of course) between the two cherubim of the mercy seat, atop the ark of the covenant. The throne of Yahweh is the ultimate destination: reaching Him is the whole point of the process of redemption as ordained and explained in the Torah.

So, if the third layer, the rams' skins dyed red, had not been concealed from view under the porpoise skin covering layer, God's ordained sequence of essential spiritual events would have been breached. To approach the true and living God, one must embrace—in order—sacrifice, cleansing, the illumination of the Holy Spirit, Yahweh's constant provision, and communication with God in prayer. Only then can he stand justified in the presence of Yahweh. Anyone can do it, but it must be done on God's terms. As Yahweh declared, **"Among those who are near Me I must be regarded as holy, and before all the people I must be glorified."** (Leviticus 10:3) Are we really so shocked to discover that Almighty God has standards?

Although it wasn't exactly a "tent," the tabernacle wasn't a "permanent" building, either. It was modular in construction, designed to be broken down into its component parts and moved from time to time, as Yahweh's Shekinah (manifested in the pillar of cloud and fire) directed, and to be reassembled in a new location. Here again, porpoise or dolphin skins are specified for the purpose of concealment, to separate—i.e., to keep holy—the sacred from the profane.

Jacob's son Levi had three sons, the patriarchs of the clans of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. All three clans had specific duties to perform when the Shekinah indicated it was time to move the camp of Israel. Merari carried the "hardware," that is, the boards, foundation sockets, bars and pillars. The Gershonites were to carry the "software"—the fabric and leather, screens, cords, curtains, and panels, including ceiling components of the tabernacle we've just been discussing: **"This is the service of the families of the Gershonites, in serving and in carrying: they shall carry the curtains of the tabernacle and the tent of meeting with its covering and the covering of porpoise skin that is on top of it, and the screen for the doorway of the tent of meeting, and the hangings of the court, and the screen for the doorway of the gate of the court which is around the tabernacle and the altar, and their**

cords and all the equipment for their service; and all that is to be done, they shall perform.”
(Numbers 4:24-26 NASB)

That left the Kohathites (the sub-family to which Moses and Aaron belonged) to carry the implements of symbolic worship: **“When the camp sets out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and they shall take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it; and they shall lay a covering of porpoise skin on it, and shall spread over it a cloth of pure blue, and shall insert its poles....”** Although carrying these items from place to place would be done by the Kohathite Levites in general, the packing and preparation was to be the exclusive duty of the priests. The first thing they were to do was to conceal the ark of the covenant (with its integral mercy seat—where the Shekinah was figuratively said to abide) from public view. The point was to regard Yahweh as holy, even if the mercy seat was only *symbolic* of His dwelling place. The procedure here proved that there was nothing “magical” or intrinsically hazardous about the ark of the covenant. Normally, Yom Kippurim was the only day of the year the most holy place could be entered (and then only by the High Priest, covered with prayer, and atoned for with the blood of a bull). But although the inevitable result of approaching the ark unworthily would have been instantaneous death, on moving day the priests were to simply take down the veil and cover the ark with it, followed with a porpoise-skin concealment covering and then a costly and symbolically significant blue cloth—which was the only thing the people would see as the ark was being transported from one place to another.

The same reverence was shown in preparing the other tabernacle furnishings for transport: **“Over the table of the bread of the Presence they shall also spread a cloth of blue and put on it the dishes and the pans and the sacrificial bowls and the jars for the drink offering, and the continual bread shall be on it.”** Note that the showbread was left in place during transport. The lesson: God’s provision for us is constant, even when He’s moving us out of our comfort zone. **“They shall spread over them a cloth of scarlet material, and cover the same with a covering of porpoise skin, and they shall insert its poles.”** Again, both porpoise skins and symbolically dyed cloth (this time, scarlet) were used to conceal the form of the holy furnishings from public view during the move. The same thing is true of the menorah and the altar of incense. **“Then they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand for the light, along with its lamps and its snuffers, and its trays and all its oil vessels, by which they serve it; and they shall put it and all its utensils in a covering of porpoise skin, and shall put it on the carrying bars. Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth and cover it with a covering of porpoise skin, and shall insert its poles; and they shall take all the utensils of service, with which they serve in the sanctuary, and put them in a blue cloth and cover them with a covering of porpoise skin, and put them on the carrying bars....”** Another constant is the use of carrying bars or poles to lift and move all of these fixtures. Everything was to be kept *literally* at arms length out of reverence for Yahweh.

The last item mentioned for covering during transport was the altar of sacrifice. Again, both porpoise skins and dyed cloth were to be used to conceal its form, and again, it was to be carried with poles, not handled manually. **“Then they shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it. They shall also put on it all its utensils by which they serve in connection with it: the firepans, the forks and shovels and the basins, all the utensils of the altar; and they shall spread a cover of porpoise skin over it and insert its poles. When Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy objects and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is to set out, after that the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them, so that they will not touch the holy objects and die. These are the things in the tent of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry.”** (Numbers 4:5-15 NASB) I don’t know how significant it is, but there is one tabernacle appurtenance that was left unmentioned in this passage. Interestingly, this same item was the *only* one for which no specifics for dimensions, weight, or capacity were given. It’s the bronze laver, in which the priests were to wash their hands and feet every time they entered the tabernacle. I have surmised that no dimensions or capacity were specified because Yahweh wished to convey the idea that there is no limit to the amount of cleansing we may receive, once the sacrifice has been made on the altar atoning for our sins. Could it be that the laver of cleansing *was not to be covered* during transport? If so, the meaning would parallel my earlier supposition: there is never a time—even when Yahweh is moving in our world, even when things are in complete upheaval—in which the works and walk of the redeemed cannot be cleansed. I realize that this is an argument from silence, but still, it gives me great comfort to know that I won’t have to reach my destination before I can wash my hands again. It’s a dirty world out here.

As we have seen, the porpoise hides used in the service and symbolism of the tabernacle invariably indicated concealment—the idea that because He is holy, Yahweh’s plan will remain opaque to those who choose not to avail themselves of *His* way, *His* truth, and *His* life. And we have also learned what those porpoise hides would have been used for, had they not been retasked—shoes. So perhaps it would be profitable to go back and take a quick look at footwear in the Bible—the common product of porpoise skin that was “sacrificed” by God on the altar of our understanding.

We have already seen what to me is a most remarkable circumstance—that having asked for—and received—the cobblers’ porpoise-leather stocks, Yahweh rewarded their faithfulness and generosity with a miracle of preservation for Israel: **“I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you,**

and your sandals have not worn off your feet.” (Deuteronomy 29:5) The point is that shoes are *expected* to wear out. It’s normal and natural, a reflection of *everything* connected with our own mortality. This reminds me of an interesting story in the book of Joshua in which worn out shoes were used to deceive the Israelites into compromising with the idolatrous world they had been commanded to destroy.

First, a bit of background: before Israel had even left Mount Sinai, God had instructed them, **“I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”** (Exodus 23:31-33) As Israel entered the Land, they had every intention of doing as God had instructed them to do, refusing to “bargain” with any of the pagan Canaanite peoples they encountered. They took Jericho, and next Ai (after one false start), and sat down to plan their campaign of conquest. **“But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, they on their part acted with cunning and went and made ready provisions and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, with worn-out, patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes. And all their provisions were dry and crumbly....”** Gibeon was a Hivite city (thus specifically promised to Israel—see Exodus 23:23) located about fifteen miles west of Jericho. It was not, as they claimed, a “far country.” But their raggedy faux diplomats arrived in Joshua’s camp and extracted a peace treaty out of Israel by claiming to have heard of Yahweh’s greatness among them. They said, **“These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they have burst. And these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey.”** (Joshua 9:3-5, 13) It took about three days for the truth to come out, but by that time it was too late: Israel had given their word. They would now either have to break Yahweh’s commandment to conquer all of Canaan, or break the Ninth Commandment—the one prohibiting “bearing false witness against their neighbors.” Israel opted to split the difference, keeping their word not to exterminate the Gibeonites, but making them slaves—water carriers and woodcutters—in perpetuity, in exchange for their lives.

Most commentators at this point take Israel to task for failing to consult with Yahweh first when faced with these emissaries “from a far country.” It is usually opined that the Israelites should have determined the true status of their visitors before making any compromises with the “Gibeonite devils,” and then squashed them like bugs. But I can’t help identifying with the hapless Hivites. Yes, until the Jews showed up, they were *wrong* about nearly everything—their priorities, their pursuits, and their passions—not to mention their gods. But is this not the state in which *every* believer was mired before the God of Israel made His presence known to them? Before we encountered Yahshua, were *we* not idolaters, serving false gods of our own imagination? We are no better—and no different—than the

men of Gibeon when confronted with the power of Yahweh: hopeless, helpless, and desperate for salvation.

So (at the risk of making our porpoise-skin shoe symbol more real than it really is) the perceptive Gibeonites *concealed* their true identities by wearing worn-out sandals (and all the rest). Those shabby shoes reflected their mortal state, whether they realized it or not: they were used up, worthless, destined to die. The only way they could hope to survive was to be retasked like the shoe-leather now covering of the tabernacle—to become servants. Their outlook was, “Better a live slave than a dead soldier.” That’s not universally true, of course: it depends on who the Master is. But in this case, it was definitely the right call. Being a live slave to Yahweh is better than, well, *anything*.

As we know, the tabernacle represents the plan of Yahweh for our redemption—the porpoise-skin roof covering being one of a hundred little details conspiring to tell us what was on Yahweh’s mind. The temple that replaced the tabernacle in Solomon’s day, although based on the same layout and proportions as the original wilderness sanctuary, lost something in the translation. For example, the roof no longer consisted of a four-layered covering, of which the porpoise hides were the outermost stratum. Thus it’s the *tabernacle*, not the temple, that embodies the most thorough symbolic description of Yahweh’s intentions toward us. The record describes quite a bit about Solomon’s design for the temple, but virtually nothing about Yahweh’s instructions concerning it. As a matter of fact, Yahweh never commanded that the temple be built at all—He merely allowed it because of the overwhelming enthusiasm of His servant David.

So even though Jerusalem—the city of David—was destined to become the spiritual focal point of the whole world, it might be instructive to enquire as to where the tabernacle was stationed *before* the temple was built. It was at *Gibeon* (see I Chronicles 16:39-40, etc.) Call me overly excitable, but I find that significant. The town that had been saved through the desperate plea of doomed but repentant men saying, “If you’ll spare our lives, we’ll serve you and your God forever,” became the last functional home of the tabernacle of Yahweh—the *unabridged* symbolic expression of Yahweh’s mercy and grace. Thank you, men of Gibeon.

Shoes were part of the imagery God had employed when He first introduced Himself to Moses. “**And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, ‘I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.’ When Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ And he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And**

Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” (Exodus 3:2-6) Note several things here. First, Yahweh provided a spectacle designed to attract Moses’ attention, but He didn’t force him to turn aside to investigate. It was only *after* Moses had sought an answer that God called to him out of the bush. Second, Yahweh addressed Moses by name, even though there was nobody else around. Names (including His own) are important to our God: we are known to Him personally, by name, and He would like us to return the favor. We’re not statistics, or worse, subjects. We’re His children. Third, Yahweh instructed Moses to remove his sandals, the reason being that he was standing on “holy ground,” that is, a place set apart from the surrounding area for Yahweh’s honor and glory.

As usual, I asked myself *why*. What is it about removing one’s sandals on holy ground that could possibly be construed as being more respectful than leaving them on? It’s not as if God had installed white carpet and He wanted to keep it clean, or anything like that. So, *why*? We could just “cop out” and say, “God’s world, God’s rules.” That’s true, of course: Yahweh has every right to tell us what to do. But perhaps there’s more to it than this. If we follow the symbolic trail—that porpoise skins (or the shoes made from them) signify concealment—we realize that by asking Moses to take off his sandals, God was asking him to remove whatever it was that stood between them, concealing them from each other, keeping them apart, insulating them from one another. Yahweh wanted to get close to Moses, to get “inside his head,” to communicate with Him on a visceral level. So He asked the shepherd to remove his sandals. Subsequent history tells us that it apparently worked just as God had intended.

There may be more to this than mere symbology, by the way. My wife’s doctor has lately been telling her of the benefits of standing barefoot on the ground outdoors. This isn’t some silly new age feng shui sort of thing—the doc is a Christian who makes it a point to stay attuned to what Yahweh has revealed about our health. Apparently, there are health benefits to be gained through being directly connected to the earth’s magnetic field by merely standing uninsulated upon the ground. Studies have linked such “grounding” to improvement in inflammation-related disorders, chronic pain, sleep disorders, low energy levels, high stress, muscle tension, headache relief, hormonal issues, and menstrual problems. Like deriving the benefits of Vitamin D from sunshine (instead of pills), the medical establishment can’t really see it. But the results speak for themselves.

When we’re talking about concealment, the question should always be raised, “Concealed from what?” Being hidden or insulated *from God* is a bad thing, but we see hints in scripture that His care for us includes concealing or protecting *us from the world*—not the “holy ground” of the burning bush, but the destructive influence of man’s idolatries and apostasies—through our footwear. Within a

lengthy figurative description of how Yahweh called Israel and blessed her richly, only to see her grow proud and utterly betray Him, He says, **“I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil; so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you,” declares the Lord Yahweh.**” (Ezekiel 16:10-14 NASB) Israel didn’t have to get her feet dirty as she pranced through her life. She had been given porpoise-skin sandals to cover her feet, protecting them from the falsehood of the world. In her closet was the white linen garment of imputed righteousness, and in her jewelry box was the gold of God’s immutable purity, and silver: the price of her redemption. All she had to do is put it on. In her kitchen was the fine flour of Yahweh’s constant provision, the honey of the good life He had made possible, and the oil of the Holy Spirit. All she had to do was partake. But she would not.

In the parable of the prodigal son, Yahshua explains the difference between Israel—that is, the privileged firstborn son in the story—and the profligate younger son, symbolic of the largely gentile church. Upon reaching the end of his rope and returning in shame and remorse to his home, the prodigal threw himself on the mercy of his father, begging him (like the Gibeonites of old) to spare him from the death he had earned in the world and instead make him a bondsman in his father’s house. **“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”** Well, that was true enough. Amazingly, however, the father didn’t exactly see it that way. **“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’”** (Luke 15:21-24) The father (that is, *The Father*, Yahweh) may have been thinking, “There will be plenty of time for service, My son. Right now, we have more important things to do—celebrating your return from death and preparing you for your coming role as My restored son.” He needed to be nourished (and remember, the calf or ox symbolizes service, and you are what you eat). He needed to be dressed properly in the robe of God’s imputed righteousness, and authorized to represent his Father in the world (which is the significance of the ring). And he needed to be shod with something that would protect his feet as he walked the earth. As Paul would put it, **“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.”** (Ephesians 6:14-15) The restored son’s new shoes were intended (as

had been Israel's, as we saw above) to cover and conceal his feet, defending them from the world's temptations and pitfalls. There had already been quite enough of *that* as the prodigal son had stumbled barefoot through his disastrous life. It was time for a change, and both Father and son knew it.

If the prodigal son had been of a mind to serve, he had come to the right place. In the Father's (i.e., Yahweh's) house, serving one another is the order of the day. One of the most menial tasks a servant could be assigned, I suppose, would have been washing the feet of others. But John the Baptist—a charismatic and influential person in his own right—felt himself utterly unworthy of even this lowly task when confronted with Yahweh's Messiah: **"And [John] preached, saying, 'After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'"** (Mark 1:7-8) Christ's prophesied baptism of His followers with the Holy Spirit—something that was so significant it was marked by the fourth (and central) holy convocation in Yahweh's annual cycle, the Feast of Weeks, a.k.a. Shavuot or Pentecost—was, in John's estimation, something that would elevate Yahshua to unprecedented heights of honor and glory. Washing *His* feet might perhaps be a proper job for kings or emperors (John may have thought), not for lowly locust-munching prophets. What a shock it must have been, then, for Yahshua's disciples (several of whom had previously followed John) to be a party to this scene: **"Jesus...rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him."** (John 13:4-5) Not only was this a stunning practical demonstration of how we are all to serve one another in utter humility, it was one more example of the necessary removal of that which "conceals" our walk in the presence of Almighty God—symbolized by porpoise-leather sandals.

The shoe was on the other foot, so to speak, when Peter found himself in prison for having had the temerity of telling the truth in the face of powerful liars. When the world gains the upper hand, we need to have something substantial on our feet. **"Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, 'Get up quickly.' And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, 'Dress yourself and put on your sandals.' And he did so. And he said to him, 'Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.'"** (Acts 12:6-8) Peter was dreaming happily about being rescued, though any normal man would have been sleepless and terrified. It's kind of funny if you think about it. The angel had to give him a sharp whack in the ribs to shake him out of his serene reverie. The peace of God can be like that: it mattered not at all to Peter that he was probably going to be crucified the next day. His conscience was clear. But God had other ideas—ideas that included the apostle's having to

wade through the world's filth a bit longer. He'd need to put on his shoes for the job at hand.

One more "shoe anecdote" bears mention. Yahshua sent His disciples out to minister to the lost sheep of Israel, giving them instructions that I believe will be even more directly applicable to the 144,000 Tribulation witnesses of Revelation 7 and 14. He told them, **"Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay. Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals [*extra* sandals, is the implication—just whatever you've got on your feet right now] nor a staff, for the laborer deserves his food."** (Matthew 10:7-10) Yahshua says (in so many words), "Don't bother going the missions board and raising support. Don't prepare. Don't even *pack*. Just get out there and tell folks that the kingdom of heaven is upon them. Right now! I know who you are, where you are, what you're doing, and why you're doing it—and I will provide whatever you need, when you need it. As with the Israelites in the wilderness, you won't have to worry about what you're going to eat, how you're going to protect yourself, or even about your shoes wearing out as you walk through the world on My behalf. My grace and provision are sufficient for the task I've assigned for you to do."

The picture that's emerging, then, is that when we're in the presence of God, the shoes need to come off, but when we're treading through the world, we'd best keep 'em on. At the moment, our God is keeping His distance (much to my chagrin). His point in doing this, of course, is to allow mankind maximum latitude in making their own decisions about whom to serve—of exercising their free will unhindered by His unavoidably intimidating personal presence. There's plenty of evidence of His love and provision, if only we'll open our eyes. And we also have His written word—now translated into virtually every language on the face of the globe—to inform us of those elements of God's message that are, shall we say, less than specific in nature. But the time is coming, and soon, unless I miss my guess, when God's personal presence—in the form of the glorious reigning Yahshua—will render shoes obsolete, figuratively anyway. Our world will be more like Eden than it's been in an age—a place and time when shoes were neither worn nor needed. Perhaps Tolkien's innocent shoeless Hobbits will serve as role models. Mordor won't stand forever; of that I am certain.

LEOPARD

❧ 3.2.11 ❧

Swift Killer

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy, the scarecrow, and the tin woodsman proceeded through the creepy forest toward the Emerald City, justifiably apprehensive about “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” (I don’t think *anybody* was quite prepared for the cowardly lion they met, though.) We’re confronted with ravenous beasts in scripture, too. They may be symbolic, but that doesn’t mean they’re not real—or dangerous. We often see them grouped together—mentioned (and more to the point, warned about) in the same contexts. We’ve already encountered the lion, indicative of authority, and the eagle, lord of the heavens. Now we shall meet three of their carnivorous colleagues—the leopard, the bear, and the wolf.

Several of these beasts are recruited as symbols that reveal the voracious nature of a succession of gentile world-dominating nations in a vision shown to Daniel—a revelation parallel and complementary to what he had seen previously in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s “statue” vision. **“Daniel declared, ‘I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea....’** The “sea” is a common scriptural metaphor for the gentile nations, as the “land” is for Israel. Daniel is being shown the course of future world history in broad strokes, as played out among the gentile nations who would, one after the other, exercise dominion over the promised land and the Jewish people in the wake of their idolatry. Note that the “winds of heaven” are stirring up these gentile kingdoms. Yahweh Himself raised up these heathen gentile kings, but not until *after* Israel had turned their backs on Him.

“And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another.” Each succeeding superpower would have a unique character profile, revealed by a different symbolic beast. **“The first was like a lion and had eagles’ wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it....”** The first beast was the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar (or his regent, Belshazzar), Daniel’s “boss” (humanly speaking) when this prophecy was delivered. A lion with eagle’s wings denotes unquestioned authority—to the point that its leaders began to see themselves as gods. The strange “wing-plucking” scenario therefore describes Nebuchadnezzar’s temporary madness, designed to teach him humility before the *real* God—a story recorded in Daniel 4.

“And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, ‘Arise, devour much flesh.’” We’ll discuss the bear symbol in our next section. This one represented Medo-Persia. **“After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it.”** (Daniel 7:2-6) The nation that supplanted Persia was Greece under Alexander the Great.

Leopards are known (and feared) for their ability to kill swiftly. Here we see that reputation bolstered by the symbolic addition of “four wings of a bird.” The word for “bird” here is the Hebrew *’owph*—the designation based on the verb meaning “to fly.” How swift a killer was Alexander? He inherited the throne of Macedonia from His father Philip in 336 BC at the age of twenty. By the time he died (at the ripe young age of thirty-two) he and his armies had conquered everything from the Ionian Sea to the Himalayas, including Egypt, the Levant, Asia Minor, and most notably, the whole Persian Empire. That would be impressive, no matter how long it took. But to do it in twelve years? That’s *fast*. The observation that the leopard had *four* wings (not to mention four heads) is a prophetic reference to Alexander’s four top generals, Cassander, Lysimachus, Ptolemy, and Seleucus, who split up Alexander’s vast kingdom among themselves upon his death.

A fourth beast, prophetic of Rome, is also mentioned in this passage, but its dreadful character defies description—it can’t be compared to any living animal. Perhaps if the Tyrannosaurus were still around, God would have used *it* to illustrate Rome.

Proving himself to be a master of metaphor mingling, Habakkuk too speaks of the swiftness of the leopard, this time in reference to the deadly advance of the Babylonian hordes: **“For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome. their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.”** Particularly efficient and deadly are their cavalry: **“Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves. Their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”** (Habakkuk 1:6-11) The Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar II, once empowered by Yahweh to be the rod of correction upon the backside of apostate Judah, were as swift as they were violent. Four times in this one short passage is their *speed* described.

The Hebrew word for leopard is *namer or namar*, based, interestingly enough, on a word that means limpid or flowing—i.e., transparent, fluid, serene and untroubled. A big cat in motion is one of the most graceful animals you’ll ever

see, and the *namer* (descriptive of the leopard, panther, presumably the cheetah, and perhaps even the tiger) is the fastest land animal on earth, at least over short distances. But because the leopard can't run all day at top speed, planning and stealth are essential components of its strategy. Yahweh says, **"It was I who knew you [Israel] in the wilderness, in the land of drought. But when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up. Therefore they forgot Me. So I am to them like a lion. Like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rip them open."** (Hosea 13:5-8; cf. Deuteronomy 23:15-22) Because of its relatively short "range," the leopard must be patient and watchful. Timing is critical, and stealth is crucial—which explains the spots. When the conditions are right for the kill, the *namer* pounces into action.

Time and again we see the leopard (or some other ravenous beast) being sent to stalk Judah in the wake of her idolatry and apostasy. Jeremiah's admonition echoes those of Habakkuk and Hosea, warning his people of the danger lurking in the tall grass. He warned them for forty years, but nobody listened—until the Chaldeans pounced. First he tried reaching the common man, but they didn't seem to understand. **"Then I said, 'These are only the poor. They have no sense, for they do not know the way of Yahweh, the justice of their God.'" Then, he tried warning the princes, elders, and priests, but they were *leading* the rebellion. "I will go to the great and will speak to them, for they know the way of Yahweh, the justice of their God.' But they all alike had broken the yoke. They had burst the bonds. Therefore a lion from the forest shall strike them down. A wolf from the desert shall devastate them. A leopard is watching their cities. Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many; their apostasies are great."** (Jeremiah 5:4-6)

Note that both Jeremiah and Hosea list three predators in succession—in Jeremiah's case, the lion, then the wolf, and then the leopard. We shouldn't be surprised, then, to learn that Judah suffered not one but *three* deportations at the hands (or should I say, claws) of Babylon. The first, demonstrating the lion's authority, came in 605 BC in the wake of Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of Judah's ally the Egyptians at Carchemish. It was at this time many Israelite nobles such as Daniel were hauled off to Babylon in chains. The second deportation—that of the ravenous wolf—took place as a result of Jehoiachin's disastrously rebellious three-month reign in 597. His replacement was the puppet king Zedekiah, who, a decade later, attempted to ally Judah with Egypt against Babylon (again), precipitating the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem—including the destruction Solomon's temple—in 586 BC. The leopard had pounced and devoured his prey.

I find it significant that the Hebrew word translated "swift" (*qalal*, as in Habakkuk 1:8, above) is closely related to the idea of lightness, that is, esteeming something lightly or considering it trivial or insignificant, hence despising or

cursing it. The swiftness of leopards in scripture, therefore, is always seen in a negative sense, as if to say, “Because you have treated God with contempt, because you have considered His word trivial or insignificant, your recompense, when it comes, will come upon you swiftly and suddenly. One good curse deserves another, so to speak.” A case in point: **“Behold, he [in context, Nebuchadnezzar] comes up like clouds. His chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles—woe to us, for we are ruined!”** The Babylonian onslaught could have been prevented, of course: **“O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?”** (Jeremiah 4:13-14)

Job too saw the swiftness of his days as a curse: **“My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle, and come to their end without hope.... My days are swifter than a runner; they flee away; they see no good.”** (Job 7:6, 9:25) Well, that’s what it felt like at the time, anyway. Yahweh in His wisdom allowed Job to be oppressed for a season in order that we might benefit from his insight, faithfulness in the face of trial, and willingness to wait on God. We must remember, though, that in the end, Yahweh restored—actually, He *doubled*—what Job possessions had lost, and replaced (in a fashion) his seven sons and three daughters. And he lived to the ripe old age of 140: **“So Job died, old and full of days.”** (Job 42:17) So much for Job’s days swiftly fleeing away from him. His troubles, as bad as they were, weren’t quite the “leopard” they seemed to be.

One “miscellaneous” reference to leopards is worthy of mention: **“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.”** (Jeremiah 13:23) The prophet’s point is roughly the same as the one Yahshua made: **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”** (Matthew 7:15-18)

This “bad fruit,” I’m delighted to report, will not follow mankind into Christ’s Millennial kingdom. The leopard’s spots, so to speak, *will* be changed. **“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”** (Isaiah 11:6-7) In this present world, the most dangerous things we dare entrust to our little children are puppy dogs and pussy cats. But in Yahshua’s kingdom, our biosphere will undergo a radical, fundamental change. The swift death of this world’s “leopards” will give way to a universal reign of perfect peace. Nice kitty!

BEAR

❧ 3.2.12 ❧

Strength

“Bear” with me: I’m about to repeat myself (or at least, repeat Isaiah). The bear is another of those formerly ferocious beasts whose character will be transformed when Christ reigns upon the earth: **“The cow and the bear shall graze; Their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”** (Isaiah 11:7) Unlike wolves, lions, and leopards, bears are omnivorous. What does a bear eat? *Anything it wants*. But in this world, they don’t normally “graze” like cattle. Like the lion eating straw, this prospect reveals some fundamental changes about how our biosphere will operate once the Messiah assumes His rightful place on the throne of the earth.

According to the *Animal Planet* website, “Most bears eat anything they can find: berries, nuts, honey and fruit as well as mice, gophers, fish, birds, eggs or carrion. In the spring they feed on protein-rich fare such as insects, larvae, fresh grass, seeds, roots and fresh plant buds. Occasionally, if the food situation is bad, they are forced to make do with bark. Fish are skillfully catapulted out of the water with a swipe of the paw. Some bears become such gourmets that they sample only a morsel of the freshly caught source of protein, leaving the remains for other animals. Yet bears are renowned for having a ravenous appetite. To avoid losing weight, bears have to eat large amounts of plant foods which are not particularly high in energy. In the summer months, for example, a brown bear requires around 10 kilograms of food a day. In the fall, bears in colder regions feed mainly on calorie-rich nuts, acorns and berries until they have acquired a thick layer of fat, constituting up to a third of their body weight. These reserves of fat are all they have to live on during hibernation in their winter den—during which time they can lose over half their weight.”

If bears were the size of bunny rabbits, of course, their diets would be greatly restricted. The reason a bear eats “anything it wants” is that it’s big enough and strong enough to kill anything it can catch. Bears can grow to enormous sizes. Polar bears and brown bears (including grizzlies and Kodiak bears) are the largest species, sometimes growing to over two thousand pounds and twelve feet long. Although eight bear species range across all of North America, Europe, and Asia (with a few varieties inhabiting South America and Africa as well), the only predator known to prey on adult bears successfully are tigers—leaving them more or less unopposed throughout most of their habitat.

I probably wouldn't have considered bears a scriptural symbol in the usual sense (sometimes an animal is just an animal), but for one usage in a vision shown to Daniel. We've already seen two other animals in this series, all of whom are prophetic symbols for great gentile world powers that would impact the course of Israel's history (thereby making them significant players in the unfolding of the Messianic saga). First on the list was the lion (one with eagle's wings), representing Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. The second was described thus: **"And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.'"** (Daniel 7:5) This "bear" would turn out to be Medo-Persia, the alliance that took Babylon without firing a shot (more or less) in 539 BC, as the overconfident regent, Belshazzar, drank himself under the table in celebration of the "fact" that the Medes would never get over his impregnable city wall. (They *didn't*, as it turned out—they diverted the Euphrates River and marched *under* the wall, opening the city gates and admitting their army.) The tale, told from God's point of view, is related in Daniel 5. The reason the "bear" in his vision was seen "raised up on one side" is that eventually, the Persians would exert hegemony over their partners, the Medes.

In Daniel's vision, the progression of ferocious beasts representing the succession of gentile "superpowers" lists four nations. The third, the one that brought down the mighty "bear" of Persia, is the *namer*—the swift and deadly jungle cat. I found it a fascinating statistic that the only animal in the world that preys on bears is the tiger—a sort of super-leopard. Not coincidentally, the Caspian Tiger, extinct since the 1970s, was once common in Asia Minor, territory conquered early in the career of Alexander the Great.

The fourth beast, Rome, the nation that supplanted the Grecian system, was so scary the prophet had no living animal with which to compare it. It was described as **"a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns."** (Daniel 7:7) Although Rome as an empire eventually crumbled of its own weight—its corruption and pride—the "fourth beast" still has some life left in it. The "ten horns" hint at a yet-to-be revealed final permutation of this creature, one that will have a large and unenviable role to play in the inevitable conclusion of gentile power upon the earth. Led by a character known as the Antichrist, it will be the last gentile world power to dominate the affairs of Israel before the advent of the reigning Messiah.

It's a page out of "Survival 101": don't get between a mother bear and what she's intent on protecting—her cubs. The same is true of getting between a holy God and someone He has invested with His mantle of service. There's a fascinating incident illustrating this—one of those times when the reality and its symbolic shadow become practically indistinguishable. This happened shortly after the "rapture" of Elijah, witnessed by his protégé and apprentice, Elisha. After staying in nearby Jericho just long enough to miraculously heal their poisoned water supply, Elisha left to return home. **"He went up from there to Bethel, and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, 'Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!' And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of Yahweh. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria."** (II Kings 2:23-24) "Small boys?" Hardly. Although the Hebrew words allow for such a translation, considering the context (they were unsupervised, roving about in an unruly mob outside the city, causing trouble and mocking their elders) the text also logically supports a translation more like, "insignificant (*qutan*—lesser, i.e., pertaining to being of low status) young men (*na'ar*—teenager, older adolescent, or servant; again, of lower social status). Later, they're called "boys," (*yeled*) perhaps better translated "youths," which the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages* says can mean "one of a group." These days, we'd call these youngsters a street gang.

What was the essence of their taunt against God's prophet? They had heard that Elisha had witnessed the rapturous ascension of his master Elijah, and they were daring him to depart the scene in a similar fashion: "Go up!" (The added jeer, calling him "baldy," was merely mean-spirited mockery, meant to show pointless disrespect to someone who should have been receiving their honor and deference. Sound familiar?) And what of Elisha's "curse"? The word here is one we've seen before—*qalal* (translated "to be swift" in reference to leopards). Elisha may or may not have "cursed" them in the sense of calling upon God to kick their impertinent little butts. He could merely have distained them, treated them with the contempt they so richly deserved, or esteemed them not worthy of his attention. Again, the word allows either conclusion. But the effect of the "curse" was that Yahweh regarded His servant Elisha as a mother bear regards her threatened cubs: He defended in no uncertain terms what was precious to Him. Ironically, He used two she-bears to get the job done, mauling forty-two of the ill-mannered youths. We are not told if there were even more of them that the bears couldn't catch, but any way you slice it, forty-two isn't a party—it's a riot.

There are turning out to be a plethora of prophetic land mines buried in this short little passage. I'm the first to admit that I may be seeing something that just isn't here, but consider this: (1) The mob was mocking the idea that Elisha's former mentor had been "raptured." At the same time, they obviously despised the

God who had arranged Elijah's spectacular exit. Could this gang of clueless, classless morons be prophetic of the world's skeptics following the rapture of the church? When those left behind begin to realize what has happened, when they begin to repent and finally open the door to Christ (the invitation of Revelation 3:18-20), the cynics will be shouting, **"Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!"** Or something similarly rude and ill-informed. Elisha is therefore analogous to the belatedly repentant neo-believers of the Church of Laodicea.

(2) What is the significance of Elisha's baldness? The prophet himself was probably just "folically challenged," providing a cheap shot for his would-be tormentors. But baldness carries with it some potentially significant symbolic baggage. Not only did people sometimes shave their heads in times of great distress or mourning, Nazarites invariably shaved their heads when taking their vows, since cutting their hair during their period of consecration was forbidden. The prophet Micah describes why Israel, and indeed the whole world, has reason to consecrate itself like a Nazarite, or failing that, to shave its collective head in mourning: **"Behold, Yahweh is coming out of His place, and will come down and tread upon the high places [i.e., the centers of worship and power] of the earth. And the mountains will melt under Him, and the valleys will split open, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place..."** Micah wrote in anticipation of the Assyrian invasion of Israel—in the same timeframe as Isaiah, about 740 BC. As bad as the Assyrian onslaught was, no mountains were melted, nor valleys split. But subsequent prophecy makes it clear that during the Last Days, these will be more than mere poetic exaggerations: they'll be terrifyingly real. So the prophet makes his recommendation: **"Make yourselves bald and cut off your hair, for the children of your delight. Make yourselves as bald as the eagle, for they shall go from you into exile."** (Micah 1:3-4, 16) In other words, either consecrate yourself to Yahweh and His Messiah, or prepare to mourn for a dying earth. That's precisely what the post-rapture believers will be doing. But the unbelieving world will mock them for their contrition—for being "bald."

(3) The neo-Laodicean believers, for their part, will "treat with contempt" the taunts of their tormentors. They will not be swayed from their newfound faith, even if it costs them their lives—and we all know how lethal and volatile mobs can be. But even from the grave, they will **"curse them in the name of Yahweh,"** just as Elisha did. Their words—actually, pleas for vengeance—are prophetically recorded in the fifth seal judgment: Revelation 6:10.

(4) How many "youths" were attacked and mauled by the she-bears? *Forty-two*, not coincidentally the same number of months that the satanically empowered Antichrist will exercise unrestricted dominion over mankind—a period of time known as the Great Tribulation, during which an unprecedented series of plagues will be visited upon the earth.

(5) Why are there *two* angry she-bears in the story? It's because God will authorize *two* witnesses to operate during the Great Tribulation. **"They [the nations, the gentiles] will trample the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days [i.e., forty-two months], clothed in sackcloth."** (Revelation 11:2-3) They will *prophesy*? Let's be more specific: **"They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire."** (Revelation 11:6) These two "witnesses" are analogous to Elisha's two she-bears, and they're sent for roughly the same reason: to maul those who align themselves against Yahweh and attack His people.

(6) There's one more parallel. Remember what Elisha was doing just before his encounter with the iron-age street gang? He was healing the water supply of the city of Jericho—a city that (for several reasons) seems to be symbolic of the rapture. One of the things the two she-bears—excuse me, the two *witnesses* of Revelation 11—will do is to mess with the world's drinking water supplies. If not calling for drought, they'll be turning the water into blood—for forty-two of the longest months in history. (Their "ministry" seems to coincide perfectly with the actions of the angels of the seven bowl judgments. Apparently, the two witnesses call the tune, and the angels rosin up the bow.) The point is that those who were previously raptured—represented by the city of Jericho—got to drink living water, from which **"there shall be no more death or barrenness."** (II Kings 2:21) But those who persecute Yahweh's (belatedly repentant) people after the rapture will be subjected to thirst, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

The she-bears who came to Elisha's defense in response to his "curse in the name of Yahweh" acted in unrestrained rage, as if they had seen their cubs being attacked. This is not the only time in scripture that this metaphor of a mother bear's unrepressed protective ferocity was employed. In the wake of David's sin with Bathsheba, his son Absalom for a short time seized the throne of Israel, forcing David out. While David himself (aware of his own culpability in the matter) was reticent to defend himself against the usurper, he was of no mind to roll over and play dead, either. So Hushai, one of Absalom's counselors (but actually, a servant of David's—it's complicated) warned the arrogant prince against attacking his father hastily with a small force. This move had been recommended by the crafty Ahithophel, another of Absalom's counselors, and it actually might have finished off David and his loyalists quickly. But Absalom instead heeded Hushai's admonition to use caution: **"Hushai said, 'You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field.'"** (II Samuel 17:8) Hushai counseled Absalom to take the time to gather a huge army to go out against David, but the counselor's *real* plan was to buy the King some time so he could escape across the Jordan into the wilderness.

It was a sucker play: Absalom's unwieldy army was forced to traipse all over Gilead chasing David's illusive band, stretching their supply lines thinner and thinner until they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory—and until General Joab managed to murder Absalom, against David's wishes. It was all a ruse: the repentant David *wasn't* as angry as a mother bear robbed of her cubs, but that didn't change the fact that any *normal* man would have been justifiably enraged. After all, Absalom had stolen what was rightfully David's—the throne of Israel. For his part, David was humble and contrite before Yahweh, willing to endure whatever chastisement His God deemed appropriate, including taking his throne, or even his life.

Can you too smell the Messianic echoes in all of this? David (a prophetic stand-in for the coming Christ) was the rightful king of Israel (read: mankind). However, because of sin (forget for sake of the illustration *whose* sin it was), his throne—and even his life—were forfeit. Absalom the usurper (symbolic of man's rebellion against Yahweh) rejected God's anointed and placed *himself* on the throne in his stead. He even slept with his father's concubines in order to show the world that he had declared himself “master of his fate and captain of his soul.” This, of course, is a thinly veiled euphemism for forcing the powerless of the world to submit—it's the common ploy of religions throughout time, up to and including the most insidious religion of them all, secular humanism.

David (read: the Messiah) was selflessly willing to let his son Absalom (rebellious man) make his own choices about whom to place on the throne of his life. But that wasn't good enough for Absalom: in his paranoia, he wouldn't feel “free” until he had slain the one to whom he owed everything—a goal that entailed slaughtering all of the King's followers as well (that's us believers, I'm afraid). That is the counsel of Satan, a role played by Ahithophel (whose name, revealingly enough, means “brother of folly.”) But the Holy Spirit, whose part is played by Hushai (whose name means “hasty”), has given us enough time (and insight) to flee swiftly with our King to the wilderness, out of the reach of Absalom. Thus it is that we find ourselves pilgrims in a barren and inhospitable land as we follow our Messiah. But we still find this an infinitely better situation than living in the promised land under the thumb of a violent usurper—even a really good looking one with a swell-sounding name like “father of peace” (which is what “Absalom” means). I'm sure he would have been on the short list for the Nobel peace prize; that's just the way the world works.

Perhaps the most fascinating facet of this analogy is the subtle duel between two Messianic metaphors—David and Joab. Their respective names tell the tale: David means “love,” and Joab means “Yahweh is father.” We are being told (in admittedly understated terms) of the struggle (so to speak) in Yahshua's dual personality—mercy versus justice. Love and mercy wish to spare the life of the

rebellious Absalom, while the just, responsible nature of Yahweh our Father demands that his sins be met with punishment befitting the crime. Justice and mercy exist in God's nature in perfect balance, but it is instructive to observe *the order* in which they are addressed. In this story, Joab slays Absalom: justice has prevailed first (see II Samuel 18). But that's not the end of the story. In I Kings 2:28-35, we read that Solomon ordered the execution of Joab—not, however, for the killing of Absalom (who really *did* have it coming, despite David's pleas for mercy) but for the murders of Abner and Amasa, two men “more righteous and better” than Joab, according to Solomon. But even this wasn't Solomon's unilateral decision: I Kings 2:5-6 make it clear that *David* authorized Joab's judgment—subject to the wisdom Yahweh had given Solomon. So in the end, David's desire for mercy was vindicated through the application of justice. And Joab, like his victim Absalom, learned the hard lesson that David—i.e., “love”—could be **“enraged, like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field.”**

A variation on this theme is presented by the prophet Hosea. In this case, the “bear” is Yahweh Himself, and the object of His fury is Israel: **“I [Yahweh] will fall upon them [Israel] like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rip them open. He destroys you, O Israel, for you are against Me, against your Helper.”** (Hosea 13:8-9) Jeremiah sees the same issue, but from Israel's point of view: **“He [Yahweh] is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He turned aside my steps and tore me to pieces. He has made me desolate.”** (Lamentations 3:10-11) Why all of this violence? In general, of course, the answer is Israel's (and later, Judah's) refusal to heed the Instructions Yahweh had given the nation under Moses—the consequences of which were listed plainly in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

But there's another side to this symbol. He describes Himself as a “bear robbed of her cubs.” Who are these “cubs” Yahweh is so intent on protecting? He isn't talking about the Torah itself, for He subsequently made it clear that its precepts were meant only as symbols of a larger reality—He doesn't care about them at all if we're performing them outside of the context of His love and His plan for our reconciliation (see for example, Isaiah 1:12-15). No, Yahweh's “cubs” are people who rely upon Him for their life, their being, their salvation, their entire existence. We cubs know we're helpless on our own, unable to protect or provide for ourselves. Nobody attacks the Mama Grizzly, of course. Her cubs, however, may seem vulnerable to foolish but hungry wolves.

David was one such “bear cub.” We just read how David was forced to flee in the wake of Absalom's coup. He writes of his plight—and of his salvation—in a Psalm: **“O Yahweh, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me. Many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God.”** Yes, the wolves were circling, making menacing growly noises. **“But you, O Yahweh, are a shield about me, my glory, and the**

lifter of my head.” Like a cub squealing in alarm, **“I cried aloud to Yahweh, and He answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept; I woke again, for Yahweh sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Arise, O Yahweh! Save me, O my God! For You strike all my enemies on the cheek.”** That sounds suspiciously like the angry swipe of a bear’s paw. **“You break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to Yahweh. Your blessing be on Your people!”** (Psalm 3) Anyone relying on Yahweh alone for their blessings is regarded by God as a cub under His protection. I can think of no safer place to be.

A mama grizzly is not known for her propensity to be reasonable when you are perceived as being a threat to her cubs. But if she decides on her own that she was mistaken about your intentions, she’ll stop chasing you (or so I’m told). But Solomon, no doubt tongue in cheek, declared that there is something even more dangerous than a she-bear in “protect” mode: **“Let a man meet a she-bear robbed of her cubs rather than a fool in his folly.”** (Proverbs 17:12) Bears may get angry and aggressive, but at least they’re logical. A fool refuses to see the truth. The term (Hebrew: *kesil*) has nothing to do with one’s lack of native intelligence, but rather to obstinacy, insolence, or rebellion—the propensity to make wrong choices based solely on stubborn willful ignorance. They say that insanity is repeating the same action over and over again in hopes of obtaining a different result. The fool in his folly doesn’t even *notice* the results—he merely pursues a course of action based on his philosophical proclivities, regardless of the evidence against its efficacy. Unfortunately, most governments today are run by fools, not lunatics.

One final “bear” scenario: **“And Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine [Goliath] to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.’ But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth.’** We too work for our Father. Our job, like David’s, is to protect the innocent and weak from the strong and aggressive. **“And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.”** If the bears of this world relinquish their prey, well and good. If not, we are to risk whatever is necessary to protect God’s flock. **“Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.’ And David said, ‘Yahweh who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.’ And Saul said to David, ‘Go, and Yahweh be with you!’”** (I Samuel 17:33-37) As strong as the “bears” of this world are, they are no match for Yahweh—and we His servants wield His power, if only we’ll allow the Holy Spirit to operate through us.

WOLF

❧ 3.2.13 ❧

Ferocity

“Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey and at evening dividing the spoil.” (Genesis 49:27) Thus spoke Jacob (a.k.a. Israel) when delivering his deathbed blessing concerning his sons. These descriptions were predictions of each tribe’s prophetic profile as the centuries unfolded. The most significant of these twelve profiles would be that of Judah (the tribe into which Yahshua was born), who was pinpointed as the tribe from whom Israel’s royal scepter would never depart. But Benjamin was pegged as a ravenous wolf. Although this *can* be a bad thing, it isn’t necessarily a prediction of evil, considering that it’s the wolves’ usual job to thin out the herd, singling out the weak and infirm and removing them, leaving the healthy and robust animals alone. In that sense, their ferocity, their enthusiasm, can actually be a good thing, in the long term.

As Israel’s “wolf,” Benjamin’s tribal role would begin one way and end another—both within the broad parameters of “wolfishness.” In the “morning” he was to devour prey. Thus we are reminded that Israel’s very first king was a Benjamite. Saul was “asked” (for that is what his name means) by Yahweh to lead Israel as king, as the era of the judges came to an end. And indeed, he led the nation in war as an alpha male wolf leads the pack: **“When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. Wherever he turned he routed them. And he did valiantly and struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them.”** (I Samuel 14:47-48) Saul did battle with great success against virtually all of Israel’s traditional enemies, devouring them like prey.

The wolf of Benjamin in the “evening,” however, played a somewhat different role. After the sun had set on the monarchy of Israel—i.e., after it had been functionally destroyed by Babylon—another Benjamite celebrity literally “divided the spoil” in the unlikeliest story of national deliverance you can possibly imagine. Meet Mordecai: **“Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish [not Saul’s father, but another man with the same name, living four or five hundred years later], a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.”**

(Esther 2:5-6) Mordecai was the uncle of Esther, the Israelite beauty who became the queen of the Persian king Ahasuerus, a.k.a. Xerxes, in about 479 BC.

I won't recount the whole story of how Ahasuerus got tricked into signing an order of genocide against the Jews (including his queen), and how Esther's bravery and cunning turned the tables, prompting the king to issue an order for the Jews to vigorously defend themselves (see Esther 8:11). But cutting to the chase, we read, **"Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples."** And who was it who organized the Jewish resistance? Mordecai, the evening wolf of the tribe of Benjamin. **"All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them."** (Esther 9:1-5)

In the interests of being thorough, I must mention that there is one other Benjamite of note in scripture who has been accused (unfairly, in my opinion) in some circles of being a "ravenous wolf." You probably won't believe who I'm talking about. If you'll recall, Yahshua issued this warning: **"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit."** (Matthew 7:15-18) In the same vein, Peter wrote, **"There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words."** (II Peter 2:1-3) So *who* is accused by this fringe movement of being a false prophet, this ravenous Benjamite wolf in sheep's clothing? Believe it or not, it's a guy who wrote half the New Testament, the one man most personally responsible for introducing Christ to Asia Minor and Europe—the apostle Paul.

Paul's roots in the tribe of Benjamin are mentioned several times in his letters, so we shouldn't brush off this "ravaging wolf" epithet without looking into it. His name (originally) was the same as that of Israel's first king—Saul (which if you'll recall, means "asked"). Saul's name was changed—we're not told when or by whom—to Paul (which means "little"). It seems significant to me that the same

verse in which the name change is mentioned (Acts 13:9) also notes that Paul was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” The conclusion you could draw is that someone becomes “little” in his own eyes when being transformed from an arrogant Pharisee into a Spirit-filled bond-slave of Christ. The accusation against Paul is leveled by those who don’t accept the concept of salvation by grace through faith, who believe that *in addition* to the sacrifice of Yahshua, we must also perform the rites of the Torah as our responsibility under the covenant. Their line of reasoning is as follows: since the Torah is God’s word, and since God’s word cannot fail, all of mankind must flawlessly keep Yahweh’s Instructions throughout their generations, no matter what Yahshua did.

Their argument may seem quite logical, until you realize several things: (1) Scores of times, Yahweh stated that the Torah was to be kept *by Israel*. Furthermore, the covenant in question was made with Israel alone. Therefore, the nations (we may presume) aren’t required to perform its precepts in any literal sense, though we are to *observe* them—to “hear and heed” what they meant. (2) No one (other than Yahshua) has *ever* flawlessly kept the Torah. If *that’s* God’s criteria for our salvation, it’s going to be a long, lonely eternity for Him. It also implies that Christ died for no reason. Either His death and resurrection are perfectly efficacious for our salvation, or they aren’t: there is no middle ground. (3) There is a fundamental difference between performing the rites of the Torah and fulfilling its precepts. Offering up a sacrificial lamb is not remotely the same thing as *being* that Lamb. (4) Paul is (wrongly) accused of being anti-Torah by both the “Judaizers” and the grace-equals-license Christian apostates with whom they’re at war. But Paul never claimed that the Torah was wrong, or evil, or outmoded, or obsolete in any sense of the word we’d ordinarily use. His point—the one for which he is taken to task by his critics—was that the Torah was *never designed* to save people from their sins. It was “merely” designed to reveal the One who could: Yahshua the Messiah. (5) Paul is accused of “starting a new religion” and thus “dividing the spoils” like the evening wolves of Benjamin’s prophetic legacy. But the only “spoils” his life as apostle won him were persecution, pain, prison, poverty, unceasing labor, and in the end, martyrdom. Far from wanting to start a new religion, Paul merely sought to explain how the Torah had been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. It’s not exactly sacrilege to point out the truth.

That’s not to say *others* didn’t come in centuries after his martyrdom and twist his teachings into an idiotic caricature of what he’d actually said, preaching that if we’re under grace, our works are meaningless. Paul never taught any such thing. We must remember the prophecies of Revelation 2 and 3 concerning the then-future history of the church. Paul’s legacy is more than just the inroads of apostasy inherent in Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. It’s also found in the

struggling faithfulness of Ephesus and Pergamos, and in the triumphant perseverance of Smyrna and Philadelphia.

And we should critically analyze what happens when Paul's letters are declared heretical and removed from the canon. They don't "go quietly into that good night." No, they take prisoners, kicking and screaming. First, Peter's writings have to go, because he personally vouched for Paul. Then Mark's gospel gets tossed, since it depends on Peter's eyewitness testimony. Luke's writings are declared suspect, because their author was Paul's closest traveling companion. Hebrews: gone. John's writings: gone. Before you know it, you've got nothing left, nothing beyond Malachi to inform you as to how Christ fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. Without Paul (and those whose lives he touched) you're still bound by the constraints of the Law (as far as you know), even though you have no temple and no priesthood with which to perform the Torah's rites, leaving you—as they say in theological jargon—*screwed*. But since Christ's death achieved our liberty, Paul fought tooth and nail against *both* self-imposed chains and self-indulgent spiritual anarchy. Ravenous? No. But he *was* as fierce as a pack of wolves in his defense of the efficacy of the blood of Christ.

A few of scripture's "wolf" references we've already seen, for they're mentioned alongside other animals that have been recruited as scriptural symbols. For instance: **"For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. They are dreaded and fearsome. their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses [a subject we'll address shortly] are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves."** (Habakkuk 1:6-8) This passage establishes the primary metaphor: wolves are fierce, ferocious, and focused.

We've also seen *this* passage in another context—also speaking of the Babylonian threat: **"A lion from the forest shall strike them down. A wolf from the desert shall devastate them. A leopard is watching their cities. Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many; their apostasies are great."** (Jeremiah 5:6) Israel and Judah were warned for centuries about the "beastly" peril that awaited them if they did not heed the word of their God. Yet they did nothing to change their ways. Prophets like Jeremiah saw the whole thing happening before their eyes like a slow motion train wreck. And I'm getting a serious case of *déjà vu* here: I see the same thing happening to my beloved America. Judgment is coming, swift and sure, yet the vast majority of us go about our lives willingly ignorant of our looming destiny—ignoring our God, despising

our gifts, robbing our children, and indulging our lusts. May we wake up before it's too late.

Ezekiel too saw wolves lurking in the shadows: **“And the word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, say to her [i.e., Judah, but again, I can't help seeing my own nation as an object of the warning], ‘You are a land that is not cleansed or rained upon in the day of indignation. The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst....”** “Prophets” here speaks of those whose assigned task is to see what's coming and offer sound and godly advice and counsel. Today, the “prophets” are the influential media, those in academia, the powerful but unelected functionaries of government (ironically called “civil servants”), and yes, even those who occupy our pulpits. I'm afraid Ezekiel could look at us today and note that nothing much has changed. Note that he calls the complicity of these people “a conspiracy.” Those of us who can't help but see behind-the-scenes collusion in the world's efforts to suppress the word of God—and are called “paranoid” for our troubles—are being reminded that there's more to this than meets the eye: this is spiritual warfare on a global scale.

“Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.” The “priests” are, as always, those who are charged with interceding between man and God—today, the ekklesia of Christ. We, sadly, have failed in our responsibility to keep ourselves set apart from the world and consecrated rather to the honor of Yahweh. The church's propensity to ignore the word of God in favor of self-serving religious claptrap makes a mockery of our supposed relationship with the Almighty Creator of the universe. **“Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain.”** (Ezekiel 22:23-27) Not to be outdone, the “princes” are our political leaders, captains of industry, and the movers and shakers of global finance—the wolves of the story, roving in packs seeking unsuspecting (or merely undefended) prey to attack and devour for their own advantage. Yahweh, it must be noted, is not unaware of what they're doing, even if He is maddeningly patient in calling them to account for their crimes.

Another prophet came to virtually the same conclusion: **“Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice. She accepts no correction. She does not trust in Yahweh. She does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions.”** The “city” here is apparently a reference to Jerusalem, who should have known better. But I see no reason not to tar every capital city on earth with the same brush. **“Her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning.”** This time, those cast in the role of ferocious, ravening “wolves” are

Judah's judges. They're roughly analogous to the "princes" we saw above in Ezekiel's tirade, but here the emphasis is on their responsibility to make just and wise legal and policy decisions, judgments designed to honor Yahweh and defend His people against oppression. But again, what we see in reality is a colossal betrayal of trust, one that does not escape Yahweh's notice. **"Her prophets are fickle, treacherous men. Her priests profane what is holy. They do violence to the law."**

(Zephaniah 3:1-4) And once again, we see the prophets and priests utterly failing to fulfill their mandate before God. The ultimate example of "doing violence to the law," of course, is being a party to the death of the One whom God's law was designed to reveal: the Anointed Yahshua. The "officials, judges, prophets, and priests" of Israel—with a few notable exceptions—conspired with Satan and his minions to murder the Messiah. It matters not (to the lawbreakers, anyway) that the Torah predicted His death—the Lamb of God providing the atonement that made possible our reconciliation with Yahweh. Bringing about the fulfillment of the Torah's imagery by killing the Christ was no more their purpose than it was Adolph Hitler's intention to "found" the modern state of Israel—even though that's exactly what resulted from his genocidal intentions.

The Hebrew word for "wolf" is *ze'eb*. Not coincidentally, the name of one of the Midianite princes who used to periodically raid Israel during the age of the judges was named Ze'eb—the wolf. Thus by studying the interaction between Israel and the Midianites, we can perhaps learn a bit more about what wolves do, and what they symbolically represent. Here's the historical situation: **"The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds...."** This was precisely the sort of thing that had been prophesied—actually, *promised*—in Deuteronomy 28:25, 31, 33, and 48-53.

If you'll recall, Moses' father-in-law Jethro had been a "priest of Midian," a believer in the One True God. When Moses had his initial encounter with Yahweh at the burning bush, he was tending Jethro's sheep at Horeb, the mountain of God, "on the west side of the wilderness" (or as the NKJV puts it, in the "back of the desert"). Thus the desert/wilderness in question *could not* have been in the Sinai Peninsula, as is commonly thought (due to a mistake in geography made by Constantine's mother). Midianite territory was in present day northwestern Saudi Arabia, *east* of the Gulf of Aqaba. So the *western* edge of their home base—the "backside" of the Midianite desert—was where the wilderness wanderings began (once Israel had crossed the Red Sea, i.e., the Gulf of Aqaba)—at Mount Horeb. These Midianite raiders, then, were several hundred miles north of their home. **"For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites [whose territory lay between the Sinai and Canaan] and the people of the East [i.e., Moab and Edom] would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour**

the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to Yahweh.” (Judges 6:1-6)

And what did Yahweh do in response? He raised up Gideon. You remember the story: upon verification that Yahweh was who He said He was, Gideon raised a rather large army—32,000 men strong—which God, to make the point that it was He who would provide Israel’s victories, promptly pared down to a paltry 300 “special forces” commandos. Yahweh then instilled a spirit of fear and defeat among the Midianite soldiers, sending them dreams from which they surmised that “God had delivered Midian and the whole camp” (Judges 7:14) into the hand of Gideon. Gideon’s little band then crept up on the camp of the enemy in the middle of the night, blew trumpets, shouted battle cries, and lit torches, sending the entire Midianite army into panic and disarray. Their “fight or flight” response kicked into high gear, causing massive “friendly fire” casualties as the terrified Midianites struck out at anything that moved—*themselves*. (This, by the way, is hauntingly familiar. The same sort of scene—the invading horde turning on each other in utter panic—will again be a big factor in Israel’s victory in a major last-days battle, prophesied in Ezekiel 38-39. See in particular, Ezekiel 38:21.)

Anyway, the next move was to secure all the local water sources so Midian couldn’t regroup. **“Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, ‘Come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.’ So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.”** Then, the only thing left to do was to cut off the head of the snake: **“And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon across the Jordan.”** (Judges 7:24-25) There is some fairly heavy linguistic symbolism in play here. Ze’eb, as we have seen, means “wolf.” And Oreb, the name of the other Midianite prince, means “raven.” Gideon’s name is derived from a verb that means “to cut, to hew, or to chop down.” So, metaphorically at least, the repentant Israelites under Yahweh had “cut down” both the ferocious pack-hunting wolf that had been ravishing them and the unclean carrion bird who had been picking their bones clean for the past seven years—read: “completely.” Just remember how Israel’s troubles began: they did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh.

This cycle—idolatry, to oppression, to misery, to repentance, to deliverance, to complacency, and back again to apostasy—happened over and over again during the four hundred years of the age of the judges. It is apparently a symptom

of the human condition itself, for it recurs in one form or another in practically every civilization. Americans (at least until recently) tended to think we were immune to this sort of thing. We had our Bible, and we had our Constitution, and we had our pride. But somewhere along the way we lost sight of the Scriptures, and we elevated the Constitution to the status of holy writ. That was the beginning of the end, for us *and* for our beloved Constitution.

Perhaps we should have heeded the words of Scottish historian Alexander Tyler, writing (in 1787, when we were implementing our shiny new Constitution) about the fall of the Athenian Republic. He said, “A democracy is always temporary in nature; it simply cannot exist as a permanent form of government.... A democracy will continue to exist up until the time that voters discover they can vote themselves generous gifts from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always vote for the candidates who promise the most benefits from the public treasury, with the result that every democracy will finally collapse due to loose fiscal policy, which is always followed by a dictatorship.... The average age of the world’s greatest civilizations from the beginning of history, has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, those nations always progressed through the following sequence: (1) from bondage to spiritual faith; (2) from spiritual faith to great courage; (3) from courage to liberty; (4) from liberty to abundance; (5) from abundance to complacency; (6) from complacency to apathy; (7) from apathy to dependence; (8) from dependence back into bondage.” Not exactly the plan Yahweh had in mind.

The wolves of our corrupt human nature, it would seem, are always on the prowl. There is only one way to break this vicious cycle—to ensure that we never again slip from faith, courage, liberty and abundance into complacency, apathy, dependence, and bondage. But the road to this blessed state is not democracy, for men are flawed and fallen. It is, strangely enough, to be found only in a scepter of iron wielded by an absolute dictator—but one whose unlimited power is exceeded only by his unfathomable love. Like it or not, that “dictator” is Yahshua the Messiah. Under His reign (coming soon to a world near you), the ravenous wolves of our human nature will be transformed into implements of God’s unending capacity for love. **“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.”** (Isaiah 11:6) That’s not to say democracy doesn’t have a part to play. Under Yahshua’s reign, we all get to choose our own personal destiny: life or death; blessing or cursing; the cycle of good versus evil, or *this*: **“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.... The wolf and the lamb shall graze together. The lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,’ says Yahweh.”** (Isaiah 65:17, 25)

HORSE

☞ 3.2.14 ☞

Military Might

Teddy Roosevelt famously quoted an old West African proverb, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” It means, of course, that you don’t have to bluster and threaten if you’re armed to the teeth and everybody knows it: military might (and the will to use it) tends to command respect (or at least deference) among one’s friends and enemies alike. The symbolic Biblical equivalent of the “big stick” is the horse—quite often mentioned in association with the chariot. This was the state-of-the-art mobile weapons platform virtually from the dawn of armed conflict until the advent of gunpowder.

Admittedly painting with an extremely broad brush, I’d say the issue for modern nations is as follows: conservatives believe in achieving peace through maintaining a high degree of military strength—basically, T.R.’s position: “If we have a strong army, no sane nation would dare attack us.” Meanwhile, liberals believe we should “give peace a chance” by making ourselves less threatening to our national neighbors. “If we don’t attack people, they’ll leave us alone.” Both positions are the result of philosophical mindsets. The liberals assume that most people are basically good and peaceful, willing to abide by the golden rule. Conservatives generally assume the converse: they believe people need to be given good, practical reasons to behave themselves.

While history generally tends to vindicate the conservative philosophy, there are pitfalls with both positions. Conservatives tend to forget that *they* are people too, and therefore just as flawed in judgment and character (if not philosophy) as their belligerent neighbors. So being well armed *in itself* all too often becomes a pretext for wars intended to right wrongs, remove tyrants, or impose good behavior (or merely democracy) on nations or cultures who don’t have a clue what that means. And then, of course, there’s the lunacy factor: in reality, some nations *can’t* be counted upon to act sanely, or even in their own best interests. Liberals, meanwhile, in the well-intentioned quest for peace at any price, don’t understand that national weakness is an engraved invitation for bad people to attack you. Both groups assume that those outside share their same desire for peace, prosperity, and independence that they do. But because they don’t comprehend the nature of spiritual warfare, both groups are *wrong*.

A study of the scriptural symbolism of horses, then, should reveal what God has to say on the matter of national defense. In a nutshell, He says that *both* the

liberal and conservative positions have missed the point—it isn't how well prepared you are to mount a defense, but *who (or what) you trust*. David informs us that **“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of Yahweh our God. They [those who rely on conventional military resources] collapse and fall, but we [who rely upon Yahweh for our defense] rise and stand upright.”** (Psalm 20:7-8) It wasn't that David wasn't armed and dangerous, but he understood where victory in battle came from—and it wasn't his weapons or his warriors. **“The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue.”** (Psalm 33:16-17) No, conflicts are won through reliance on God.

This begs the question, however: what is the definition of “winning?” If you're a child of Yahweh, “winning” is an outcome that will bring you into closer fellowship with Him—which might look suspiciously like “losing” to the rest of the world. The incident I have in mind (though there were no horses involved) was the Battle of Ai, described in Joshua 7. Fresh on the heels of their great—dare I say, *miraculous*—victory at Jericho, the Israelites suffered a rout at the hands of an insignificant little town. When they enquired as to why, Yahweh informed them that His instructions concerning the spoils from Jericho had not been kept—one man's sin had brought disaster and defeat upon the whole nation, even though nobody but the sinner himself knew of his guilt. The lesson—that Israel must be holy, for their God was holy—was learned and put to use, turning defeat into victory. Another example of “winning” the hard way: after the risen Yahshua had issued the great commission (Acts 1:8), the believers had mostly stayed put in Jerusalem—until the persecution set in (see Acts 8:1), scattering them and their good news “to all Judea and Samaria, and (eventually) to the end of the earth.” Thus God's purpose was achieved through what looked—to the untrained eye—like a setback.

To keep things in perspective, we should note that *whatever* we're tempted to consider a source of temporal strength is actually a mere derivative of Yahweh's power and creative process. The horse—our primary symbol for such things—is no exception. As Yahweh grilled the hapless Job on why he thought he might be qualified to defend himself before God, He asked a series of unanswerable questions, including this one: **“Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrifying. He paws in the valley and exults in his strength; he goes out to meet the weapons. He laughs at fear and is not dismayed; he does not turn back from the sword. Upon him rattle the quiver, the flashing spear and the javelin. With fierceness and rage he swallows the ground; he cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet sounds, he says ‘Aha!’ He smells the battle from afar, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.”** (Job 39:19-25) The warhorse was the supreme example of battlefield hardware for millennia on end. But man could use the horse for such purposes only because God had

made it in the first place—made it strong and swift and fearless and enthusiastic, and yet responsive to his master’s touch on the reigns. But *anything* upon which we might come to rely for our security, whether personal or national, falls under the same heading: at some level, we owe its existence to our Creator, Yahweh.

It should go without saying (but I’ll say it anyway) that the God upon whom we must rely is *the actual* God, Yahweh, and not some false deity we have conjured up to add an air of legitimacy to whatever we’ve unilaterally decided to do. An illustration from antiquity: in Homer’s *Iliad*, Book II, Agamemnon calls on the blessing of *four* such faux gods (Jove—a.k.a. Jupiter—Minerva, Apollo, and Saturn) as he rouses his troops: “Whet well your spears; see well to the ordering of your shields; give good feeds to your horses, and look your chariots carefully over, that we may do battle the livelong day; for we shall have no rest, not for a moment, till night falls to part us. The bands that bear your shields shall be wet with the sweat upon your shoulders, your hands shall weary upon your spears, your horses shall steam in front of your chariots, and if I see any man shirking the fight, or trying to keep out of it at the ships, there shall be no help for him, but he shall be a prey to dogs and vultures.” The king’s “gods,” of course, could do nothing to affect the course of the battle of Troy, nor did his imprecations negate the fact that he had already settled on his own course of action. Agamemnon’s real faith was in horses, men, and ships—on strength, valor, and technology—not in his so-called gods.

We should also bear in mind that “tools” like horses and chariots are only as good as the people wielding them. An aircraft carrier is only as effective as its crew; a nuclear-tipped missile is only as good as its targeting system. And they’re all worse than useless unless the politicians pulling the strings of power are wiser than Solomon. James puts things in perspective for us: **“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.”** (James 3:1-5) All the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t “un-say” something we’ve said in anger or malice or thoughtlessness.

One monarch who unwittingly demonstrated the futility of having a well-oiled military machine deployed in opposition to Yahweh’s plan was the pharaoh of the

exodus. After having been bludgeoned into compliance with ten increasingly devastating plagues designed to demonstrate the indisputable sovereignty of Yahweh over the gods he worshiped—including himself—the pharaoh finally relented and let his Israelite slaves go—only to change his mind one last time after they had left town. **“And Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”** God didn’t force him to choose to pursue the slaves, you understand: He merely “set in stone” the attitude and opinion the king had held all along. **“And he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.”** (Exodus 14:8-9)

These place names tell the tale. If I may quote from my previous work (*The Owner’s Manual*), “The popular fiction that the Israelites crossed nothing more formidable than a shallow marsh called the ‘Reed Sea’ is destroyed by the text. Yahweh had Moses lead them down a wadi snaking southeast through the rugged and mountainous eastern Sinai Peninsula that empties out onto a large beach—the alluvial fan of this seasonal river emptying into the Gulf of Aqaba at about the 29th parallel. The beach, easily big enough to accommodate two or three million Israelites and their flocks, is located at the present seaside city of Nuweiba. ‘Pi Hahiroth’ describes the egress point: it literally means ‘mouth of the cave,’ reflecting the high canyon walls that hem in the wadi. Migdol [mentioned in verse 2] means ‘tower,’ referring to an Egyptian fortification, the ancient remains of which lie to the north of the beach, blocking the Israelites’ escape in that direction. South of the beach, the mountains reach down to the shoreline, making passage impossible. So basically, the Israelites at this point were stuck between the devil (or at least the Pharaoh) and the deep blue sea. Baal Zephon, a Midianite fortress Moses knew well (having tended sheep on the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba for forty years) lay directly across the gulf from the beach—you could see it on a clear day, since the Gulf of Aqaba is only about ten miles wide at this point.”

It looked to everyone, Israelites and Egyptians alike, that Moses had led them into a trap from which there was no escape. But you know the story: Yahweh told Moses to stick out his rod, the seas parted, the pillar of fire stationed itself as a rear guard, and the Israelites all passed safely across the sea floor to Midian, in present day Saudi Arabia. And the Egyptians? **“The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.... And as the Egyptians fled into it, Yahweh overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained.”** (Exodus 14:23, 27-28) The most formidable military force in the world at that time was defeated without an arrow being shot or a spear being thrown. Why? Because they

refused to comprehend the sovereignty of Yahweh, the God who had revealed Himself to the Hebrews. The Egyptians didn't recognize the difference between faith and presumption. While the fleeing Israelites were proceeding in faith (and precious little of it at that) that Yahweh intended to rescue them, Pharaoh's army merely presumed that whatever was going on would work to their advantage too. Modern military forces as well, whether America's, NATO's, Russia's, or Iran's, all too often presume that God (however they care to define Him) is on their side, when in fact they are merely doing what's in their politicians' perceived self interests. My advice is: don't *ever* go to war without a clear directive from Yahweh. But obviously, nobody's listening to me.

By the way, did you ever wonder how Egypt *became* such a formidable military force, equipped with horses and chariots that the surrounding nations could only dream of having? It's pretty clear that at the time of Abraham, Egypt's Pharaoh wasn't remotely the exalted potentate of later legend—someone of the status Moses would have to deal with half a millennium later. In Genesis 12:10-20, it appears that Abraham, a wealthy though landless nomad, was received by Pharaoh as an equal, more or less—a colleague of similar rank—a far cry from the master-slave dichotomy that would later characterize the relationship between the Pharaoh and Abraham's offspring. So what had happened?

Notwithstanding the fact that a lot can change in five or six hundred years, it transpires that Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was single-handedly responsible for Egypt's sudden leap from provincial mediocrity to international military prominence. Here again, the background story is familiar to anyone who ever spent a day in Sunday School: there was a great regional famine that lasted seven years, during which Joseph was in charge of the distribution of the grain that had been stored up during the good times (at Yahweh's dream-induced suggestion). Joseph, finding himself steward over Pharaoh's affairs, used the opportunity to enrich and empower his employer, selling the stored bounty in exchange for whatever the hungry and desperate buyers had to sell—including their horses. **"And Joseph answered, 'Give your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone.' So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys."** (Genesis 47:16-17) By the time the famine finally ended, the Egyptian throne had been established as one of the most wealthy and powerful political entities in the world—and it stayed that way for many centuries. Joseph's Pharaoh responded appropriately, giving his steward's family the fat of the land, Goshen, in which to live.

But subsequent Egyptian monarchs (like so many of our politicians today) promptly forgot the lessons of their own history, and enslaved the very people responsible for their blessed circumstances. Some things never change, I guess. I

am reminded that Great Britain was on the winning side of World War I largely because of the timely scientific innovation of a British Jew, Chaim Weizmann—who's invention of synthetic acetone allowed his nation to manufacture all the explosives they needed. The 1917 Balfour Declaration, issued in grateful response to Weismann's contribution, was the first political recognition of the Zionist cause by any major world power, promising a national homeland for the Jews in what was then called Palestine—something Britain was in a position to deliver, having defeated the Ottoman Turks. But Britain, like post-Joseph Egypt, reneged on their commitment. One wonders if the pounding England endured at the hands of Hitler's Germany in 1940 could have been avoided.

Anyway, four and a half centuries later (thanks largely to Joseph), Egypt had become *the* place to get horses to prop up one's national military aspirations. Yahweh, meanwhile, wanted His people to do nothing of the sort: He wanted them to rely on Him alone, not on conventional modes of warfare—even if they *were* charged with the task of ridding the Promised Land of the powerful Canaanites. So He instructed Moses to tell the people, **"When you come to the land that Yahweh your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it and then say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,' you may indeed set a king over you whom Yahweh your God will choose."** This was not a *command* to appoint a king, but only permission to do so—permission that came with certain caveats: **"One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you, who is not your brother."** The tribe from which Israelite kings would eventually come had already been identified: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah." This, of course, also required that the Messiah would be born into Judah. **"Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since Yahweh has said to you, 'You shall never return that way again.'" (Deuteronomy 17:14-16)** At issue here is whose path God's people would adopt, His or the world's. Egypt is often symbolic of bondage in the world, the very thing from which Yahweh had freed them. If they relied on Him, if they heeded His words, they would never have to go back there (into bondage) ever again. So the acquisition of horses from Egypt had become a metaphor for "fighting the battles of life man's way, not God's way." Remember: you are a servant of whomever you rely upon.

While I would not doubt that King David had some horses (since his son Absalom is said to have ridden in a chariot), I found it significant that there is not one single scriptural reference to David using horses in battle, though he was a man of war all his adult life. His attitude, rather, was what we read at the beginning of this section: **"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of Yahweh our God."** (Psalm 20:7) And we know that, in principle at least, David's son Solomon agreed with him, for he wrote, **"No wisdom, no understanding,**

no counsel can avail against Yahweh. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to Yahweh.” (Proverbs 21:30-31)

Solomon was not a man of war; David himself had expanded the borders of the Land to their maximum extent—*without* (as far as we know) *the use of horses*. Solomon merely maintained the borders and tributaries that his father had established. So it comes as something of a shock to read this: **“Solomon also had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, and 12,000 horsemen. And those officers supplied provisions for King Solomon, and for all who came to King Solomon’s table, each one in his month. They let nothing be lacking. Barley also and straw for the horses and swift steeds they brought to the place where it was required, each according to his duty.”** (I Kings 4:26-28) I once saw a bumper sticker that said, “Poverty is owning a horse,” and having known a horse owner or two, I can believe it. Any way you slice it, the upkeep on an equine “recreational vehicle” can be daunting. So why would a man who *knew* that “victory belongs to Yahweh” keep so many horses—especially in peacetime? Was it pride? Was it fear? Was it for the sake of appearances in the community of nations (of whom Israel at this time was the region’s superpower)? Or was it simply that Solomon had forgotten (or purposely ignored) what Yahweh’s clear instructions concerning a king in Israel had been: **“He must not acquire many horses for himself.”**

And it gets worse. Yahweh had also commanded concerning Israel’s future kings: **“He must not...cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses.”** Where did Solomon get his 40,000 horses? **“And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen. He had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem.... And Solomon’s import of horses was from Egypt and Kue, and the king’s traders received them from Kue [a.k.a. Cilicia, a.k.a. Keveh, located in modern Southern Turkey—the region where the apostle Paul was born] at a price. A chariot could be imported from Egypt for 600 shekels of silver and a horse for 150, and so through the king’s traders they were exported to all the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Syria.”** (I Kings 10:26-29) So in blatant disregard for the instructions of Yahweh, Solomon became the ancient world’s richest arms dealer. Not only was he “acquiring many horses for himself”—from *Egypt*, no less, he was also selling state-of-the-art weapons to the Hittites (who were on Yahweh’s seven-nation Promised-Land “hit list”—see Deuteronomy 7:1) and to Syria (on-again off-again enemies of Israel). What was he *thinkin’*? He wasn’t. And apparently, *not thinking* has become an honored tradition among world leaders: just this morning I read the news that the American president wants to sell 125 M1A1 Abrams heavy tanks to the Egyptian military (you know, the *same* Egypt now being led by the Muslim Brotherhood)—who has no use at all for such equipment *except* to attack its neighbor (and our ally) Israel—something we’ve been paying them handsomely *not to do* since the days of Jimmy Carter. I feel like throwing up. And according to Revelation 3:16, so does God.

So, if not with horses and chariots, how were the Israelites supposed to meet their enemies (i.e., those whom *Yahweh* defined as their enemies) in battle? The Torah's instructions were as follows: **"When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them, for Yahweh your God is with you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people and shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, for Yahweh your God is He who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.'" (Deuteronomy 20:1-4)** This is far more practical than merely telling them to "be brave." The salient features of the Israelite battle strategy were to be as follows: (1) Don't be intimidated by greater numbers or better equipment than you have. (2) Never for an instant forget that Yahweh your God—the One who told you to go and fight these guys in the first place—is with you, and more to the point, is personally fighting on your behalf, providing whatever success you enjoy. And (3) Listen to the priest—i.e., our ultimate High Priest, Yahshua the Messiah—whose function it is to sit at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. He knows our weaknesses as well as Yahweh's strengths. It should be reiterated, of course, that if your trust is in your own strength, or if your god is someone (or *something*) other than Yahweh, all bets are off. You're free to fight your battles your way, of course, but don't expect any help from a God you don't revere.

A few years later, Joshua had the opportunity to put these instructions to the test: **"And they [the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Hivites (v.3)] came out with all their troops, a great horde, in number like the sand that is on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots."** Precisely the scary equine scenario that Moses had told them to expect. **"And all these kings joined their forces and came and encamped together at the waters of Merom to fight with Israel."** Merom, a town about ten miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee, means "high place." The "waters of Merom" probably refers to the small lake fed by streams from this area—Lake Huleh, north of Galilee on the Jordan River. I am reminded that Canaanite pagan worship rituals were generally practiced at "high places," though a different word (*bamah*) is used to describe them. **"And Yahweh said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will give over all of them, slain, to Israel. You shall hamstring their horses and burn their chariots with fire.' So Joshua and all his warriors came suddenly against them by the waters of Merom and fell upon them. And Yahweh gave them into the hand of Israel, who struck them and chased them as far as Great Sidon and Misrephoth-maim, and eastward as far as the Valley of Mizpeh. And they struck them until he left none remaining. And Joshua did to them just as Yahweh said to him: he hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots with fire."** (Joshua 11:4-9)

Human wisdom would have said, “Let’s capture their horses and retask their chariots to our own purposes: we’ll be that much more formidable in battle the next time.” But Yahweh’s instructions said, “Those horses were of no help to the Canaanite coalition against My people, were they? So put no trust in them—only in Me. But don’t turn the horses loose, either, so they might be used by your enemies against you in the future. Cripple them so they’ll be worthless to your adversaries as implements of war.” At the close of World War II, there was a mad scramble among Americans and Soviets to gather and utilize as much Nazi and Japanese war technology (and scientists) as possible. The Americans under MacArthur shielded Japanese war criminals involved in the infamous “Unit 731” biological warfare program from prosecution, hoping to learn their deadly secrets. And 104 Nazi rocket scientists were similarly protected and utilized under “Operation Paperclip.” The outcome, in the end, was to bring us closer to “doomsday” *decades* sooner than would otherwise have been possible. Contemporary counsel from Yahweh might sound like this: “Honor Me as you go to war, and I will help you destroy your enemy’s capacity to make biological or nuclear weapons they can use against you. But don’t take their anthrax spores or plutonium as spoils of war, for your own use. I alone am your defense.”

That is the underlying theme most every time the subject of “horses” is brought up in scripture: God’s people are to trust in Him, not in man’s strength and strategies, when they face the world. Scripture repeats the scenario *ad nauseam*, in seemingly as many variations as God can think of, but all with the same core lesson: trust *Me*—rely on *Me* alone. One more example: enumerating what was wrong with Israel in the days leading up to the Assyrian invasion that swept them all away, Isaiah writes, **“For You have rejected Your people, the house of Jacob, because (1) they are full of things from the east and of fortune-tellers like the Philistines.”** Israel had been specifically warned (e.g., Deuteronomy 18:9-14) against practicing any sort of occult activity—the mainstay of the Babylonian (i.e., eastern) mystery religion. Doing these things betrayed a reliance upon demons, manifested in a thirst for esoteric “knowledge” other than that which Yahweh had taught them. **“And (2) they strike hands [i.e., make treaties, including marriage alliances] with the children of foreigners.”** Israel had been warned in no uncertain terms not to ally themselves with the local pagans in any way (see for example, Exodus 34:10-16), for such compromise is the antithesis of holiness. Israel was instructed to remain undefiled through separation from the world. (3) **“Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures.”** Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with temporal wealth, it can—probably more easily than anything else—become a false god, something that entices men to believe that they don’t really need Yahweh’s provision. (4) **“Their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots....”** This is the part germane to our present topic: Israel had been told not to “multiply horses” to define their military

strength. Rather, their battle strategy was supposed to be, simply, “Rely upon Yahweh.”

And (5) **“Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. So man is humbled, and each one is brought low—do not forgive them!”** (Isaiah 2:6-9) It’s no shame to be humbled before Yahweh; it’s a fact of life, a *fait accompli*, whether we realize it or not. But it’s downright humiliating (not to mention illogical) to be seen bowing before a “god” of one’s own manufacture—a tacit admission of abject stupidity, of flawed judgment, of abysmal ignorance. And before you say, “Amen, preach it, brother,” know that such “bowing” may consist of nothing more than voluntarily placing yourself in a position of subservience to *any* created thing: you are the *only* one who can elevate it to the status of a “god.” Our “gods” can be absurdly unworthy: a popular celebrity, a political candidate, a certain standard of living, a pet “cause,” or some hidden corner of your life you reserve for yourself. I know: now I’m getting *personal*, and it stings a bit. That’s what happens when you preach to the mirror.

Another variation on the same theme: **“Woe to those who go down to Egypt [read: the world, the place of bondage] for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult Yahweh!”** Would it be asking too much to insist that this verse be included in the oath of office for every public position in the land? Human wisdom isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Even the best of men who rely on their own abilities and knowledge (instead of on the true and living God) are doomed to failure. **“And yet He [Yahweh] is wise and brings disaster.”** So much for the best laid plans of mice and men. **“He does not call back His words, but will arise against the house of the evildoers and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When Yahweh stretches out His hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish together.”** (Isaiah 31:1-3) Both the “buyer” and the “seller” of any scheme in which dependence upon Yahweh is superseded by self-reliance are on shaky ground. What was it Yahshua said about the blind leading the blind? They’ll both end up in the ditch.

Conventional wisdom, of course, would call me an idiot for suggesting (actually, *insisting*) that Yahweh can be trusted to defend those who honor Him. On the other hand, those who *do* honor Him are few and far between these days, so it’s awfully hard to find contemporary examples of faith to which God could respond. Miracles are rare in today’s jaded world: pearls before swine, as it were. (Although I’m told that in places where Judeo-Christian “culture” isn’t so well entrenched, miracles of provision and protection on behalf of Yahweh’s children

happen with astonishing regularity.) But there are enough examples in scripture to establish the principle.

One of them took place when the Assyrians under Sennacherib were running roughshod over Israel. They had already hauled the apostate northern tribes off in chains, and they'd exacted tribute from the kingdom of Judah as well. (Note that although Israel, a.k.a. Ephraim, never had a single godly king, Judah's occasional revivals under their righteous kings—eight out of a total of twenty—postponed their destruction for 136 years past the demise of the northern kingdom.) As Assyria closed in on Jerusalem, the king's Rabshakeh (literally, cupbearer—read: chief diplomat/negotiator/shakedown artist) threatened Jerusalem's people: **“And the Rabshakeh said to them, ‘Say to Hezekiah, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting now in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him....”** The Assyrian may have had a point. Both Ephraim and Judah had in the past resorted to alliances with Egypt against powerful and belligerent neighbors like Syria (Aram). And the Rabshakeh was certainly correct in his assessment of Egypt's untrustworthiness. It's the same thing Yahweh had been telling them for centuries.

That's *not* to say Hezekiah was trusting in Egypt for aid. The Assyrian hoodlum didn't actually know what he was talking about. And the next thing out of his mouth proved it: **“But if you say to me, ‘We trust in Yahweh our God,’ is it not He whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem’?”** No, it was not. Hezekiah had indeed shut down the “high places.” But Yahweh Himself had established the altar in Jerusalem, and forbidden cultic rites everywhere else. Unfortunately, the Torah was by this time so thoroughly misunderstood—by Jews and gentiles alike—hardly anybody could tell where paganism stopped and Levitical worship began. This is really a sad commentary: it had become such a “normal” part of life in Judah to worship pagan gods like Tammuz, Ashtoreth, and Molech, it almost seemed (to the casual observer) as if Yahweh was just one dumb idol among many—the one whose temple happened to be on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. Worse, before Hezekiah had instituted his reforms, what went on *in the temple* was corrupt and polluted as well. It looked about as much like the rites of the Torah as “modern mainstream Christian practice” would look like to the first century ekklesia—which is to say, not a lot. Without reference to what Yahweh had actually ordained, how could anyone tell the difference? Like the pundits, politicians, and potentates of today's world, the Rabshakeh had no idea who Yahweh was or what He had said to do, because so few of His children perceived His presence or heeded His word. So he made Hezekiah a cynical bet: **“Come now,**

make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them.” (II Kings 18:19-23; cf. Isaiah 36)

It was a dare designed to emphasize Hezekiah’s poor bargaining position—to rub salt in his wounds. But more than that, it was a temptation to fight against spiritual enemies with temporal weapons. The Rabshakeh was saying, in effect, “Your God Yahweh is no more real or able to help you than our gods Assur, Ishtar, Marduk, and Bel are to us. That’s why we rely on overwhelming force and trust in superior weaponry. You can’t beat us at our own game. Give up. Now.” Yahweh, of course, begged to differ: **“Therefore thus says Yahweh concerning the king of Assyria: ‘He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares Yahweh. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.’ And that night the angel of Yahweh went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.”** (II Kings 19:32-35, cf. Isaiah 36-37) There is all sorts of controversy concerning precisely what method God used to kill all these Assyrian soldiers in one night. But it doesn’t matter, beyond the one fact made clear from the narrative: they *were*’t killed in battle. The true and living God does not need humans to do His “wet work,” defend His people, or establish His kingdom. He may allow us to participate in His endeavors, like a father teaching his son how to use tools in his workshop, but He doesn’t *need* our efforts to achieve His purposes.

It’s strange: although Muslim fundamentalists are enthusiastic about spreading Allah’s religion through warfare and terror, it never seems to occur to them that Allah never lifts a finger to help. Their results would be *exactly* the same if they did what they do in the name of a purple polka-dotted bunny rabbit named Skippy. It’s hilariously ironic that the dirtiest word a jihadist Muslim can call you is a “crusader.” Why? Because the Catholic crusaders of the Middle Ages operated in precisely the same way they do—fighting a “holy war” in their own strength, neither empowered nor instructed by God, but prodded into action rather by a religious elite claiming to speak for Him. To hear the Qur’an tell it, Allah is pleased when his jihad fighters attack people in his cause (or—let’s face it—merely for the booty), and he’s doubly pleased when they get “martyred” in the attempt. When they win, he’s happy to take credit, but when they lose, he’s said to be “harvesting souls for paradise.” It’s a pretty slick scam, if you’re an idiot. Of course, it helps to threaten anybody who questions Allah’s (or Muhammad’s) credentials, or who wants to leave Islam, with a horrible death: no one wants to be the first to announce that the emperor has no clothes.

And how does Yahweh feel about such things? Is He impressed with men and “horses” (that is, their military prowess)? Does He revel in our glorious wars?

Apparently not. **“His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor His pleasure in the legs of a man, but Yahweh takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love. Praise Yahweh, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For He strengthens the bars of your gates; He blesses your children within you.”** (Psalm 147:10-13) Reading between the lines that which is overtly stated elsewhere in scripture, the Psalmist intimates that Yahweh is pleased when we realize that as strong as we may seem, we are actually weak, defenseless, and vulnerable on our own. Our security lies in reliance upon Him alone. His strength is made complete in our weakness. Oh, and one more thing: note that Zion—Jerusalem—is the only city on earth that God ever swore to defend. That fact, were it known, would surely give pause to the invading hordes of the coming Tribulation. But they will neither know nor care.

Sun gods and moon gods dot the pagan landscape like “cow patties” on a dairy farm’s back forty. The ineffectual Allah is said to be a moon deity (one among scores of them), and the Assyrian “sun god” was named Marduk. As we have seen, Yahweh convincingly trounced this bogus solar deity along with his army outside of Jerusalem’s city gates (just as He will Allah in the days to come). What I can’t figure out is why, a single generation after Hezekiah’s reign, was Judah back to tolerating—even worshipping—pagan deities? It’s sadly ironic that the all-too-rare righteous kings of Judah never seemed to be able to pass their godly predilections on to their heirs, nor were the lessons of history ever retained for very long. Hezekiah’s son Manasseh turned out to be one of the worst kings of the lot (though the fact that he came to the throne a petulant youth twelve years old explains a lot). During his fifty-five year reign, Manasseh sunk Judah to new and unprecedented depths of pagan depravity. His wicked son Amon (named after Amun-Ra, the Egyptian sun god) reigned only two years, leaving his eight-year-old son Josiah to reign over Judah—a great disappointment to his father and grandfather no doubt, for Josiah, against all odds, grew up to become the last righteous king of Judah. Among the many reforms he instituted, we read, **“And he [Josiah] removed from the entrance to the temple of Yahweh the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun.... And he burned the chariots of the sun with fire.”** (II Kings 23:11)

What’s important to notice here is that horses and chariots—the means of waging war—had been associated, linked in dedication, with pagan worship. The lesson: a nation’s attitudes toward making war are inevitably a reflection of its spiritual outlook. A multiplicity of horses, as we have seen, was to be viewed in Israel as a determination to fight life’s battles in man’s strength and wisdom, not according to Yahweh’s provision of victory. At the risk of sounding like a pacifist (which I’m not), I believe we should be far more discerning—and attuned to God’s leading—than we usually are when contemplating going to war. There was a time in America’s history—during the Revolutionary War—when our national agenda aligned (to a great extent) with Yahweh’s revealed character: we were

fighting for liberty, equality, and freedom from tyranny—politically, financially, personally, and in matters of faith. Our leaders' unabashed reliance on the Almighty in the face of insurmountable odds was the one thing that allowed us to prevail over the best-oiled military machine on earth at the time.

But what are we fighting for these days? We ship our best and bravest (or merely our hard-earned tax dollars) to troubled hot zones—invariably places with overwhelming Islamic majorities—to fight decades-long unwinnable wars in the hopes of achieving...achieving what? The objectives are never clear-cut. I *could* plunge into a sea of conspiracy theories at this point, but I'll restrict myself to the published and accepted rationalizations. National security? There is no demonstrable link between terrorist acts on our soil and *any* foreign government. Regime change? Replacing a thug with a megalomaniac or a tyrant with a gangster would seem a fool's errand. Cheap oil? How's *that* workin' out for you? Imposing American-style democracy on everybody? We spend thousands of lives and billions of dollars to get them to the polls, only to find that they're in such spiritual bondage, they'll only vote for candidates pre-approved by their imams—the more hard line, the better. So every “free election” moves the populace deeper into self-imposed slavery. Why? Because America and our well-intentioned allies have relied on “horses and chariots” rather than on the counsel of God.

Excuse my rant. But there's historical precedent in scripture to teach us about the end game of such a strategy. We shall reap what we have sown. Beginning with Solomon, Israel, and then the divided kingdom, ignored Yahweh's instructions concerning “horses and chariots,” preferring to trust in the best armies they could draft and tax into existence (or failing that, acquiring allies from among their less-than-reliable pagan neighbors on the rent-a-thug plan). So what happens when a people blessed with the oracles of Yahweh choose to ignore them? They will be taught that there's always somebody with more horses and bigger chariots than they've got. **“Thus says Yahweh: Behold, a people is coming from the north country, a great nation is stirring from the farthest parts of the earth. They lay hold on bow and javelin; they are cruel and have no mercy. The sound of them is like the roaring sea. They ride on horses, set in array as a man for battle, against you, O daughter of Zion!”** (Jeremiah 6:22-23) It was no comfort to Judah that Nebuchadnezzar's armies decimated Assyria before they turned their attentions to them. What goes around comes around.

Fast forward a hundred-plus years. The Babylonians had succumbed in turn to the Medes and the Persians; a remnant of the Jewish population had returned to the promised land; and the temple had been rebuilt, after a fashion. But the majority of Jews remained in exile, settled and comfortable in their new lives under relatively benign Persian rule. As you'll recall from our study of wolves, a beautiful young Jewish woman had even been made King Xerxes' queen. As luck

(yeah, right) would have it, Queen Esther's uncle Mordecai had saved the king's life sometime previously, but the king had forgotten all about the incident until reminded by Yahweh—through a bad case of insomnia. (It's a long story.)

So now he determined to correct his error of omission: **“And the king said to Haman [Xerxes' court favorite, the Jews' persecutor, and Mordecai's nemesis], ‘What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?’ And Haman said to himself, ‘Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?’ And Haman said to the king, ‘For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.”’ Then the king said to Haman, ‘Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.’ So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.’”** (Esther 6:6-11) Oops. Haman's greed for self aggrandizement blew up in his face, and he was forced to publically honor the one man he hated worst in this world. (The reason for this hatred, by the way, was that Mordecai had refused to pay homage to Haman—or any man—but to Yahweh only.)

There are lots of lessons that could be gleaned from the Book of Esther. For our immediate purposes, however, I merely want to point out what symbolic role the horse played. Although not seen here in the context of military *conquest*, the horse still represented triumph and temporal power. Since the king himself had ridden this particular animal, riding it represented the exercise of the king's own authority. (The wearing of the king's royal robes and the crown didn't hurt, either.) The horse represents the power of its owner, so the picture is that of vicariously wielding the authority of the king.

In a moment, we'll see how this picture will come full circle in the portrayal of the returning Messiah-King upon a white horse. But for now, ponder this: what animal was Yahshua known for riding during his first advent? Not the majestic white horse of triumph, but a lowly donkey of service, the bearer of burdens. Symbolically at least, you are what you ride.

The Tribulation of the last days will see two major military campaigns with the objective of wiping the Israel off the face of the earth. The first battle (which I

expect to begin about a year into this final 2,520-day period of rebellion and judgment upon the earth) will begin as a full scale Islamic invasion into Israel. One of the reasons I am convinced Yahweh will never allow Israel to be attacked with nuclear weapons—even if/when Iran acquires them—is that this first conflict is uniformly described in scripture as conventional warfare, with invading armies facing off against the defenders of the land in battle. (Unfortunately, I can't make any such predictions about America's thermonuclear prospects. I'm pretty sure we're in for it at some point.) Jeremiah asks, **"Who is this, rising like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge? Egypt rises like the Nile, like rivers whose waters surge. He said, 'I will rise, I will cover the earth, I will destroy cities and their inhabitants....'"** Egypt, though a consistent Biblical metaphor for "bondage in the world," is sometimes just *Egypt*. I believe that's the case here. It certainly was in 1967 and 1973, and their driving agenda—Islam—has only gotten more belligerent and organized in the intervening years.

"Advance, O horses, and rage, O chariots! Let the warriors go out: men of Cush and Put who handle the shield, men of Lud, skilled in handling the bow...." One bridge we need to get over is the use of such symbology when it comes to prophetic descriptions of weaponry. Is God saying the Islamic hordes are *literally* going to attack using horses and chariots, bows, arrows, spears, swords, and shields? No, He's not. The prophet has described, using the only terms he and his audience could have understood, a modern, well-equipped land based fighting force. They have both offensive and defensive capabilities; they're mobile, swift, skilled, and deadly. And as always, the underlying theme is that these armies are relying on their own resources to achieve their objective. (They'd like to believe they're operating in Allah's strength, I suppose, but since he's only a figment of their prophet's imagination, they're on their own in the divine empowerment department.) Notice too that there are several people groups listed—a roster that will be expanded greatly by the prophet Ezekiel in a bit. Cush ("Ethiopia") is south of Egypt, and Put ("Libya") is west of it. Lud is apparently in the far west of Turkey. These (and those included in Ezekiel's expanded list) are *all* Muslim lands today, in case you didn't notice.

And what is the battle's *raison d'être*? Why has Yahweh given it such a prominent place in His scriptures? Because, **"That day is the day of the Lord Yahweh of hosts, a day of vengeance, to avenge Himself on His foes."** As if it needed clarification, Yahweh has just declared Islam to be His enemy, at least as defined by geography. Of all the institutional evils in the world He intends to deal with (and He intends to deal with *all* of them), Islam will experience His vengeance first. **"The sword shall devour and be sated and drink its fill of their blood. For the Lord Yahweh of hosts holds a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates."** (Jeremiah 46:7-10) This reference to the Euphrates may seem confusing, since most of the nations listed as "foes" are in Africa, to the south. But Ezekiel's account, as we shall see,

describes an Islamic coalition driven by Iran, with a significant Turkish component (or is it the other way around?): the invasion will come primarily from Israel's north, from the direction of the Euphrates River.

Let us then consult with Ezekiel, who offers the most comprehensive description of this campaign, in chapters 38 and 39. **"The word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal."** Gog is apparently a title for the Islamic leader. I take him to be the Mahdi, or "Twelfth Imam" of Islamic lore—a made-to-order self-fulfilling prophecy. He could well head up a revived "Ottoman-style caliphate"—something that has been dormant since the end of World War I. The name "Gog" means "mountain," which is a scriptural metaphor for power. The word "Caucasus" (the name of the mountain range between the Black and Caspian Seas) means "Gog's fort." Magog is usually equated with the ancient Scythian empire, which occupied a vast swath of land that, between the 8th and 4th centuries B.C., stretched across Eurasia from the Danube River to China—concentrated in Turkey, the Caucasus region, and Iran. Meshech and Tubal are located in modern-day Turkey. As with Jeremiah's description, all of the territories listed by Ezekiel are in Muslim hands today. **"And prophesy against him and say, Thus says the Lord Yahweh: Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. And I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armor, a great host, all of them with buckler and shield, wielding swords...."** Once again, we see horses as the symbolic centerpiece of a great military force—one doomed to failure. The description reeks of pride and, dare I say, overconfidence.

"Persia, Cush, and Put are with them, all of them with shield and helmet; Gomer and all his hordes; Beth-togarmah from the uttermost parts of the north with all his hordes—many peoples are with you...." As we have seen, Cush and Put are in Africa. Persia, of course, is in Iran (the southern portion), although when Ezekiel was writing this, their empire had expanded to cover much of the Middle East. Gomer (Cimmeria) and the house of Togarmah are both (once again) in Turkey, a region that's beginning to look *very* suspicious. Of interest here is who's *missing* from the list: notably Egypt (Mizraim), Syria (Aram), Jordan (Edom, Moab, and Ammon), and Saudi Arabia (Sheba, Dedan, Zimri, and others). The reason for that seems to be latent in what Ezekiel is describing: a formal coalition (or caliphate) being led by "Gog," the Mahdi. But as far back as Genesis 16, Yahweh declared that Ishmael (the father of the Arabian peoples) would be a "wild ass" of a man, at enmity with pretty much everybody. So we should not be surprised to find that the Arabs will not be included in the Magog confederation. That doesn't mean they won't attack Israel; it just means that cooperation with their fellow Islamists is not their long suit. The Jeremiah 46 passage we saw above, along with Daniel 11:40, guarantee Egypt's and Syria's involvement. And although Saudi

Arabia (the birthplace of Islam) would prefer to remain aloof (see Ezekiel 38:13), Jeremiah 25 announces that their fate is sealed.

At any rate, God's prophet is told to address their leader: **"Therefore, son of man, prophesy, and say to Gog, Thus says the Lord Yahweh: On that day when My people Israel are dwelling securely, will you not know it? You will come from your place out of the uttermost parts of the north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great host, a mighty army."** Horses, once again, are a symbolic reference to a show of military might. Since Israel's war of independence in 1948, their Islamic foes have employed what they thought was an ever-increasing degree of military superiority, only to be defeated every time they attacked. In 1973, only the grace of God and some timely assistance with weaponry from America kept Israel from being wiped out. (To my mind, it was Richard Nixon's finest hour.) This time, Gog will muster an unprecedented, theoretically unstoppable force. **"You will come up against My people Israel, like a cloud covering the land. In the latter days I will bring you against My land, that the nations may know Me, when through you, O Gog, I vindicate My holiness before their eyes."** (Ezekiel 38:1-6, 14-16) There will be no question this time: if the Muslims are defeated, it will be a miracle from Yahweh. Like Pharaoh of old, the Muslims will be summoned to their destruction like moths to a flame. Yahweh intends to use their defeat as a wake-up call to the world: He is a God who is willing and able to defend His chosen people—even if they don't really know Him, even if the odds are impossibly lopsided. The battle of Magog will be the ultimate test case, and Yahweh will rub Muhammad's nose in the mess he's made. Bad dog!

And who (or what) will perish on the mountains of Israel at the hand of Yahweh? Let us examine the profile of the dead, the losers, the victims of this war: **"Speak to the birds of every sort and to all beasts of the field, 'Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth."** While literally true—that is, notwithstanding the fact that millions of dead Muslim bodies will pollute the landscape, so many that it will take the Israelis seven months to bury the dead in mass graves—there is also symbolic information embedded here: **"Of rams** [the leaders of the Muslim flock], **of lambs** [the clueless and (relatively) innocent participants sent to the slaughter by their overlords], **and of he-goats** [aggressive sinners], **of bulls** [the plans and schemes of man], **all of them fat beasts of Bashan** [the very best army that Dar al-Islam can field]. **And you** [remember, he's speaking to the birds, representative of the consequences of choice] **shall eat fat till you are filled, and drink blood till you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you. And you shall be filled at My table with horses and charioteers** [i.e., Islam's military might will be devoured], **with mighty men** [symbolic of volition: they are

reaping what they have sown—in this case, utter destruction] **and all kinds of warriors,' declares the Lord Yahweh.**" (Ezekiel 39:17-20)

These two chapters (Ezekiel 38 and 39) delineate a variety of “weapons” God intends to use to defend His land from the Islamic menace. I find it significant that he doesn’t actually slay their armies *until* they invade the Land. Ezekiel mentions (1) an earthquake, (2) the sword (i.e., conventional warfare), the point being that Israel (and some unlikely allies) will mount a vigorous defense, (3) fratricide—something Muslims have historically been far more adept at than actually killing Jews or Christians, (4) pestilence, that is, disease—the inevitable bedfellow of total war, (5) bloodshed, (6) flooding rain (a circumstance that serves to confirm that this campaign will take place during the first half of the Tribulation, since widespread drought is ordained for the second half), (7) great hailstones, to be expected with thunderstorm activity (but a description that *could* possibly refer to meteor activity), and (8) fire and brimstone, the same phenomenon that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—which apparently had something to do with a sulfur-rich meteor shower. The “trick” for Yahweh will be removing the Muslim invaders without wiping away the Israelite defenders—or for that matter, destroying Gog’s war supplies—fuel, food, ammunition, vehicles, etc. Ezekiel 39:9-10 intimates that these supplies will be utilized by the Israelis after the battle is over—a seven year supply.

The bottom line is that Yahweh does not intend to forever let things roll along as they have for the past age. In the interests of letting man’s free will chart its own course, He has rarely intervened against the “horses and chariots” of man. But that’s all going to change: **“I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders. And the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother.”** (Haggai 2:21-22) Here again, we see one of the weapons He will deploy during the Battle of Magog: fratricide—men being slain “with the swords of their brothers.” But this issue extends far beyond historic Jewish-Muslim animosity, beyond the war of Magog. It will spread to the very infrastructure of civilization. As governments disintegrate, their ability to keep their populations in check will diminish. Liberty will degenerate into license, then into anarchy, and then into utter chaos.

As society unravels, only one thing will come into focus: fallen man’s illogical resentment against the God who made him. But since they can’t get to Yahweh, they’ll settle for attacking His chosen people, the Jews (along with the neo-Christians, the “fellowship of repentant Laodicea”). Dar al-Islam is only the first wave: **“On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples. All who lift it will surely hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth will gather against it. On that day, declares Yahweh, I will strike every horse with panic, and its rider with madness.**

But for the sake of the house of Judah I will keep My eyes open, when I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness. Then the clans of Judah shall say to themselves, ‘The inhabitants of Jerusalem have strength through Yahweh of hosts, their God.’” (Zechariah 12:3-5) The “panic of horses” speaks of the inability—through sheer terror—of the military forces of the nations gathered against Jerusalem to function. “Rider madness” describes the foolishness—the *insanity*—of those calling the shots: the politicians, the diplomats, and the generals. Picture the moment when the Red Sea began to collapse back in on the Egyptian armies pursuing the Israelites. Multiply that by a thousand, and you’ve got the basic idea.

As I said a few pages back, there will be *two* campaigns fought over Jerusalem. This next passage bridges the gap between them. The first was the Battle of Magog; the second is the Battle of Armageddon—although calling them “battles” may be a bit of an overstatement. In the final analysis, Yahweh will achieve victory single handedly, with a yawn and a shrug. **“Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against Yahweh and against his anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’ He who sits in the heavens laughs; Yahweh holds them in derision. Then He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury, saying, ‘As for Me, I have set My King on Zion, My holy hill.’”** (Psalm 2:1-6) The relationship between Yahweh and His Anointed is seen here. Though God is one person, one entity, Yahweh is manifested in Yahshua the Messiah—God in the form of a human being: He is the “king” that Yahweh has set on His holy hill, Mount Zion. Though Yahweh will not appear personally as He decimates the Muslim hordes of the Battle of Magog, He *will* return as the reigning Messiah prior to Armageddon. **“Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? Yahweh, strong and mighty, Yahweh, mighty in battle!”** (Psalm 24:7-8)

It’s a stunning picture—the return of the King of glory to the world that treated Him so shabbily last time He appeared. John saw it in his vision: **“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war.”** One final time, the horse is employed to reveal the strength of its rider. But this time, the Rider is flawless and pure: the horse He’s riding is white. We are reminded that Roman generals, returning home in triumph, employed white horses to telegraph the invincibility of Rome. **“His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but Himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God....”** The only One who could ever have been honestly described as “faithful and true” is Yahshua the Messiah. Although He has always been the personification of righteousness, this is the first time He has *ever* sat in judgment or made war upon the earth.

“And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.” (Revelation 19:11-16) Although the prophet Isaiah reported (in 63:3) that this King will “tread out the winepress *alone*,” that is, achieve His military victory over the rebellious earth without any assistance from man, here we see that He won’t actually *be* alone—King Yahshua will be accompanied by the armies of heaven, who, like Him, are all seen riding white horses of invincibility and triumph. These “armies” aren’t the hosts of angels who do the bidding of Yahweh—as the “Lord of Sabaoth”—in the spiritual realm, however. They are seen wearing fine, white linen—symbolic of imputed righteousness. That detail defines them as the previously raptured saints: they’re seen returning to earth as a bride with her Husband, going to their home after the wedding feast—the marriage supper of the Lamb (see Revelation 19:7-9).

But the white horses of the victorious King and His bride aren’t the only horses on the scene in this last great confrontation. John continues: **“Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great...’”** Besides the obvious literal carrion feast, necessary (once again) to cleanse the land of the myriad of dead bodies of those who were foolish enough to attack Yahweh’s people, there is a symbolic component to this: if “birds” represent the consequences of our choices, and “horses” symbolize military strength, then we’re seeing the consequences of choosing to go to war against the King of kings. It’s not a pretty sight.

Being old enough to have lived through the Vietnam war era, I feel compelled to bring up another issue. John’s casualties list includes “slaves” as well as free men—something one might interpret as both “draftees” and “volunteers.” Thousands of my contemporaries fought and died in Southeast Asia, not because they were patriots who truly believed they were somehow defending America, but merely because—patriots or not—they were drafted, forced against their will to go and fight. Here at Armageddon, the draft will once again have been imposed: there are “slaves” among the fallen. Does this mean that they’re not necessarily enemies of God? It might, but I doubt it. Christ’s metaphor of the “sheep and goats” in Matthew 25:31-46 makes it clear that no one will still be uncommitted by the end of the Tribulation (when the Battle of Armageddon will take place). By that time, they will all either be Yahweh’s or Satan’s. So even if they’d rather not fight in the Antichrist’s army (whose sole objective is to destroy Israel), even if their participation in the last battle is compelled and coerced, the draftees have still all made the choice, as individuals, to accept the Antichrist’s oath of

loyalty—the mark of the beast. If they had not, they would not have been made soldiers: they’d be made prisoners—or more likely, corpses.

And what about the leaders of the forces arrayed against the returning Messiah? John saw that too: **“And I saw the beast [that is, the Antichrist] and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against Him who was sitting on the [white] horse and against His army.”** Until this moment, it looks as if a great battle is going to take place. But it never happens: the Messiah simply annihilates the satanic forces with a spoken word. **“And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”** (Revelation 19:17-21) It’s all over almost before it begins. The power of the King of kings, the one seated on the white horse of triumph, is, in the end, unassailable. Perhaps someone should have told these multiplied millions of rebellious mortals, armed only with the weapons of men, that they were going out to fight against an immortal militia, armed with the Spirit of God and led by the eternal, omnipotent King. Oh, wait. Someone *did* tell them.

When God’s prophets see horses in their visions, the usual symbolic concept of “military strength” gets boiled down to its most fundamental principle: the advancement of a scriptural imperative through the application of power. In several of these visions, the seer is shown multiple horses—actually, they always seem to come in sets of *four* (four being the number symbolic of God’s design for the earth). Another consistent factor: the four horses (or teams) are invariably said to be of different colors. This in turn begs the question: what do the colors suggest?

During the time of Governor Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest—when the second temple was being built (520-518 BC)—the prophet Zechariah saw two such multiple-horse visions. **“I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel who talked with me said to me, ‘I will show you what they are.’ So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, ‘These are they whom Yahweh has sent to patrol the earth....’”** Although they’re not necessarily seen in a combat, these four horses are still employed in a quasi-military role—patrolling the earth, guarding and reporting timely sit-reps to their commander.

What to the horses' colors suggest? The patrol's leader and one of his troop are riding red horses. This is the Hebrew adjective *adam*, related to *adam*, a verb meaning to be red or ruddy, and also a noun meaning man or mankind. The "sorrel" horse is speckled or dappled in color. The Hebrew word is *saruq*, derived, interestingly enough, from *saraq*, a word denoting a hissing or whistling sound, or perhaps the piping of a shepherd's flute. It denotes a non-verbal communication of scorn or derision (as when one passes a burnt-out ruin and whistles in amazement that such a thing could have happened), or a non-verbal whistling signal whose purpose is to command attention or gather a group together. The last horse is white, the Hebrew *laban*—the color denoting moral purity. Therefore, if I had to guess (and I do, since we're not overtly told), the four horses of Zechariah 1:8 picture a man calling men to purity.

Before you call the eisegesis police on me (since this admittedly sounds a bit like I'm pulling interpretations out of thin air), consider the rest of the passage. **"And they answered the angel of Yahweh who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, 'We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest.'" Myrtle trees are linked (in Nehemiah 8:15) with the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, prophetic of the Millennial reign of Christ—when (not coincidentally) "all the earth will remain at rest."** But there was also a near-term objective in Zechariah's vision: the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple in the wake of the Babylonian captivity. **"Then the angel of Yahweh said, 'O Yahweh of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?' And Yahweh answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says Yahweh of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says Yahweh, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy. My house shall be built in it, declares Yahweh of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says Yahweh of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and Yahweh will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.'" (Zechariah 1:8-17)**

Is he speaking of the rebuilding of the city and temple by Zerubbabel and Joshua, or of the reconstruction that will take place after the Tribulation has run its course and Yahshua sits on His rightful throne? Yes, he is. That is, *both things*, the near and far perspective, are in view. The seventy years of Israel's Babylonian captivity are analogous to their two millennia of exile and persecution in the wake of their national rejection of Yahshua the Messiah. In both cases, the nations that implemented Yahweh's wrath on Israel and Judah were—in God's estimation—a little too enthusiastic, a little too quick to rub salt into Israel's well deserved wounds. And then as now, Yahweh has determined to regather His people back to Himself in purity and forgiveness, in prosperity and comfort, in mercy and with

zeal. That, in case you missed it, is precisely what the colors of the four horses seemed (to me, anyway) to indicate. Yahweh will “whistle” for His people, and they will return to Zion, with a new heart for His word, from all over the earth. And lest we lose sight of the basic meaning of our “horse” metaphor, this regathering of the purified remnant of Israel will be achieved with the strength and efficiency of a proper military operation. The Commander-in-Chief has issued His orders. His word will be carried out as He said. Yahweh will once again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem.

A few chapters later, Zechariah describes another vision in which horses played a starring role: **“Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four chariots came out from between two mountains. And the mountains were mountains of bronze.”** The message is different, more ominous, this time. In God’s symbolic shorthand, “four” indicates God’s design, “two” is the number of witness, “mountains” are a place of power, and “bronze” symbolizes judgment. I’ll let you draw your own conclusions as to what this all means, but it’s pretty clear: something serious is about to be revealed. **“The first chariot had red horses, the second black horses, the third white horses, and the fourth chariot dappled horses—all of them strong. Then I answered and said to the angel who talked with me, ‘What are these, my lord?’”** Again, the colors are a subtle indicator of what’s going on. And again, God doesn’t spell it out: He leaves it up to us to ponder their meaning.

If our interpretation of the previous vision has any merit, the two colors that are repeated (red and white) will mean the same thing they did before. To recap, red (*adom*) means man, and white (*laban*) indicates purity. The color of the second team of horses, black, is the Hebrew *shachor*, derived from the verb *shachar*: to be black (as in the darkness before the dawn) or in a related sense, to seek or look for diligently (as when the available light is insufficient for the task). A revealing usage of the word is found in Isaiah 14:12, where the descriptive phrase *helel ben shachar* is used of Satan. This is usually translated “Lucifer, son of the morning” or something similar, but as we can now see, *shachar* is actually more descriptive of the darkness that *precedes* the light of dawn. The point, apparently, is that when Satan is given hegemony, darkness rules—you can’t see your spiritual hand in front of your face, so to speak. But the condition is temporary: the light of Yahshua’s triumph is destined to eclipse and obliterate Satan’s dark rule: He is the *real* “bright and morning star” (see Revelation 22:16). There’s also a fourth color, “dappled,” but if you don’t mind, I’d like to defer my analysis of that one for a moment.

Thus far, we have seen four spiritual profiles (represented by the horses’ various colors), the *number* of chariots informing us that this is all happening according to Yahweh’s design. According to the symbolic clues, these horses (representing, as always, strength in battle) proceed from a position of power for

the purpose of judgment as a witness to the prophet's audience—ideally, the whole world. No big surprises so far. It's pretty much the same story we encounter throughout prophetic scripture. The weirdness is yet to come: **"And the angel answered and said to me, 'These are going out to the four winds of heaven, after presenting themselves [literally, who go out from their station] before the lord of all the earth...."** The chariots of war are being sent to "the four winds"—i.e., all over the earth. The implication is that this will be the first *world* war worthy of the name. The identity of the "lord of all the earth" completely eludes the translators, who invariably either capitalize it (Lord) or render it in small caps (LORD) because they irrationally assume it's referring to Yahweh—whose name they're in the habit of obfuscating by replacing it with the title "the LORD." But the text (the Hebrew word is *adon*, not *YHWH*) neither requires nor implies any such thing. *Adon* simply means master or owner. In this age, sadly, the "lord of all the earth" for most people is not Yahweh, but *Satan*. In II Corinthians 4:4, Paul calls him "the god of this world (or age)," and we see the same sort of language used of either Satan or the beast/Antichrist he empowers, in both Revelation 11:4 (where the "two witnesses" confront the beast) and in Zechariah 4:14—a passage that predicts these men, their anointing, and their ministry. The horses in the vision, then, are operating—they're waging war—in a world controlled by Satan.

Their destinations correlate to their colors: **"The chariot with the black horses goes toward the north country, the white ones go after them, and the dappled ones go toward the south country."** In addition to a literal point on the compass, north symbolizes darkness and cold, emotional concealment, a calculating nature. The word for "north" (*tsaphown*) is derived from *tsaphan*, meaning to hide, treasure, or store up. **"When the strong horses came out, they were impatient to go and patrol the earth. And he [the angel] said, 'Go, patrol the earth.' So they patrolled the earth. Then he cried to me, 'Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country."** (Zechariah 6:1-8) Okay, so let's sort this out. Both the black (satanic pre-dawn darkness) and white (morally pure) horses have gone to do battle in the north—the place of cold logic, where things are concealed with a definite purpose, either for protection (as with the white horses) or for sinister reasons (the case with the black ones). Either way the angel (who's speaking for God) says his "Spirit is at rest." In the case of the white horses of purity, Yahweh is "at rest" with the choice that has been made—even though mass martyrdom is part of the picture (see Revelation 6:9-11); but in the case of the black horses of satanic darkness, His "wrath has been appeased" (as it's worded in the NASB). So in the end, judgment—separation—has been achieved in the "north"—where truth and falsehood alike are stored up.

The dappled horses, however, went south. The south indicates the opposite of north—warmth and brightness. It's a place of passion and spontaneity. The Hebrew word for "south" is *teyman*. It's based on *yamiyn*, which means the right

hand or right side (the idea being that when one faces the rising sun, the south is on his right hand). The right hand of God is a consistent metaphor for His power, especially when used as an instrument of deliverance for His people. We see the concept used, for example, in the Song of Moses: **“I will sing to Yahweh, for He has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea.... Your right hand, O Yahweh, glorious in power, Your right hand, O Yahweh, shatters the enemy.”** (Exodus 15:1, 6) The horses going south, then, offer a picture of encountering the direct intervention of Yahweh on behalf of His people. And what does their “color” description mean? The horses are called “dappled” (Hebrew: *barod*), that is, spotted, marked, mottled, speckled, or splotchy in appearance. A potentially revealing clue as to its symbolic significance is that *barod* is derived from *barad*—a noun or verb describing hailstones or hailstorms. This, as we have seen, is one of the weapons Yahweh intends to deploy against the Muslim invaders during the Battle of Magog. So the picture has come full circle. The horses going “south” to make war will encounter the direct, enthusiastic right hand of God (in the form of hailstones, for starters) in judgment.

We aren’t specifically told where the red (*adom*) horses were sent. Perhaps the clue to their destination is provided in verse 7: **“Then the strong steeds went out, eager to go, that they might walk to and fro throughout the earth. And He said, ‘Go, walk to and fro throughout the earth.’ So they walked to and fro throughout the earth.”** (Zechariah 6:7 NKJV) In other words, they took the battle with them everywhere they went. It’s not too much of an extrapolation to read into this a state of war (or at least aggressive anarchy) “throughout the earth”—everywhere man dwells—during these troubled times. This is, at the very least, a reasonable conclusion, in light of two grim statistics from the book of Revelation. First, the death toll of the fourth seal judgment (Revelation 6:8)—which seems to be the unavoidable outcome of the previous two seal judgments, war and the famine that inevitably follows it—is one quarter of the earth’s population—about 1.7 billion souls. And later, under the judgment of the sixth trumpet, a two hundred million man demon-led army from the east kills a third of the remaining population—*another* 1.7 billion people. If you’re keeping score, that’s *half* of the world’s population who have been slain in the wars of the Tribulation (and there will be a hundred ways to die that cannot logically be attributed to these horses of Zechariah 6).

We’ve already seen that the returning King of kings will be riding the white horse of invincibility. But at the beginning of the Tribulation’s events, another white horse is introduced, one whose rider—though seemingly invincible for a short time—is the very antithesis of the Christ: **“Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living beings say with a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.”** (Revelation 6:1-2) Thus we are introduced to the first of the so-called “four horsemen of the

Apocalypse.” The rider—who will be revealed to be the Antichrist, a.k.a. the “beast” or the son of perdition—will look like a winner at first, a conquering hero, both militarily (the bow) and politically (the crown).

Paul described this “rider on the white horse” as “the man of lawlessness.” He wrote, **“For that day [i.e., the coming of Yahshua in glory] will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.... And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.”** This “restrainer” is the Holy Spirit. **“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only He who now restrains it will do so until He is out of the way.”** Thus the Antichrist cannot be revealed until after the rapture has taken place, for the Holy Spirit permanently indwells the lives of all believers in the present age. He cannot be “out of the way” as long as children of Yahweh walk the earth. But after the rapture, all bets are off: **“And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of His mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of His coming.”** So why will the world see this “lawless one” as a rider on a white horse, a conquering hero, the man of the hour? **“The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”** (II Thessalonians 2:3-12) In other words, if man refuses to see the truth, he will be shown lies that are more to his liking.

Following closely on the heels of the introduction of the lawless one, we see something that will come as no surprise to people who love peace and order. **“When He [the Lamb of God] opened the second seal, I heard the second living being say, ‘Come!’ And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword....”** The second horse brings war. Red in color, it would appear to be analogous to the red horses of Zechariah’s vision, the strong steeds seen going to and fro throughout the earth removing any semblance of peace that might remain. Now that the church has been removed from the earth, now that the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit is no longer in evidence, the hatred, greed, pride, and desperation that have always precipitated wars in our world will be given free reign.

But war doesn’t happen in a vacuum, nor does it pass without leaving destruction in its wake: **“When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living being say, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do**

not harm the oil and wine!..." What we're seeing here is famine, but it's more than just a shortage of food. The underlying condition is the total collapse of the world's monetary system—runaway inflation brought on by the reckless expansion of the currency supply by the world's governments and financial institutions—especially central banks. It's not just that wheat and barley (the staples of the ordinary diet in John's day) are hard to come by. It's that your money just isn't worth much anymore. A person will have to work all day (a denarius was equivalent to a working man's daily wage) just to buy a loaf of bread. Another factor that may be in play (as we mentioned in our study of honey as a symbol) is the collapse of the honeybee population. The olive oil and wine were not to be harmed by the rider on the black horse. Neither olive trees nor grape vines rely on honeybees for pollination, but many staple foods do. The mysterious disappearance of bees is a situation that is already reaching epidemic proportions. It tends to make many foods more scarce—and more expensive—even in places that don't normally suffer from famines.

And the inevitable conclusion? **"When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living being say, 'Come!' And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth."** (Revelation 6:3-8) The "pale" horse is actually a light, ashen shade of green (Greek: *chloros*). There's not much room for optimism here. Man is about to become an endangered species. And what follows death? Hades—the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew sheol—the place of the departed souls of the physically dead, some of whom will be resurrected to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting contempt (see Daniel 12:2). Four causes of death are listed here: war, famine, disease, and wild beasts. That last entry is interesting. While the Greek word *therion* can and does include wild animals, birds, or venomous reptiles (and perhaps even insects and deadly microbes), it can also be used metaphorically to describe violent and brutal men. In fact, the Antichrist himself is described as "the beast" (*therion*) thirty-one times. The point is that under the pale horse of the fourth seal judgment, no one is safe.

I would view these "four horsemen of the Apocalypse" as an interrelated set—like the four chariots of Zechariah 6. They do not operate independently, but are rather like separate facets on the same gemstone, or different chapters in the same book. And because Yahweh has presented them using the symbology of "the horse," we should keep in mind that military strength is being described: the Tribulation will witness the ultimate war between good and evil. The devil is being given his last, best chance to make his case among fallen men. And Yahweh, in the interests of presenting a crystal clear choice to mankind, is going to give him all the rope he thinks he needs. But in the end, this will be a ridiculously one-sided conflict, proving once and for all that Solomon was right:

“No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against Yahweh. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to Yahweh.” (Proverbs 21:30-31)

Besides the first four seal judgments, horses are used metaphorically in several other places in the Book of Revelation to emphasize that there’s a battle, a spiritual war, going on. In the fifth trumpet judgment, we’re given—in highly figurative language—a description of some rather terrifying demonic beasts. First, we’re told of the opening of the “bottomless pit” by a “fallen star” (apparently Satan). The shaft of this abyss belches smoke, darkening the earth. **“Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth.... In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold. Their faces were like human faces, their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.”** (Revelation 9:3, 7-9) These locust-like creatures are said to look like horses prepared for battle. Knowing what we do now about what horses symbolize, I’d guess that this is less a physical description than a symbolic one: they are brought upon the earth to force Satan’s agenda—revealed by the name of the “king” of these demonic beasts: Abaddon (in Hebrew) or Apollyon (in Greek)—destruction or destroyer.

It may come as a shock to those who have chosen Satan over Yahweh, but they’re about to discover that even though they’ve given their souls to him, he’s *not* their ally. He has neither the ability nor the inclination to protect them. The demonic locusts have but one mission: destroy. If they possessed free will, they’d destroy everything and everybody, “friend” and foe alike. But they’re on a short leash—one being yanked by Yahweh Himself: He has given them only five months in which to operate, and He has forbidden them from harming anyone with the “seal of God on their foreheads.” The only group *specifically* said to be sealed like this are the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14. But since the neo-Laodiceans (those who have belatedly chosen to receive the grace of Christ as they were invited to do in Revelation 3:18-20) are defined as being part of the church (and therefore have the Holy Spirit indwelling them), I’d say they too are sealed, and are thus immune to the militant demon locusts. After all, Paul tells us, **“In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.”** (Ephesians 1:13) **“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”** (Ephesians 4:30) **“It is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”** (II Corinthians 1:22) So, it would appear, Satan’s rampaging horse-locusts will attack only those allied with Satan and those remaining uncommitted (if there are any at this late date, which is doubtful).

With the sixth trumpet judgment, we once again see horses employed as a metaphor for military might. We are shown the rise of a great army, two hundred million strong, rising in the East—i.e., beyond the Euphrates River. **“The four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions’ heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths....”** Their battle colors identify them. Red, blue and yellow are colors utilized in the flags of China and Mongolia—as if anybody else could raise a two hundred million man army. (China has boasted of its ability to do so since the mid-1960s.)

“By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths.” Considering the fact that under the fourth seal judgment one quarter of the earth’s population was killed, the one third we see dying here is subsequent to the previous western holocaust—bringing the death total to one half of the earth’s initial population. That’s roughly *three and a half billion* souls dead from these two well-defined causes. The sixth trumpet takes place in the part of the world left relatively untouched by the fourth seal: the Far East. The Chinese (with the Antichrist’s blessing and support) are reaching out to seize the lands occupied by some of the most densely populated nations on earth—India, Indonesia, and Japan, for starters. The weapons are said to be coming out of the horses’ mouths—which is a dead giveaway that literal horses are not meant, but rather the symbolic means of achieving military advantage through force of arms. It seems to me that “fire” signifies nuclear weapons, “smoke” indicates conventional gun-based warfare, and sulfur or brimstone reveals the use of chemical or biological weapons. **“For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.”** (Revelation 9:15-19) Again, this is highly figurative language. The prophet seems to be indicating that war is being waged with both straightforward military aggression (the horses’ mouths) and behind-the-scenes Machiavellian schemes, spycraft, and deceitful diplomacy (the tails). In Greek, the word for serpent (*ophis*) can, as it does in English, denote a sly, cunning, and malicious person.

One more example of “horses” in the Tribulation narrative is worthy of mention. This one is in connection with the predicted collapse of financial or commercial Babylon. A bit earlier, I mentioned that the third seal judgment, the black horse of the Apocalypse, indicated not only famine but also the inevitable failure of the world’s system of currency, making commerce next to impossible. In Revelation 18, we’re given a much more detailed view of the sudden final collapse of the market for the world’s goods and services. After announcing that the world’s system of commerce has become hopelessly corrupt (actually, he calls

it the home of demons and a cage for foul and unclean birds—something we now recognize as being symbolic of the consequences of man’s poor choices) the angel declares that the whole world has “drunk the wine of the wrath of Babylon’s fornication,” which can’t be a good thing. You can’t cross the street these days without being confronted with some permutation of the incestuous relationship between Washington politicians and Wall Street financiers. John reports that these “kings and merchants” **“will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, ‘Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.’”** Think of a “city” in this context as a *system*—united in motivation and prepared to defend itself. **“And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.”** (Revelation 18:10-13)

Down near the bottom of the list, we see “horses and chariots” listed. This is clearly a reference to the multi-billion dollar arms industry that thrives today. But the business of national security will implode under its own ponderous weight long before the Tribulation has run its course. The world, when you add it all up, now spends upwards of 1.6 trillion dollars per year on “defense.” That’s \$230 for every man, woman, child, and unborn fetus on the face of the planet. No wonder one of Yahweh’s millennial objectives is to “beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks” (as it says in Micah 4:3). Seems to me, hate is awfully expensive.

Of course, if you’re God, *love* isn’t exactly cheap, either. Rescuing mankind from his fallen state required a greater sacrifice than any of us can adequately comprehend. It took nothing less than the death of Life itself, the emptying of the Fullness of God, the impoverishment of the Owner of the universe. We’ve already seen how Yahshua, when here on earth to present Himself a ransom for our transgressions, rode not the white horse of triumph, but a humble donkey—just as the prophet Zechariah had predicted: **“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you. Righteous and having salvation is He, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”** But then, without so much as taking a breath, the prophet saw where such humility would lead—to glory, dominion, and perfect peace: **“I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and He shall speak peace to the nations. His rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”** (Zechariah 9:9-10) The second coming of Christ will spell an end to the horse as a symbol for military conquest—beginning with the heart of His kingdom: Israel. What will defend them from this point on? The very thing that would have defended them all along, if only they had been willing to call

upon it: His word. When King Yahshua “speaks peace to the nations,” they will listen, for no one will dispute His right to rule. He will speak softly and carry a scepter of iron.

And what about horses? Are they to become extinct? No, just retasked. Yahweh describes the post apocalyptic immigration of Israel—all twelve tribes—back to the land of promise: **“And they shall declare My glory among the nations. And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to Yahweh, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to My holy mountain Jerusalem, says Yahweh, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of Yahweh.”** Who will declare Yahweh’s glory? Who will facilitate the return of the Jews to Israel, not as refugees, but as honored citizens of the kingdom of God? The gentiles—more specifically, the blessed “sheep” of Yahshua’s “sheep and goats” illustration. **“And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says Yahweh. For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before Me, says Yahweh, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before Me, declares Yahweh.”** (Isaiah 66:19-23) Some of us already do.

And when Israel has returned, when they are at last living securely in the land that Yahweh gave them under the beneficent reign of the King of kings, what will the horses be doing then? Zechariah paints the picture for us: **“Yahweh will be king over all the earth. On that day Yahweh will be one and his name one.... And [Jerusalem] shall be inhabited, for there shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security.... Then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, Yahweh of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths.... And on that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses, “Holy to Yahweh.”** (Zechariah 14:9, 11, 16, 20) Horses in the Millennium will announce the holiness of their owners as they once declared their riders’ strength in battle. The inscription upon their bells is the very same title that was once engraved on a golden plate fastened on the turban of the High Priest. The message is identical: the one bearing this inscription, everything he does and all that he represents, is set apart from the world for the glory and honor of Yahweh.

Nice work if you can get it.

LOCUST

☞ 3.2.15 ☞

Destruction

Solomon observed, **“Four things on earth are small, but they are exceedingly wise: the ants are a people not strong, yet they provide their food in the summer. The rock badgers are a people not mighty, yet they make their homes in the cliffs. The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank. The lizard you can take in your hands, yet it is in kings’ palaces.”** (Proverbs 30:24-28) Notwithstanding the fact that Yahweh put the administration of the world’s entire animal kingdom under the responsibility of man (see Genesis 1:26), there are large parts of it that we neither control nor comprehend. Following nothing more sophisticated than raw instinct and basic biological programming, animals often prove themselves immune to mankind’s attempts to manage them. Locusts are a perfect example. When a billion locusts land on your town and begin eating everything in sight, there’s not a lot you can do about it, except, perhaps, pray for a good stiff wind.

The Bible isn’t exaggerating when it talks of swarms of locusts covering the ground or blotting out the sun. A single locust swarm has been known to cover a hundred square miles and contain ten billion individuals. Such swarms are surprisingly mobile—and noisy: the sound is compared in scripture to chariots in battle, the roar of a grass fire, or an earthquake. Locusts have two sets of wings and an enlarged pair of legs for jumping. They’re able to fly for seventeen hours at a time and have been known to cover fifteen hundred miles between feedings. Their course, however, is usually determined by the prevailing winds, not the greenest pastures.

Taxonomically, locusts are insects belonging to the order of *Orthoptera* (“straight-winged”), the family *Acridiidae* (“short-horned grasshoppers”) and the subfamily *Saltatoria* (the “leapers”). Of the ninety-one species found in the Levant, only the desert locust (*Schistocerca gregaria* or *Acridium peregrinum*) has perennially plagued the neighborhood. The biblical locust is not the same thing as the *cicada*, sometimes referred to as a “locust” in some parts of the United States. The most often used Hebrew word for locust is *’arbeh*, which (interestingly enough) also means “sudden disappearance.” *’Arbeh* is derived from the verb *rabah*, meaning “to become great or numerous.” But as we saw with so many animals with which the Hebrews were intimately familiar, there are a number of words used to describe locusts in scripture—not so much defining separate species as pinpointing different stages of development (mature, larval, nymph, and the stage between molts). There are no fewer than nine such Hebrew

words: *'arbeh*, *gazam*, *geba* (only as plural: *gebim*), *gobay*, *hagab*, *hasil*, *yeleq*, *solam*, *selasal*. (Aren't you glad you know that? It could be worse: the Akkadian language recognizes eighteen names for locusts, and the Talmud employs *twenty*.)

The *'arbeh* and three similar bugs—the *sol'am* (the “devastating locust”), the *hargol* (the cricket), and the *hagab* (the grasshopper)—are listed in the Torah as the only clean (that is, edible) insects. **“All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you.”** He's obviously not declaring that insects have only four legs. The expression “walking on all fours” simply means that they don't walk upright (like birds, for instance). The distinction is necessary because there is no direct equivalent for the word “insect.” *Sherets* simply means “a teeming or swarming thing,” a word used to describe any type of small creature found in large groups, like fish swimming in schools. **“Yet among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the ground. Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind. But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you.”** (Leviticus 11:20-23) Hebrew dietary laws were generally more restrictive than the customs of their contemporaries, so we shouldn't be surprised to find that other cultures also ate locusts. Bas reliefs from Nineveh show servants bringing skewered locusts for Sennacherib's table. Many African and Arab peoples remove the wings, legs, and heads, and eat locusts either cooked or ground up as flour. Yum.

John the Baptist famously subsisted on locusts and honey. **“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of Yahweh; make His paths straight.’ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.”** One wonders if John's diet was meant to convey the choice he had come to offer—a choice between the sweet life of a shared relationship with the Messiah and the certain destruction that awaited those who aligned themselves with the religious elite. **“Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.”** The repentant masses are represented by the honey. **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.’** The Pharisees and Sadducees, on the other hand, could only look forward to wrath and locusts: destruction. **“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** (Matthew 3:1-10) Note that the line separating the blessed and the cursed (the honey vs. the locusts, so to speak) is the “fruit” one bears, that is, the evidence of one's spiritual state. If

the fruit is good and sweet (love, joy, peace, patience, self-control, etc.) the repentance is genuine and acceptable to God. If the fruit is sour and poisonous—or if it is merely non-existent—then your religious display is deemed a sham: Yahweh won't have you taking up space forever in His garden.

If locusts are so destructive, how did they rate a spot on Yahweh's "okay to eat" list? One thing has nothing to do with the other. But locusts, as it turns out, are very discerning about what they eat—and therein lies the answer. If I may quote a paragraph from my book on the Torah, *The Owner's Manual*, "Because of recent swarms in which billions of locusts have swept across 60 countries in Africa, Asia, and Australia eating everything in their path, researchers have been studying these creatures intently in recent years. They can eat their body weight (2 grams) in food every day while traveling up to 130 kilometers. But stopping them with pesticides has proven problematical. It turns out that they are incredibly fussy eaters who know better than humans how to regulate and balance their food intake. They "taste" their environment through microscopic "hairs" on their legs as well as through their mouthparts. This helps them avoid areas that have been treated with pesticides. Oxford University researchers have discovered that locusts will regulate their food intake: when given food diluted fivefold with indigestible cellulose, the locusts merely increase their intake—fivefold! They will also compensate for past deficiencies in their diet if given the opportunity, eating precisely the right balance of proteins, carbohydrates, and salts. So locusts and their cousins are safe to eat (which is not to say they're not an acquired taste)."

Locusts were mentioned among a hundred things that could go wrong if the Children of Israel turned their backs on the God who had redeemed them from the house of bondage: **"But if you will not obey the voice of Yahweh your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.... You shall carry much seed into the field and shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it."** (Deuteronomy 28: 15, 38) Written between the lines is the fact that the "locusts" plaguing the country need not be the six-legged flying variety. As I said, *arbeh*—the general Hebrew word for locust—is derived from a verb meaning "to become great or numerous." One of the plagues that would descend upon the disobedient Israelites was armies of human invaders that *behaved* like locusts.

A case in point: **"The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian**

overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them." Midian was located just east of the Gulf of Aqaba, in modern day Saudi Arabia. The Amalekites' lands were due south of Canaan, on the northern edge of the Sinai Peninsula. And the "peoples of the East" most likely included Ammon, Moab, Edom, and the Amorites. So these invaders were people the Israelites had encountered during their wilderness wanderings—people who had *never* been able to militarily prevail against Israel, even in their weakest, most vulnerable condition (when measured by the yardstick of human criteria)—when "all" they had going for them was Yahweh's provision. Now, having said through their idolatries that they didn't want Yahweh's help, things had changed. **"They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to Yahweh...."** We see this pattern time after time in the age of the judges: the vicious cycle of faith, to complacency, to pride, to apostasy, to idolatry, to oppression, to bondage, to repentance, to deliverance, and back to faith. (Does this sound familiar, America? It should. As I write these words, we've fallen from the idolatry stage into oppression, and we're staring bondage in the face. How my heart aches for the days of repentance and restoration!)

So God immediately sent a mighty deliverer to make everything swell again, right? No, He didn't. First, He sent a prophet to remind the people that in spite of everything He had done for them, they weren't exactly keeping their end of the bargain. **"When the people of Israel cried out to Yahweh on account of the Midianites, Yahweh sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, 'Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage. And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, 'I am Yahweh your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed My voice.'"** (Judges 6:1-10) What was the crux of Yahweh's case against them? That they "feared" the gods of the Amorites. The Amorites were a brutal and bloodthirsty people who had lived east of the Canaanites, and had been pushed even farther east by the invading Israelites. But because they hadn't been wiped out (per Yahweh's instructions), they were still a recurring threat.

I don't think that Israel's problem was so much that they'd dumped the worship of Yahweh in favor of a gaggle of moldy Canaanite deities like Amurru, Sin, Molech, Dagon, Ba'al, and Ashtoreth—though that would come into play later. At this stage, I'm guessing, their "fear" (Hebrew *yare*: to revere, be afraid

of, or hold in awe) of the gods of the Amorites was mostly in the form of respect for their ability to make war against them—putting these false gods on the same level as Yahweh. His point was, “If you people only *trusted* Me, these pagans wouldn’t have a chance—they certainly wouldn’t be able to come into the Land I’ve given you and strip it bare like a swarm of locusts.”

But Yahweh didn’t ignore their plight, either, refusing to help because His people had grown timid, weak, and faithless. In the very next verse, we’re introduced to Gideon, who would lead Israel in some remarkable victories. God made sure, however, that the *way* Gideon won his battles would make it clear to everyone that it wasn’t the valor of the Israelite soldiers or the skill of their leader, but Yahweh Himself who was miraculously providing the victories. Gideon raised an army of 32,000 men (probably not nearly enough, in human terms), a force Yahweh quickly pared down to a mere *three hundred*. **“The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance.”** (Judges 7:12) What can three hundred soldiers accomplish against a force described as “innumerable?” Such a small force couldn’t really do *anything* against such odds—but that was kind of the point. Even with minimal human participation, Yahweh provided a stunning upset victory. You know the story: Gideon’s men split into three companies, surrounded the Midianite camp in the middle of the night, and suddenly announced their presence with torches, war cries, and blasts on the shofar. And then they just stood there—while the whole Midianite army “ran and cried out and fled” (v. 21), turning on each other in panic, confusion, and fratricide. I find it interesting (if not prophetic) that Gideon’s spoils of war included gold crescent-shaped ornaments (Judges 8:26), indicating that the defeated Midianites were moon-god worshippers. Why is this significant? Because a similar invasion of “innumerable” moon worshippers—Muslims this time—is predicted to take place during the Tribulation, and one of the weapons Yahweh has promised to use to annihilate them is the same sort of confusion-bred fratricide (see Ezekiel 38:21) He caused among Gideon’s Midianite foes. An enemy’s numerical superiority in battle is not an obstacle—actually, it’s not even a *factor*—to the God of Israel.

Israel wasn’t the only nation to face foes described in scripture as being “like locusts.” Egypt was to be devoured by the Chaldeans, just as Judah was: **“The word that Yahweh spoke to Jeremiah the prophet about the coming of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon to strike the land of Egypt... They shall cut down her forest, declares Yahweh, though it is impenetrable, because they are more numerous than locusts. They are without number. The daughter of Egypt shall be put to shame. She shall be delivered into the hand of a people from the north.”** (Jeremiah 46:13, 23-24) And what of the Assyrians who had decimated Israel (i.e., the ten northern tribes—Ephraim) in 722 BC? They too would be overrun by the Babylonian “locusts.” Nahum warns Nineveh, **“Get ready**

for the siege! Store up water! Strengthen the defenses! Make bricks to repair the walls! Go into the pits to trample clay, and pack it into molds! But in the middle of your preparations, the fire will devour you; the sword will cut you down. The enemy will consume you like locusts, devouring everything they see.” But the Chaldeans weren’t the only “locusts” in the picture. The Assyrians had already been stripped bare by *their own* commercial interests and politicians, so corrupting their nation they were made an easy target for the hungry Babylonian invaders. **“There will be no escape, even if you multiply like grasshoppers. Merchants, as numerous as the stars, have filled your city with vast wealth. But like a swarm of locusts, they strip the land and then fly away. Your princes and officials are also like locusts, crowding together in the hedges to survive the cold. But like locusts that fly away when the sun comes up to warm the earth, all of them will fly away and disappear.”** (Nahum 3:14-17 NLT) Again, the whole scenario is reminiscent of recent American history—the decadence and corruption that has come to define our once-great nation. Because we have been devoured from within by our own “merchants, princes, and officials,” we have become as vulnerable to “Babylon” as Assyria was. Is there a Jonah in the house?

The primary threat of a swarm of locusts is its destructive power—its collective voracious nature. Locusts can literally eat every bit of vegetation in sight. Their “ranking” among the ten plagues of Egypt tells the tale: locusts were eighth on the list—*after* the water turning to blood, frogs, lice, flies, disease on Egyptian livestock, boils, and hail. The only things considered worse than locusts were total darkness and the death of the firstborn children. **“So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh and said to him, ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, that they may serve Me.’**” That is *still* a loaded question, one that might be asked of any government on the earth today. At this late date, I would suggest that *any* nation or government that refuses to humble itself before Yahweh, and who refuses to allow its people to choose whom (and how) they wish to worship is asking for “locusts”—a plague of destruction, famine, and hopelessness. **“For if you refuse to let My people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country, and they shall cover the face of the land, so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail, and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field, and they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians, as neither your fathers nor your grandfathers have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.”** (Exodus 10:3-6)

Pharaoh, of course, reacted in the manner customary of politicians and princes since the dawn of civilization—he dug in his heels, put his head in the sand, and doubled down on his bets. Why do those who rule over us insist on operating

according to their philosophical mindset instead of looking at the evidence and then using logic and deduction? I mean, after experiencing *seven* successive plagues—first predicted, then inflicted, and finally interdicted by Yahweh through Moses—it wouldn't take a "man of faith" to recognize the pattern. But the Pharaoh, like our politicians today, couldn't seem to add up two and two. **"Then Yahweh said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for the locusts, so that they may come upon the land of Egypt and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.' So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and Yahweh brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night. When it was morning, the east wind had brought the locusts."** Forgive me for seeing a Muslim under every scriptural rock, but note where the plague blew in from: Arabia, east of Egypt—the same place the Islamic plague was born. From its larval stage in the seventh century, Islam has become a swarm of locusts that has engulfed one fifth of the world's population, bringing poverty and desolation with it wherever it goes. **"The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt...."** Again, is this description materially any different than what Islam has done to this once great nation? I think not.

Four times previously, the Pharaoh had asked Moses to entreat Yahweh to remove the plague. This desperate plea makes five: **"Then Pharaoh hastily called Moses and Aaron and said, 'I have sinned against Yahweh your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, please, only this once, and plead with Yahweh your God only to remove this death from me.'"** What had begun as inconvenience had quickly escalated into annoyance, then debacle, then disaster. Now Pharaoh was seeing the plagues brought on by his own stubbornness as "death." If only he knew: the next one would mark the demise of his chief deity, Amun Ra—the sun god of Egypt, followed by the death of what he *really* cared about—his own son, the heir to his throne and legacy. **"So he went out from Pharaoh and pleaded with Yahweh. And Yahweh turned the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea."** Well, the locusts *almost* made it home to Arabia. How ironic it is that the Egyptians who were so anxious to be rid of the locusts were about to follow them to the same final resting place. **"Not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go."** (Exodus 10:12-20)

Fast forward about five hundred years. Solomon, Israel's third king, has built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem to replace the wilderness tabernacle. In the intervening centuries, Israel had become all too familiar with the curses of Deuteronomy 28—and, to be fair, some of the blessings as well. They had been, on occasion, subjected to plagues of locusts—both the six legged and two legged

varieties—resulting from their apostasies and idolatries. So Solomon asked that the new temple be made a focal point for the prayers of Israel—especially their petitions for forgiveness: **“If there is famine in the land, if there is pestilence or blight or mildew or locust or caterpillar, if their enemy besieges them in the land at their gates, whatever plague, whatever sickness there is, whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house, then hear in heaven Your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart You know, according to all his ways (for You, You only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land that You gave to our fathers.”** (I Kings 8:37-40; c.f. II Chronicles 6:28-31) Locust swarms are God’s way (one of them) of saying you’ve screwed up. Repentance is our way of acknowledging the truth of His assessment. And prayer—done in the context of what the temple symbolizes—is how we may communicate our change of heart to our Father.

Since the temple retained the layout of the tabernacle, the lessons concerning prayer remained intact. In order to petition Yahweh, one first had to encounter the altar of judgment, then avail himself of the laver of cleansing. The priest (i.e., the one who intercedes with God) could then enter the temple, where the seven-branched menorah illuminates the bread of Yahweh’s presence—highlighting His constant provision. Only then could he approach the altar of incense, where prayer (symbolically, anyway) is offered. This altar stood immediately before the Most Holy Place, where Yahweh’s Shekinah was said to abide between the twin cherubim of the mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant. In other words, there were no short cuts to the throne of God in prayer. In the end, we could petition Yahweh for the “locusts” of our lives to be removed only because we had been redeemed by the blood of the lamb of God and cleansed by His Holy Spirit, we had acknowledged Yahweh’s constant provision, and had been admitted into His presence through prayer.

The prophet Joel uses several words to describe locusts—which play a large symbolic role in his dire predictions. These words evidently represent stages of the creature’s development, rather than identifying separate species. The *'arbeh* is the mature locust, that which deposits the eggs. The *yeleq* is apparently the larva as it emerges from the egg. The *hasil* seems to be the intermediate instar (the stage between molts). And the *gazam* is evidently the nymph stage, so destructive and ravenous it even strips the bark from trees. Of infinitely more importance, however, is the prophet’s message: that because of the apostasy and idolatry of God’s people, they will be subject to destruction (symbolized by locusts)—but if (actually, *when*) they repent, Yahweh will restore their fortunes. **“Hear this, you elders; give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children to another generation. What the cutting locust [*gazam*] left, the swarming**

locust [*'arbeh*] has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust [*yeleq*] has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust [*hasil*] has eaten.” (Joel 1:2-4) While Joel’s message is addressed to Judah, the dearth of specifics (not to mention the overall tenor of his prophecy) leads me to believe that the real object of his prophecy is the world at large during the last days.

And while I have no doubt that the locusts of judgment were literal in the case of Judah (and may be literal again as they wreak havoc upon the earth during the Tribulation), I also hear echoes of other prophesies, warnings of a great, unstoppable army rampaging upon the earth during the latter years of the Time of Jacob’s Trouble. What does this sound like—locusts, or a well armed human horde? To me, it could go either way, either one or both: **“The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing escapes them.”** As a battle tactic, Sherman’s march to the sea during the Civil War looked just like this. **“Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run.”** We’ve already seen that horses are an oft used scriptural metaphor for military might. **“As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle.”** As locusts are equipped with wings, we are (perhaps) being given a prophetic glimpse of “close air support.” **“Before them peoples are in anguish; all faces grow pale. Like warriors they charge; like soldiers they scale the wall. They march each on his way; they do not swerve from their paths. They do not jostle one another; each marches in his path. They burst through the weapons and are not halted. They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls, they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief.”** How else would you describe a modern disciplined fighting force, well trained in both open field and urban warfare? **“The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.”** (Joel 2:3-10) Any way you look at it, these adversaries are formidable, terrifying, numerous, and utterly destructive.

Though the Tribulation will be a time characterized by anarchy and lawlessness, punctuated by the almost casual use of weapons of mass destruction, there is one army that fits Joel’s prophecy to a tee. It *isn’t* the Muslim horde that will invade Israel about a year into the Tribulation. The “Magog coalition” will be characterized by the Islamic legacy of blind hatred toward everybody. Ezekiel reports (in 38:21) that their battle plan will disintegrate into chaos, infighting, and fratricide before they can achieve their objective of wiping Israel off the map. It will be like Gideon vs. the Midianites all over again. No, the army I’m talking about is described in the sixth trumpet judgment in Revelation—which places its rise within the second half of the Tribulation.

“Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, ‘Release the four

angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. Now the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them." (Revelation 9:13-16) We met this army when reviewing the symbolism of horses. This demon-led horde is identified by their battle flag—containing colors that define them as coming from China. If the schedule of their preparation (an hour, a day, a month, and a year) is timed from the abomination of desolation—when the Antichrist will assume control of the whole earth—then I'd place the date for the sixth trumpet judgment at April 23, 2031. This will give the Chinese horde about two and a half years to achieve their take-over of the entire Far East, killing 1.7 billion souls in the process—a reasonable chronological assumption, once you get past the enormity of the catastrophe. My point is that in order to conquer (or should I say, *annihilate*) Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, Australia, India, and all the rest in such a short time, they're going to have to be the very disciplined, organized, *locust-like* fighting force that Joel envisioned.

This two-hundred-million-man Chinese army won't stay confined east of the Euphrates River, however. Their ultimate prophetic task will be to participate in the final battle—the one in which the Antichrist's worldwide coalition will attempt to succeed where the Muslim horde so unexpectedly failed. You guessed it: they're going after the Jews. **"The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.... And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon."** (Revelation 16:12-15) This army will have lost none of its locust-swarm capacity for utter destruction. They, unlike the Muslims that attempted this a few years before, are a battle-hardened, efficient, undefeated (and on paper anyway, *undefeatable*) military force. But it doesn't matter. Just like the locusts that Pharaoh called "this death," Yahweh will blow them away with a word—or, as it's phrased in Revelation 19:21, **"with the sword which proceeded from the mouth of Him who sat on the horse,"** i.e., Yahshua the Messiah.

Locusts in scripture aren't *always* either *Acridium peregrinum* or a metaphorical reference to innumerable armies of destructive men. On one occasion at least, they were used to describe something that doesn't really exist in our ordinary human experience—though it will be all too real when the time comes. **"And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft."** So far, so good: we're familiar with angels (from scripture, anyway), and we can envision shafts

belching thick black smoke. The “fallen star” is no doubt a euphemism for a fallen angel—a demon. But what are we to make of *this*? **“Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them....”** Literal locusts do not sting like scorpions, nor do they attack people directly. They *do* eat green plants and trees. So these are not actual insect-style locusts. Why aren’t they described as scorpions? I believe it’s because scorpions neither fly nor swarm in huge numbers, as these beasties do. Note that these demon-locusts (1) have corporeal existence—mortal bodies. Unlike ordinary demons (who, like angels, are spirits), these “locusts” can interact on a physical level with human beings. (2) Being demons, they are placed under limits—restrictions they must obey—by God Himself. (3) They are prevented from attacking anyone who is “sealed” by Yahweh—a term I believe includes every mortal believer (of whom there will presumably be quite a few, here in the post-abomination second half of the Tribulation).

The description continues: **“In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.”** What they “looked like” *can’t be* so much a literal description as it is a symbolic portrayal. “Horses prepared for battle” tells us they’re armored, mobile, and strong—they’re hard (or impossible) to kill. A “crown of gold” seems to be a mark of authority, or at least power. “Hair like women’s” might be an indicator of pride, since the fancy hairdos of privileged women were the first thing to go when they were hauled off into captivity for their arrogance (e.g., Isaiah 3:24). “Lions’ teeth” speaks of power over one’s prey. “Breastplates of iron,” says (again) that they’re well defended, as they must be, since they have mortal, corporeal bodies. **“They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails....”** Needless to say, literal locusts do not have tails, nor do they sting people. This may be an indication that their threat is not where you might expect it to be, but the damage they inflict comes from an unexpected direction (as is the case with the scorpion). Deception seems to be Satan’s usual *modus operandi*.

“They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.” (Revelation 9:1-11) This begs the question: whose “troops” were these demon-locusts, anyway? We’re given mixed signals on that issue. On the one hand, they’re released into the world by a fallen

angel, and their leader is the spirit of the abyss: it would seem that the devil is calling the shots, especially considering the fact that it's the second half of the Tribulation, when Satan's rule on the earth will be unchallenged. On the other hand, it was Yahweh who kicked the "fallen angel" (Satan himself, I'm guessing, though we aren't told) out of heaven, Yahweh who supplied him with the key to the bottomless pit, Yahweh who imposed a five month time limit on the plague, and Yahweh who set the rules of engagement to exclude attacks on His own children, and even Yahweh who created the "locusts" in the first place, since Satan doesn't possess a creative nature. In the end, it would seem, the devil's control over his own demonic manifestations is an illusion. Yahweh is in control.

But why would He engage in such a proactive campaign against the world's fallen populace? Off hand, I can think of only three other times in history when Yahweh has unilaterally "attacked" mortal humans *en masse*—the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the conquest of Canaan. And every time, the reason was the same (as far as we can tell): these populations had unanimously received Satan's spirit. They had all made their choice of whom to serve, and there was no going back. This leads me to a very uncomfortable conclusion about the demonic locusts of the fifth trumpet. Because they are sent to torment **"only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads,"** by the time of their release, it would appear that everyone alive on the face of the earth had already made their choice of whom to worship and serve—Satan and his Antichrist, or Yahweh and His Messiah. Unlike today's world, there will be no "undecided" box to check on this survey.

Coming as it does a few years after the epiphany of the Battle of Magog (see Ezekiel 39:22), the fifth trumpet will find many in Israel attuned their God again for the first time in thousands of years. And these intrepid pioneers of renewed Jewish faith in Yahweh will form the backbone of redeemed Israel—where the "locusts" of judgment will never again be allowed to swarm. The same prophet who foretold the destruction of Judah by locusts now reports Israel's restoration: **"The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust [*'arbeh*] has eaten, the hopper [*yeleq*], the destroyer [*hasil*], and the cutter [*gazam*], My great army, which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of Yahweh your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am Yahweh your God and there is none else. And My people shall never again be put to shame."** (Joel 2:24-27)

FISH

❧ 3.2.16 ❧

Lost Humanity

On the theory that God never tells us anything by accident or does anything on a pointless whim, it would seem that fish in scripture represent Yahweh's "quarry," those He would like to "reel in"—we who are, if you catch my drift, the whole reason He "bought the boat" in the first place. Like any fisherman, He knows from the outset that He's not going to "catch" all of us, and that some who end up in His nets (as we shall see) are dead—or worse, poisonous. But there's a sea of humanity out there who are lost and vulnerable. So although you can't bend this metaphor too far without breaking it, God asks us to pay attention to what He said about fish.

It was no accident that several of Yahshua's chosen disciples were fishermen by trade. These guys were in the perfect position to be able to comprehend the core nature of their calling—being "fishers of men." **"On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on [Yahshua] to hear the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret [i.e., Galilee], and He saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, He asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the people from the boat."** Peter figured he was done for the day. The popular young rabbi had drawn quite a crowd, and Peter, being a devout man, wanted to hear what He had to say as well. So lending Him his boat to use as a pulpit was the natural thing to do. But Peter was in for a surprise: **"And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.' And Simon answered, 'Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets....'"** Peter was tired, and probably more than a little frustrated with his unproductive night's work. But something Yahshua had said had encouraged him, so although he wouldn't have done it at the suggestion of his partners (who, like him, *knew* there weren't any fish out there), Peter did what Yahshua suggested. It seems evident that "faith" was the least of his response. His faith seems to have been like that of Naaman the leper: minimal but desperate, just enough to admit the *possibility* that there was something to be gained through obedience. Perhaps he merely wanted to avoid offending the rabbi.

"And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink." When God decides to bless you, be prepared for an overabundance. Until this moment, Peter had no idea who had been preaching from his boat, not really. Oh, he had heard about the

enigmatic endorsement that Yahshua had received from John the Baptist, and had been stirred by the words of hope and redemption that Yahshua had spoken to the assembled crowd. But Peter now saw the young rabbi do something only God could do: turn nature on like a faucet. Note that the miracle came *after* Peter's accommodation of the teacher, not before. That is, the fish were provided *not* to draw a crowd to Yahshua's words, but as confirmation that those words were true—that they had been spoken with divine authority.

“But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’” His reaction was perfectly natural (which is not to say many people alive today would have had the self-awareness and humility to put two and two together like Simon did). **“For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon.”** They all knew, based on Yahshua's works and words, that they were standing in the presence of—at the very least—Yahweh's personal representative. And Yahshua did what God always does in the face of humbleness and repentance: he enabled the man to stand upright, redeemed and empowered to fill his role in the kingdom: **“And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.”** (Luke 5:1-11)

Matthew's retelling of this incident is abbreviated, but it includes one interesting detail: **“While walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, ‘Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and He called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him.”** (Matthew 4:18-22) Zebedee & Sons was a successful, prosperous fishing business. It has been proposed that the reason John was so easily able to gain admittance to the trial of Yahshua before Annas (see John 18:15) was that he had served as his father's agent in Jerusalem, selling their catch to the household of the High Priest. So for both James and John to suddenly leave their father to follow Yahshua would have put a serious crimp in the family business. But the record implies that the brothers remained on good terms with their parents, which leads me to the conclusion that Zebedee too was a man of faith, someone who saw the hope of Israel in the eyes of Yahshua. So Zebedee stayed behind to run the business, allowing (and, I'm guessing, *enabling*) his sons to follow Yahshua personally. There is more than one way to serve.

All of this happened shortly after the disciples had first met Yahshua, at the beginning of His ministry. But something similar happened at the end—after the resurrection. And the point was identical: the Messiah was transforming these

catchers of fish into fishers of men. With his Master gone (though far from forgotten), Peter and his former fishing partners reverted to “default mode.” **“Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.”** Déjà vu, all over again. **“Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, do you have any fish?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some....”** I can practically guarantee that the hairs on Peter’s neck stood up.

“So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved [i.e., John] therefore said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea.” At this point, the fish meant nothing to Peter: his focus was on Christ. **“The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread....”** Interesting: Yahshua already had breakfast prepared, so it wasn’t that He *needed* the fish in the net. What He “needed” was for Peter and the others to realize that the job wasn’t over; it was just beginning. As before, He would provide the increase, and they would be tasked with drawing in the nets. But from now on, the “catch” would be people. The Great Commission has just been acted out in pantomime.

Although Yahshua already had some fish on the barbie, He wanted to make it clear that *the disciples’* fish were an essential part of the lesson. **“Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’”** Yahshua’s “catch,” so to speak, had been the disciples themselves. But from this point forward, *they* would be the ones drawing folks into the kingdom. **“Now none of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.”** (John 21:3-14) Christ was now in His resurrected, “spiritual” body—something that, though absolutely real and corporeal, was as different from his former human shell as an oak tree is from the acorn from which it grew (see I Corinthians 15:35-50). The disciples knew Him not by His appearance or by the sound of His voice: they recognized Him by the unmistakable power He displayed.

At this point, it may be instructive to inquire what God considers a “fish” and what He doesn’t. The purpose of the Levitical dietary laws was not only to keep the children of Israel healthy by avoiding animal food sources that were less than desirable. They were also symbolic—designed to teach us to be discerning what

sorts of things we should put into our lives. So we read, **“These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat. But anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you. You shall regard them as detestable; you shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall detest their carcasses. Everything in the waters that has not fins and scales is detestable to you.”** (Leviticus 11:9-12) Regular bony fish were okay to eat, while other sea creatures were not. The disapproved list would include everything from fish-like swimmers without scaly skins—whales, dolphins, sharks, eels, and rays—to ostensibly edible creatures like lobsters, crabs, shrimp, clams, and oysters. Even though they may not kill you outright, laboratory tests (David I. Macht, M.D., Johns Hopkins University, 1953) on fifty-four different kinds of sea animals proved conclusively that the fish on the Torah’s “approved” list (i.e., with both fins and scales) were safe to eat, while those forbidden for food were all toxic to some degree.

But what about the symbolic aspects of differentiating good fish from bad? If “fish” are metaphorical of the state in which we all begin—swimming in a sea of lost humanity—then Yahshua’s parable should be taken very seriously: **“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered some of every kind. [Though implied, the word “fish” isn’t actually in the text—the net has brought in a variety of sea creatures, whether clean or not.] When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.”** The “good” fish, of course, represent those who have entered into the kingdom of God, having received the Good News of grace through faith, resulting in redemption, reconciliation, and the quickening of the Holy Spirit. In contrast, the “bad” are thrown away. The word translated “bad” here is the Greek *sapros*. It means rotten and decayed, putrefied, decomposed; thus unfit and worthless. A fish that is *sapros* is dead, and judging by the stench, has been for some time. **“So it will be at the close of the age....”** These bad sea creatures are likened to spiritually dead men, those whose souls have not been made alive by the indwelling of immortal spirit. They are destined to be unceremoniously disposed of when this age has run its course. This is bad, of course, but it doesn’t sound *at all* like the “torment in hell” we’ve heard about all our lives. These lifeless *sapros* fish are simply discarded. Does that mean there’s no such thing as hell? No, it doesn’t. It simply means that there is a difference between being dead and being damned.

Yahshua goes on to explain: **“The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** (Matthew 13:47-50) This “fiery furnace” *is* analogous to hell. So in contrast with the merely “bad” fish, these “evil” ones—“wicked” in some translations—are not rotten or putrefied, left to decompose in peace. The Greek word used to describe them is *poneros*, meaning one who causes pain, peril, and

trouble—someone who is diseased, malignant, seriously faulty, evil, morally corrupt, or vicious: even one who derives his wickedness from supernatural evil powers. Fish that are *poneros* are very much alive, and because they are, they're dangerous. Dead fish (or people) don't "weep or gnash their teeth"; but the wicked ones most certainly will. So there are three potential destinies for men at the end of the age: (1) eternal life with Yahweh (a very good thing), (2) death (a bad thing), and (3) everlasting punishment like that reserved for Satan and his demons (something infinitely worse than bad).

I don't know if it's significant in this context or not, but it's worth mentioning a prophecy whose literal fulfillment will take place sometime during the second half of the Tribulation: **"The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea."** (Revelation 16:3) The question is—does this prophecy also have a symbolic component? That is (since "fish" seem to be metaphorical of the lost humanity Yahweh is trying to reach), could this mean that no one alive will remain uncommitted—either to Yahweh or Satan—as the age draws to a close? Judging by such passages as the "separation of the sheep from the goats," this would indeed seem to be the case. **"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left."** (Matthew 25:31-32) By this time (unlike this present hour) there will be no one in the middle still trying to make up their minds (or studiously attempting to ignore the issue). But it seems to me (for what it's worth) that there's no time like the present: choose Yahweh—choose life, love, and liberty.

From the very beginning of man's tenure upon the earth, part of his job was to exercise "dominion" over the other living creatures in this world—including fish. **"So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas.'" (Genesis 1:21-22)** Yahweh's intentions for man were stated soon thereafter: **"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:26)** Two issues are implicit here. First, authority is bestowed upon the lesser by the greater. It is not incumbent upon fish, birds, and beasts to grant mankind authority over them: it must be granted (if at all) by

Someone greater than man—Yahweh. And it bears repeating: man was *not* given dominion over other men, but only animals.

The second issue is that man's derived dominion over the earth's biosphere implies his responsibility to take care of it, to preserve, manage, and protect it to the best of his ability. Like dominion itself, this is a reflection of the benign administration of the universe by its Creator. We are neither omniscient nor omnipotent, of course, but we do have a gift that no mere animal possesses—free will, the ability to make moral choices. It seems to me, therefore, that the dominion granted by God to mankind over the animals of this earth was designed to teach us something. Being responsible for the biosphere should tell us something important about the way Yahweh deals with us: we are to approach our mandate the same way Yahweh does—with wisdom, the best of intentions, selflessness, and pragmatism.

A responsible manager of planet earth should realize that balance is required. Doing absolutely nothing (if it is in our power to do *something*) is irresponsible—the refuge of lazy and careless fools. It leads to plagues of rats, bad water, rampant disease, and poverty. But the converse—the arrogant and misguided attempt to control *everything*, eliminating the “bad” and imposing the “good” (according to our own definition of the words) leads to environmental blunders, scorched-earth tactics, and the “law of unintended consequences.” The problem is, of course, that we are fallen creatures—neither omniscient nor particularly wise. “Bad” and “good” mean different things to different people. “Good” to some may simply mean that vast sums of money can be made, never mind the horrendous cost in terms of human suffering and environmental damage—the very thing others would call “bad.” It's all a question of our point of view.

So the wise manager tries to strike a balance, recognizing that nature the way Yahweh made it is, to a great degree, self-correcting; but that sometimes it needs help—invariably because fallen man is part of it. (Examples: there ought to be safeguards against introducing species with no natural predators into the local environment. We should have regulations designed to protect groundwater resources when extracting mineral resources or disposing of waste. Mankind's exploitation of renewable natural resources—such as harvesting fish from the sea—should never exceed the ability God built into nature to replenish itself.)

How does this teach us about Yahweh's methods? It compels us to confront the fact that as long as man has free will, God *doesn't* right all the wrongs, punish all the wicked, or make life prosperous and painless for all of His friends. To do so would have the effect of abridging our freedom to choose: we'd be *forced* to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty—something that would preclude a response in love. We are to approach our world the same way. Promote freedom; don't impose bondage. Supervise; don't control. Nurture; don't dominate. Love, but

don't smother. Fight injustice, but don't forsake mercy. Advance liberty, but neither neglect nor micromanage.

We should be aware, however, that God's present paradigm (of benign tolerance driven by hope) is temporary. Yahweh gave us six days (read: six thousand years) in which to work—something He Himself defined as “believing in Him whom Yahweh sent,” i.e., Yahshua the Messiah; but the Sabbath is coming (and soon, if I'm not mistaken) in which no man may work. I'm referring to the impending Millennial reign of King Yahshua—a thousand years of perfect peace, liberty, justice, and divine supervision. These things will only be possible because everyone alive will have *already* chosen to honor Yahweh. For the raptured immortals, “free will” will have become an anachronism of sorts, replaced by perfect liberty—the Law of Love imposed and enforced on a global scale. It's not so much that we'll no longer be able to make choices; it's that we will no longer have a sin nature begging us to make bad ones.

But I digress. We were talking about fish, and how man's dominion over them illustrates Yahweh's dominion over us in the present age. It is incumbent upon every man to honor Yahweh in his flesh, because he never knows when “the net” will fall—when his mortality will catch up with him. Consider the case of the fish in the Nile River as Yahweh prepared to free His people. Moses reported to Pharaoh: **“Thus says Yahweh, ‘By this you shall know that I am Yahweh: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile....’ Moses and Aaron did as Yahweh commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. And the fish in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile. There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.”** (Exodus 7:17-18, 20-21) This was the very first plague, but it offered a portent of what would soon happen to virtually every Egyptian household: death would visit unexpectedly. If Pharaoh had understood that the fish in the Nile represented all of lost humanity—and that Yahweh was willing to bathe them in blood in order to free His people—perhaps he would have taken the sign a bit more seriously than he did.

Don't look now, but a corollary looms in the prophetic destiny of earth. During the Tribulation (as Yahweh sets about once again separating His people apart from Satan's) millions—nay, *billions*—of clueless “fish” will be scooped up in the nets of genocidal war and unrestrained natural (and unnatural) disaster. Most will die without having made a conscious decision about whom to serve—Yahweh or something inferior. Like the fish in the Nile, God would prefer to spare them, if He could do so without abridging their free will. But He can't: His character constrains Him. The fates of these “fish” (physically, anyway) will be in

the hands of those who hold the reins of power—the “Pharaohs” of the age. And *they* will once again have put themselves in the hands of Satan.

This all puts a sobering spin on Yahweh’s “sit-rep” to Noah after the flood: **“And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered.’”** (Genesis 9:1-2) Again, on the symbolic level, awesome responsibility is being placed on the shoulders of Noah and his sons. If we accept the metaphor that “the fish of the sea” are the world’s lost souls in need of the truth, and the “sons of Noah” are Yahweh’s redeemed representatives, then it should shake us to the core to discover that “they are delivered into our hands.” It is *our fault* if Yahweh and His Messiah aren’t presented clearly and compellingly to the world. It is *our fault* if the honest seekers never get a good look at the truth because we’ve masked it with religion, smothered it with tradition, and choked it with enough rules to make the tax code look like a pamphlet in comparison.

Remember what I said about Yahweh “managing” the world with tolerance and restraint, not willing to abridge anyone’s capacity to choose? Habakkuk brought this into focus for us, asking Yahweh why He didn’t force the issue, why He didn’t impose justice and righteousness all the time. He asks, **“You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he? Why do You make men like fish of the sea, like creeping things that have no ruler over them?”** All this freedom, he complains, is downright inconvenient for the victims of the wicked aggressors. **“They [the wicked ones] take up all of them with a hook, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their dragnet.”** Life isn’t fair, the prophet moans. Why don’t You do something about it? Evil overlords are scooping us up like sardines in a seine! **“Therefore they rejoice and are glad. Therefore they sacrifice to their net, and burn incense to their dragnet, because by them their share is sumptuous and their food plentiful. Shall they therefore empty their net, and continue to slay nations without pity?”** (Habakkuk 1:13-17) The wicked one is not content merely to exploit and abuse his victims. He also worships the implement of his conquest, “praying” that his power will bring him even more power, and his money will buy him more wealth. For him, there is no such thing as “enough.” So why doesn’t Yahweh *do something* to impose justice on the world on an ongoing basis?

In the very next chapter, Yahweh answers His frustrated prophet. **“For the vision is yet for an appointed time. But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it, because it will surely come: it will not tarry.”** Justice, He says, will be dispensed on My predetermined schedule: when all of humanity have made their

choices to reciprocate My love—or reject it. Yahweh is on a timetable, one He introduced to us in the very first chapter of the Bible (if we had been astute enough to recognize it for what it was)—one He referred to time after time throughout scripture. The pattern is six days of work, followed by one day of rest—that is, six thousand years in which fallen man is given the opportunity to decide what to do with God’s plan of redemption, followed by one thousand years of “rest,” the state of affairs for which Habakkuk yearned. (Note that any way you calculate it, man’s six thousand years of making choices are almost over.) So the wicked, those who regard people as a commodity, as “fish” to be caught in a net and sold for profit, are contrasted with those who rely upon Yahweh: **“Behold the proud: his soul is not upright in him. But the just shall live by his faith.”** (Habakkuk 2:3-4)

This is all strikingly reminiscent of Peter’s indictment against the false prophets who would plague the church: **“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you [KJV: “make merchandise of you”] with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”** (II Peter 2:1-3) The “many who follow their sensuality” are the same people as Habakkuk’s “fish.” We are not to let false prophets go unchallenged. Note that when he says “their destruction is not asleep” (or it “does not slumber”), Peter is equating these false teachers with the “wicked fish” (those described as *poneros*—dangerous, diseased, malignant, evil, morally corrupt, or vicious) that are destined to be cast into hell’s fire, as we saw in the Matthew 13 passage above.

The whole dominion vs. responsibility thing is summed up by King David: **“O Yahweh our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! You have set Your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babes and infants, You have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.”** That is, You have shown Your strength to us, your little children, who use it to put Your adversaries to shame. **“When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.”** Since we are operating in Yahweh’s strength alone, we have nothing to boast about. Whatever “glory” we have is strictly derivative, and besides, we aren’t even the most capable creatures in God’s creation—the angels have us beat by a mile. And yet, **“You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”** (Psalm 8) I surmise from this that although we aren’t literally given dominion over other men, we have been given the responsibility to pursue “the

fish of the sea,” symbolically, the lost masses of humanity seeking to reconnect with their Creator. It’s the Great Commission all over again.

Although the “fish” of the world are God’s objective, and thereby the object of our commission to seek the lost as well, we must draw a distinction between the purpose of our quest and the object of our worship—two things the world confuses on a regular basis. These things are linked, to be sure, but they’re not the same. We might couch this in temporal terms: if we are the workers, the fish are the job, but God is the employer. Or, if we are the actors, the fish are the audience, but Yahweh is the Playwright. We (God’s people) have a relationship with Yahweh, but a responsibility concerning the fish. We are not to confuse the two things.

Moses made that perfectly clear: **“Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.”** (Deuteronomy 4:15-18) This, of course, is a restatement of the Second Commandment. The Israelites were about to encounter a Babylonian/Canaanite fertility god named Dagon (pictured as both a fish and a stalk of grain—the idea being that he promised to multiply the wealth of his worshippers). As the “fish god,” Dagon (the Hebrew word for “fish” is *dag*) rose to the head of the pantheon of the Philistines—the sea peoples. At this late date, this all may seem academic, but it’s not: the Pope still wears a hat modeled on Dagon’s fish head.

A more current permutation of worshipping “the likeness of fish” might be the all-too-prevalent propensity of modern mainline Christian churches to focus on demographics, tailoring their services—and their theologies—to attract the “right sort” of congregants. They’re not necessarily *wrong* (i.e., heretical or apostate) in their teachings, mind you. But where in the Great Commission did Yahshua say to “Go and make disciples of upwardly mobile young couples with 2.3 children living in large homes in guard gated communities, people who will support your ministry with their tithes as long as you keep the sermon under forty minutes and don’t stretch them too much.”

That’s not to say that “fish” have nothing to offer. But it’s counterintuitive, to say the least. What the fish bring to the party is *need*—a hunger for a God they know must be out there somewhere, but don’t know how to find Him. Job remarked, **“Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of Yahweh has done this? In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.”** (Job 12:7-

10) We “fish” are all born with the capacity for indwelling with Yahweh’s Spirit. We feel empty without it. Some try to fill that emptiness with diversions and distractions, some with pride and possessions, but nothing “fits” the chasm within our souls other than the Spirit of Yahweh Himself.

One such fish played a starring role in scripture—a literal fish “helping” God’s reluctant prophet to turn around and attend to the needs of a whole “school” of symbolic fish. I’m speaking, of course, of Jonah and the lost souls of Nineveh. It’s a familiar story. Yahweh had told Jonah to go and preach in the Assyrian capital city, but the prophet didn’t see any point in warning these barbaric pagans about the wrath that awaited them. In his opinion, they had made their spiritual bed, and they could jolly well sleep in it. I must confess that I can sometimes relate to Jonah—to my shame. I have no problem reaching out to most of the world’s lost—Hindus, Buddhists, apostate Jews (and Christians), and secular humanists, etc. But having studied Islam’s scriptures, I have a sporadic mental block about people who follow a religion whose stated goal is to enslave and then kill every non-Muslim on the planet, starting with Jews and Christians. Pointing a loaded gun at my family is not the best way to get on my good side. I have to forcibly remind myself that ninety-eight percent of the world’s Muslims are *victims* of their own satanic religion and culture. They are being held in bondage and ignorance, and they don’t even know it. The fact is, Christ *died* so that they might live—along with every other lost fish in the sea.

So Jonah did what my own raw instincts would tell me to do: flee. God said to go east, so he got on a boat and headed west—as far away from Nineveh (and Yahweh) as he could possibly get. Long story short, God sent a storm to get His prophet’s attention, and Jonah eventually confessed to the terrified crew that the reason for the storm was his own rebellion. So, praying for God’s forgiveness, they tossed the prophet overboard—and the sea became calm again. **“And Yahweh appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”** (Jonah 1:17)

At this point, most of us react like Pavlov’s dog and make the leap to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Although that’s *close*, it’s not really the point at all. The gospel record states, **“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from You.’ But He answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth....’”** The problem is, Yahshua *didn’t* spend “three days and three nights” in the tomb, like most everybody assumes. He was crucified on Passover (A.D. 33), dying late Friday afternoon, and His body was placed in the grave before sunset. There He spent a day and a night removing our sins from us on the Sabbath, in

fulfillment of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Before sunup on the next day, the Feast of Firstfruits, Christ arose from the tomb, proving His power over death—not to mention His deity. So add it up: He spent only one full day, one full night, and part of another night in the grave—in perfect compliance with the requirements of the Torah.

Therefore, the passion was *not* the “sign of the prophet Jonah,” not exactly. But He explained what the sign actually was in His subsequent statement, if only we had been astute enough to catch it: **“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”** (Matthew 12:38-41) He’s talking not about conquering death or atoning for sin. He’s talking about sojourning among the lost (as Jonah was within the fish) for three days and three nights, in order that the “worst” of us (exemplified by the Ninevites) might have the opportunity to hear and repent. For what it’s worth, the number three symbolizes accomplishment, while days and nights remind of the dichotomy between light and darkness—all of which tells us that Yahshua *would* accomplish His goal of reaching the lost whether the conditions were favorable or not.

When Yahshua invokes Jonah’s adventure as a sign, He’s not talking about *the tomb* being the “belly of the earth.” Rather, He’s referring to His unbroken sojourn in Jerusalem, the “heart of the *Land*” of Israel, the city of Yahshua’s temple, His temporary tomb, and His future throne. Transmitted through Greek, of course, the two things would have looked quite similar, and indeed, the linguistic parallel was Yahshua’s whole point. I’ve stood within that tomb. It’s hardly what you’d call the “heart of the earth.” It’s just a small walk-in cave cut into the side of an old limestone quarry wall. But remember what language Yahshua was speaking—Aramaic, a close cognate of Hebrew. The word he doubtless used for “earth” is *ara*, the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew *eret*, which can mean land, earth, the whole world, country, territory, the land of Israel, or even soil—it’s so general that it’s silly to presume that it *must* mean the planet upon which we live. I’m convinced the usage Yahshua meant to convey was “the Land of Israel,” that piece of earth Yahweh set aside for Himself—something still called “*eret* Israel” by those who love it.

Jerusalem, then, is where Yahshua spent “three days and three nights” in fulfillment of the sign of the prophet Jonah. We can follow His itinerary in the Book of Mark. The week (with weekdays as in the year 33 AD) looks like this: On Monday (Nisan 10, as required in Exodus 12:3) the triumphal entry took place (see Mark 11:1-10), after which He left Jerusalem and stayed in Bethany. (This day also marked the fulfillment of the “coming of Messiah” prophecy of Daniel 9:25.) He came back on Tuesday (Mark 11:12), but again spent the night out of town. Same thing on Wednesday (11:20). But on Thursday morning He came

back to Jerusalem and never left again until after the resurrection. Passover (14:1) began on Thursday evening, running through Friday afternoon, when He was slain. His body lay in the tomb over the Sabbath (as required in the Torah), and rose sometime after sunset, His risen status being discovered by His followers early on Sunday morning. So Yahshua spent Thursday, that evening, Friday, that evening, Saturday, and that evening—*precisely three days and three nights*—in the heart of the Land of Israel: Jerusalem. And the reason he did this is the same as the reason for Jonah’s sojourn in the belly of the big fish: so that the lost of the world—the “fish,” as our present symbol puts it—would have an opportunity to hear and respond to Yahweh’s lifesaving message.

Just for fun, I went back and did a little word study on the other statements that might lead one to believe that Christ *intended* to be three full days and nights in the tomb (something that would have thrown the requirements of the Torah into a cocked hat). It turns out, He never said that. Fourteen times, the phrase “the third day” is used concerning the whole process. No problem there, since any part of a day would count: if He were crucified on Friday afternoon and rose any time after sunset after the Sabbath, this would rightly be called “the third day.” In cases where our translations read, “After three days...” the word for “after” is *meta*, which has as its primary meaning: “mid, amid, in the midst of, with, or among.” So in cases like Mark 8:31, the meaning is “...and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and *in the midst of* (or *within*) three days rise again.” In the original Greek, it’s precisely correct. And in cases where the phrase used is “in three days” the word translated “in” is *dia*, whose primary meaning is “through or throughout.” So John 26:61 should read, “two false witnesses came forward and said, This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it *throughout* three days.’” Which is exactly what Yahshua did, if you understand what the temple signifies.

So the sign of the prophet Jonah was to “endure the big fish,” to the point of death, so that other fish might find their way—that is, to bear the lost souls of the earth so that the rest of them (us) might have an opportunity for redemption. Note what Jonah had to say about it: **“Then Jonah prayed to Yahweh his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to Yahweh, out of my distress, and He answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice.’”** For Jonah, the belly of sheol was metaphorical, but for Yahshua, it was all too literal. **“For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me.”** The reference to “seas” might be a sideways symbolic reference to the gentile nations—both the Romans who crucified Yahshua and the majority of those who would subsequently hear and respond to His word (represented, in Jonah’s case, by the Assyrians). **“All Your waves and your billows passed over me.’ Then I said, ‘I am driven away from Your sight.’”** Remember Yahshua’s plea from the cross? “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” **“Yet I shall again look upon Your holy temple....”** The symbolic

references abound: the temple indicates the totality of Yahweh's plan for man's salvation.

Amid all this symbolism, we must never forget what a horrific trial was endured—by both Jonah and Yahshua—for our sakes. **“The waters closed in over me to take my life. The deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains.”** Mountains are symbolic of power; their “roots” are their foundations. So Jonah's plight—and Yahshua's sacrifice—speak of submission to a higher power for the sake of the lost. **“I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever. Yet You brought up my life from the pit, O Yahweh my God.”** Jonah's “resurrection” was clearly a dress rehearsal for Yahshua's. **“When my life was fainting away, I remembered Yahweh, and my prayer came to You, into your holy temple.”** It's not as if Jonah (or Yahshua) had *forgotten* Yahweh; but there's nothing like a sojourn in sheol to bring things into focus. **“Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to You. What I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to Yahweh!...”** Yahshua *was* the sacrifice; His name *means* “Yahweh is salvation.”

“And Yahweh spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.” (Jonah 2) The final lesson is that the trial that achieves our redemption (if we will but receive it) is temporary: three days and three nights. Jonah didn't “move in” to the belly of the fish, nor did Christ remain in Jerusalem—or in sheol—for longer than the appointed time. The real job was yet to come: Jonah still had to go to Nineveh to deliver God's word, as Yahshua still must assume the throne of His kingdom, reigning over the earth in truth and justice.

The reason Yahweh could recruit fish as a metaphor was that they were familiar to everyone—a common source of food, a nutritional resource that could be tapped from seas, rivers, and lakes. Their symbolic role as “God's quarry” is supported by the observation that fish can be hard to catch—they're slippery, wary, and often swim in schools—that is, like lost souls, they tend to find shelter (if not actual safety) in conformity. In that respect, they can be quite a bit like the people Yahweh seeks to “catch.” In a sense, God's policy is “catch and release.” That is, once we have been brought aboard, we are given a degree of liberty that is far more meaningful to us than that which we enjoyed before we encountered the Great Fisherman. But this isn't a sport or a game to Yahweh. It's serious business, a matter of life or death—ours. That being said, under normal circumstances, the point of fishing is not to kill the fish, but to eat them—that is, to assimilate them into one's body. And in a way, that is precisely what God wishes to do with men:

make them part of Himself. It is as Yahshua told His disciples on the night before His crucifixion: **“Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.... Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.”** (John 14:11, 19-20) As counterintuitive as it may sound, as “fish,” we will not *really* “live” until we are “caught” by God and assimilated into Himself—the source and destiny of all life. Yes, it’s true that death is part of the formula: we must die to sin in order to live to God. But our bodies are going to die anyway. It’s what comes *after* death that ought to be our primary concern.

Keeping that in mind, let us examine a few scriptures in which fish are seen as food. The land of Goshen, where the Israelite slaves had spent four hundred years, was close to both the Nile delta and the Mediterranean Sea, so not surprisingly, fish were part of the staple diet there. But once the Israelites had left Egypt, that food source was no longer available. Instead, Yahweh provided manna, a nutritious and tasty (if somewhat monochromatic) dietary staple—something that would sustain the people for the next forty years. But after a year or two on this diet, the exiles of the exodus expressed their earnest desire to “fall off the wagon.” **“Now the rabble [literally, ‘the collection,’ that is, those other than the Israelites who had gathered together with them in order to flee from Egypt] that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, ‘Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.’”** (Numbers 11:4-6) We can all relate to having cravings—for foods or other things. Living here in a nation that has been blessed by God with an overabundance of nearly *everything*, getting what we crave is not a problem: we need only weigh our cravings against their downside—whether health, budget, morality, or our testimony before men—and choose whether or not to cave in to them. But the Israelites and the mixed multitude with them had no such options: there were no fish, melons, or garlic to be had—at any price. Their “choices” consisted of (1) stifling their cravings and thanking Yahweh for His provision, or (2) moaning and complaining about what they couldn’t get anymore, now that they were no longer slaves in Egypt. They chose poorly.

Actually, though, there was a third option open to them—one that apparently occurred to no one: they could humbly and reverently ask Yahweh to provide a little variety in their diet, acknowledging that, as their Creator and Lord, He was capable of doing anything He chose to do. I realize they were new to this, but Yahweh had revealed His character when He saved them from their Egyptian overlords and provided water and manna. This wasn’t rocket science. Yahshua would later point out what should have been obvious: **“Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will**

your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:9-10) The fact is, God *wants* to give us good things. The only reason He finds it necessary to withhold His blessing is *our* immaturity or unfaithfulness. He wants us to "grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man," but sometimes the only way we can learn what we need to know is for Him to be selective about His gifts. Yahweh is not in the habit of buying Ferraris for twelve-year-olds. If we're His children, however, we'll never lack what we need. As David put it, **"Yahweh is my shepherd: I shall not be in want."** (Psalm 23:1)

Yahweh decided to satisfy the cravings of Israel's rabble—but probably not quite as they had envisioned. He told Moses that He would give them meat to eat for an entire month—they'd gorge on it until they vomited it back up through their noses! This left Moses in confusion, for he had no idea how Yahweh intended to fulfill this pledge. Was *he* supposed to procure this questionable feast? No. **"Moses said, 'The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot, and You have said, 'I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!' Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?' And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Is Yahweh's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not.'"** (Numbers 11:21-23) In our section on "Birds," we saw what happened next: millions of low flying quail flew through the camp, and a frenzy of hysterical greed set in among the people, who slew a hundred times more birds than they could possibly eat—not comprehending that Yahweh could provide meat for them anytime He wished, if only they'd trust Him. Fallen man doesn't know himself very well, and as often as not, he refuses to learn. I can guarantee that if they had been able to flash freeze and transport every quail they knocked out of the air, they would have ended up every bit as weary of it after a year as they were with the manna. But "reverence for Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom." If we know our God, we will soon come to terms with our own weaknesses and limitations.

I don't know why this lesson seems so hard for us to learn, but the fact is that God (having built us) knows what we need, and (because He loves us) desires to provide for us. To one extent or another, every religion in the world presents its god (or gods) as tyrants who must be appeased in return for favorable treatment, whether now or in the hereafter. Even in atheism (where the "gods" are wealth, power, pleasure, and pride) one must make sacrifices in order to attain the desired result. But Yahweh is nothing like that—quite the opposite, in fact. All He "wants" from us is to trust Him, like a small child intuitively trusts her mommy and daddy. Appeasement never crosses her mind. She doesn't try to *earn* her parents' love. It's just *there*, naturally permeating their relationship. And yet, her parents (if they're wise) don't give her everything she might want, even if they can afford it. They don't let her live on M&Ms and Red Bull, but insist on proper nutrition (at least as they understand it). They don't let her watch horror movies

and porn, but instead insist that she goes to school to learn useful things. Why? Because they love her, and have her best interests at heart—and they know better than she does what’s good for her and what isn’t. Ideally, our relationship with Yahweh is very much like that.

But wait a minute! What about all those sacrifices in the Torah? What about tithing, and keeping the Sabbath, and turning the other cheek, and going the extra mile? There is a seemingly endless list of “rules” in the Bible. Isn’t trying to “keep them” tantamount to appeasing God? No. We will remain confused about God’s intentions until we come to realize that everything He told us to do—*everything*—is designed to teach us what He was doing for us. The Levitical sacrifices teach us that *He* sacrificed Himself for us; giving alms teaches us to trust *Him*; *His* Millennium (the seventh since the fall of man) will give us rest from our mortality; *He* restrained Himself from retaliating against our foolishness and arrogance; and *He* went the distance to achieve our reconciliation. Through Moses, the Messiah, the prophets, and the Apostles, Yahweh told us to “do” hundreds of things. But none of them benefit Yahweh in the least. They neither enrich nor empower Him—or even those who shepherd His flock in this world. They’re all for our benefit and edification.

Yahweh’s desire to provide for us—to meet our needs—is demonstrated quite forcefully in two similar incidents recorded in the Gospels, the feeding of the four thousand and the feeding of the five thousand. Since they describe the same event, let us combine the accounts of John and Matthew: **“Now when it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, and the day is now over. Send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ Lifting up His eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said, ‘They need not go away. You give them something to eat.’ Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?’ (He said this to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do.) Philip answered Him, ‘Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little....’”** As with the Egyptian expatriates in the wilderness, God knew what they needed, and He was prepared to provide it. But it was even more important that they came away from the experience enriched in knowledge and spiritual insight—starting with His disciples. Yahshua’s “test question” to Philip put things in perspective: “If I asked you to feed all these people, what would you do?” The correct answer would have been, “I’d ask *You* (since you are Yahweh in the flesh) to take care of them, and then I’d await Your instructions.” Philip, being human—willing to help but still ignorant of God’s power—immediately began calculating the cost of the task, as if there were no God in the picture at all. He threw a “food drive thermometer chart” up on the wall, and began contemplating who he could tap for a year’s worth of income to get the job done.

We shouldn't be too hard on Philip, of course. This is precisely the course of action we invariably take when faced with similar problems. We proceed exactly as we would if God didn't even exist! That's not to say that Yahweh wants us to sit around waiting to be taken care of like baby birds in the nest. There's a place for our involvement and investment, but we aren't to presume that we have to do God's job for Him. One of the twelve stumbled (quite by accident, I'm pretty sure) onto the principle Yahshua wanted us all to learn: **"But one of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?...'"** We are left to speculate, of course, but I like to imagine that the boy had overheard the discussion about how to feed the throng, and spontaneously stepped up to help. Like a four-year-old who wants to "help" daddy buy a diamond necklace for mommy's birthday with the seventy-two cents he has saved in his piggy bank, we may smile at his naiveté. But Yahshua's reaction is, "Perfect! That'll be just enough. Well done."

"And Jesus said, 'Bring them here to Me.' Now there was much grass in the place. So he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass." The order to sit down was a signal that He had something further to teach them. The crowd had no idea that they were about to be fed, but they were hungry for every word that came out of Yahshua's mouth—something even more important than food. **"The men sat down, about five thousand in number, besides women and children."** What were actually counted here were *families*—men *with* their wives and children, all of whom had made the trek out to the "desolate place" to hear Yahshua teach. Thus there were probably fifteen to twenty thousand people in attendance. Statistics don't really mean much to Yahweh, of course. Some 600,000 such families took part in the exodus, and He provided bread for all of them—for forty years. For that matter, planet earth is currently inhabited with roughly seven billion people—and Yahweh would love to feed us all, if only we'd honor Him with our trust.

"Jesus then took the loaves, and when He had looked up to heaven and said a blessing of thanksgiving, He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, distributing them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted...." It's interesting that Yahshua offered thanks. *To whom*, we might reasonably ask. He Himself was Yahweh in human form, though the undiminished Father Creator still stood outside of time and space, set apart (i.e., holy) from the work of His hands. But perhaps a better question would be "thanks for what?" I'd venture that it wasn't as much for the miracle of multiplication the crowd was about to witness as it was for the boy's willingness to contribute his lunch so that others could eat. And it wasn't so much God giving thanks for being God as it was God being thankful for people who were hungry for the truth—the "fish" of our current area of study.

“They all ate and were satisfied. And when they had eaten their fill, He told His disciples, ‘Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with broken fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten....” I just can’t resist doing the math on this. The boy had contributed enough food for maybe two people. So Yahshua multiplied it by a factor of as much as ten thousand. The human stomach holds about one quart. Since they “ate their fill,” that equates to up to 20,000 quarts, or over *600 bushels of food*. We aren’t told how big the “leftover” baskets were, but we are informed that there were twelve of them. Interesting: just enough for the disciples who had been passing out the food to all those people. They didn’t get rich, but they did get fed (as did the boy who had contributed the loaves and fishes in the first place). And as far as we’re told, Yahshua took nothing for Himself: miracles (like rules) are for our benefit, not God’s.

The result of the whole thing was a dim awareness that Yahweh was at work fulfilling His prophetic promises: **“When the people saw the sign that He had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’”** (Matthew 14:15-21, John 6:5-14, blended) Not just *a* prophet, but *The* Prophet, the One Moses had predicted: **“Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to Him you shall listen.... I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers.”** The Prophet would be a leader operating the power and authority of Yahweh (like Moses in that respect), and He would be an Israelite. **“And I will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. And whoever will not listen to My words that He shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.”** (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19) I realize that these guys didn’t have the Torah app on their iPhones just yet, but they would have done well to concentrate less on the food and think more about the words of the One who had provided it. God here had promised to hold them accountable to take heed of Yahshua’s message—for “the Prophet’s” words were, in fact, Yahweh’s words.

A very similar thing happened a bit later (or at least, it’s listed later in both Gospels that record the incident). It was occasioned by the very same thing—the urgent desire of the masses to hear what Yahshua had to say, even if they had to walk miles out of their way to get to where He was. **“In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, He called His disciples to Him and said to them, ‘I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with Me now three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away....’”** He had been willing to teach for as long as they had been willing to listen. But nobody had really anticipated staying with Yahshua for three whole days. Still, how could you leave? This man had the words of eternal life.

There was no lack of compassion on the part of the disciples. But after three days, their supply of food was seriously depleted as well. There was only enough left to feed half of them. And this time, there was no little boy offering to donate his lunch to the cause—the last of *that* had been eaten for breakfast—*yesterday*. The disciples (perhaps because their own stomachs were rumbling) had forgotten that “next to nothing” is more than enough to work with—if you’re God incarnate. **“And His disciples answered Him, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?’ And He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ And He directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, He broke them and gave them to His disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, He said that these also should be set before them. And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. And there were about four thousand people.”** (Mark 8:1-9; cf. Matthew 15:32-39) The Matthew account makes it clear that, once again, the number of *families* are in view, that is, they only counted the heads of the households. So there were actually more like eight or ten thousand people there, hanging on Yahshua’s every word. And once again, every last one of them received a good meal to sustain their bodies on the journey back home, just as Yahshua’s words had sustained their souls for the journey into Yahweh’s presence. The number seven shows up twice in the narrative—the number of original loaves, and the number of baskets left over. Since “seven” is the consistent Biblical code for completion or perfection, we may safely infer that that if we give our all, everything we need will be given back to us—*if* Yahshua is in charge of blessing and breaking the bread.

It would come as an epiphany to most of mankind that this designation “everything we need” includes some things that, in a perfect world, we *wouldn’t* need. Like atonement for our sins: it shouldn’t be necessary, but it is. As in the story of Jonah, a fish plays the starring role in God’s demonstration of this principle: **“When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half-shekel tax went up to Peter and said, ‘Does your teacher not pay the tax?’ He said, ‘Yes....’”** This wasn’t a Roman tax, but an annual levy that went to the support of the temple. It was a requirement of the Torah (see Exodus 30:11-16), where it was referred to as a “ransom” that would secure “atonement,” something that would function as a “memorial for the Israelites before Yahweh.” Technically (according to the Torah) it was only supposed to be collected whenever a census of the Israelites (i.e., males twenty years old and above) was taken—something that would only be done when preparing for battle. The key to its significance lies in the related words “atonement” and “ransom” (based on a single Hebrew root: *kapar/koper/kippur*). The concept Yahweh was teaching us is that of *substitution*. The fighting men of Israel were being “ransomed” for half a shekel (a symbolic pittance, and an amount that was the same for rich and poor alike—which tells us

that our relative wealth or status among men means nothing to God). In the same way, our sins would be atoned—our lives would be ransomed—by Yahweh’s own personal sacrifice: His only begotten Son. And here too, the same sacrifice was declared sufficient for each individual. So this “tax” had nothing to do with the maintenance of the temple (even though that’s where the money went), and everything to do with communicating God’s plan for the redemption of mankind.

But here in Capernaum, Yahshua had another lesson in mind. **“And when he [Peter] came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?’ And when he said, ‘From others,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea [Capernaum was situated on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee] and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for Me and for yourself.”**

(Matthew 17:24-27) If the “temple tax” had actually been intended for the upkeep of the temple, then Yahshua would no doubt have paid it in a straightforward manner. But the Exodus 30 passage that defines this precept states no fewer than four times that the half-shekel belonged *to Yahweh*. Hence the lesson: Yahshua, *being* Yahweh in the flesh, would not logically pay taxes to Himself, nor would His “sons,” His followers, like Peter. The point was that if one was following Yahshua (even here, before the crucifixion), his ransom had *already* been paid; his atonement was *already* secure: “the sons are free.”

Why, then, did Yahshua arrange for the ransom to be delivered by a fish? If, as I have been asserting, fish are symbolic of a sea of humanity in need of “catching,” then it makes perfect sense. The fish Peter caught, you see, wasn’t *itself* the ransom. It was merely the delivery vehicle. So in the metaphorical sense, the fish doesn’t provide atonement, but it does (once it’s “caught”) convey God’s atonement to us. Thus the fish here is an illustration of the Great Commission. Christ would not bring the good news of His saving grace to all people—not personally, anyway. Rather, He would leave that job up to the “fish”—we who have taken Peter’s hook (so to speak). That “hook” (if I may stretch the analogy like a reel of five pound test pulling in a ten pound bass) was Peter’s statement that Yahshua was “the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Once we’ve swallowed that truth, all folks have to do is “open our mouths” to find what it takes to pay their ransom.

Fish, like people, don’t live forever. Be not deceived: one way or another, we all eventually get caught. Either we end up in Yahweh’s net, or in Satan’s, or we

perish without ever leaving the sea—“caught” by our own apathy or ignorance. To adapt Robert Burns: “The best laid plans of fish and men oft go astray.” Or as Solomon put it, **“I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.”** (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12) We’re all in the same boat, so to speak, and the boat’s name is Mortality. In the end, it doesn’t matter whether you’re a shark or a minnow: your earthly life is transient and temporary. The only hope any of us has is to be “caught” in Yahweh’s net, for there, a different sort of life—blessed and eternal—awaits.

In the meantime, we must deal with life as we find it—a tempestuous and dangerous sea, populated by predators. Yet even now, there is safety to be found in Yahweh’s net, and He still casts it hopefully into our waters. But remember the Law of the Sabbath: there comes a time when the work is finished, when it is unlawful—even for Yahweh—to continue “fishing” for the lost. In the creation account, we read, **“On the seventh day God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all His work that He had done in creation.”** (Genesis 2:2-3) And the Torah codifies the principle in the Fourth Commandment: **“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”** (Exodus 20:8-11) It is no stretch whatsoever to deduce from this that Yahweh will “pull in His nets” for the last time as the sun nears the horizon at the end of the sixth day.

That, of course, begs the question: what is the “sixth day?” I believe that the entire history of fallen man—from Eden to the inauguration of Yahshua’s Millennial reign—will span precisely six thousand years. Besides the Sabbath principle, we are given heavy handed hints of Yahweh’s schedule in such passages as II Peter 3:8 and Psalm 90:4—one day in God’s redemptive plan is equated to one thousand years of human history. (You’ll note that I said nothing about the process or timeline of *creation* there, only the duration of Yahweh’s plan for mankind’s redemption.) And any way you slice it, we are fast approaching the end of the “sixth day.” So it is with the utmost urgency that we encourage the lost fish of the world to enter Yahweh’s net *now*, before He pulls it in and rejoices in his catch—us. After that time (if I may stretch the metaphor) the only way to reach God will be *the hard way*. With no divine net in the water,

they'll have to jump into His boat—something the other lost fish will consider suicide, but in truth will be a death that leads to eternal life.

I'm speaking, of course, of the last seven years of this age—a period of time commonly known as The Tribulation. (To be more precise, the “withdrawal of God's net” will be the rapture of the church, an event that can be expected to occur before—and perhaps *years* before—the beginning of the Tribulation.) There are hints concerning the ramifications for these symbolic fish spread throughout the prophetic record. For instance, Ezekiel writes, **“Thus says the Lord Yahweh: Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself.’”** Egypt is symbolic of bondage in the world, so its king, the Pharaoh (seen here as a great dragon), represents the one imposing the slavery—in the end, Satan. He covets Yahweh's creative nature, so he would like us to believe that he made and owns us all. (Trust me: he didn't, and he doesn't.) But Yahweh, when it suits Him, will deal with this dragon: **“I will put hooks in your jaws, and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales; and I will draw you up out of the midst of your streams, with all the fish of your streams that stick to your scales.”** Yahweh isn't the only one who has been fishing these waters: the dragon, Satan, has been casting his nets here too. And those he has snared will share his horrible fate. **“And I will cast you out into the wilderness, you and all the fish of your streams. You shall fall on the open field, and not be brought together or gathered.”** (Ezekiel 29:3-5) Note that the dragon and his hangers-on won't merely be slain. This is worse: they'll be consigned to an alien environment where they'll have no power, no allies, no breath—this is hell itself.

Hosea addresses the “why” of it all. **“Hear the word of Yahweh, O children of Israel, for Yahweh has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.”** He's warning Israel, but Israel is a metaphorical microcosm of the whole earth: the lessons taught to (and through) Israel should be taken to heart by every living human being. Why, then is Yahweh confronting His people? **“There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery. They break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.”** (Hosea 4:1-3) The bottom line is that the world's lost souls—the fish of the sea—look at Israel's relationship (or lack of it) with Yahweh and—because of Israel's historic faithlessness—see nothing of value, nothing worth emulating. So the fish languish in despair, and in the end are swept away with the tide of time.

And what about these seven individual sins that Hosea has listed? Each of them has symbolic ramifications that extend beyond mere “bad behavior.” (1) “Swearing” doesn't mean using foul language. The word is *'alah*, meaning to utter a curse (invoking divine sanctions against an enemy) or bind under an oath.

Basically, this entails the breaching of the Third Commandment, using Yahweh's name lightly or for unworthy purposes. (2) "Lying" is the Hebrew *kachash*: to deceive, to deal falsely, or feign obedience (cringing in fear instead of submitting oneself in reference or relationship). This, then, isn't merely telling untruths; it's doing so with an intent to deceive men and God to gain an unwarranted advantage. It's one step away from treason or treachery, and it's akin to violating the Ninth Commandment. Of course, the only reason one would do this is that he didn't trust Yahweh, so he felt that he had to "look out for Number One." (3) "Murder" (see the Sixth Commandment) is a euphemism drawn from the physical world to illustrate the equivalent thing in the spiritual realm. If one murders, he has purposely separated someone's soul from his body, an act that results in physical death. But the spiritual equivalent is much more serious: it's preventing someone from having a life-giving relationship with Yahweh—in effect severing soul from Spirit. (4) "Stealing" is a violation of the Eighth Commandment. Again, the only reason one would do this is that he didn't trust and rely upon Yahweh, who promised to meet all of our needs if we'd honor His word. (5) Physical "adultery" (as in the Seventh Commandment) is symbolic of idolatry—the giving of one's affection and devotion, something that rightly belongs to Yahweh alone, to someone or something else—*anything* else. (6) The "breaking of bounds" (Hebrew: *parats*) is hostility, opposition, spreading out to increase one's prosperity. The best example I can think of is Hitler's bloodthirsty quest for *lebensraum* (i.e., "living space") at the expense of Germany's neighbors in the late 1930s. It's "coveting" on an international scale, a violation of the Tenth Commandment. And (7) "bloodshed" is what it sounds like—the shedding of blood through violence and havoc, usually resulting in death. It's taking life, for "the life is in the blood." It's the very thing to which Yahshua submitted Himself for our sakes.

And lest we lose sight of the forest for the trees, remember that we're looking at "fish" as a symbol of lost humanity. When people commit these seven heinous crimes against man, **"even the fish of the sea are taken away."** That is, the lost are impeded in their search for the truth. Why? Hosea explained it right up front: **"There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land."** And that's a problem, for a few verses later, he reminded us, **"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge."** (Hosea 4:6) When Israel is destroyed for lack of knowledge, the whole world suffers, for Yahweh assigned *them* to be the repository of truth.

If it were up to man, the situation would be hopeless: Israel has (if I may use a football metaphor) dropped the ball; and even though the Christians—the "second stringers"—have recovered the fumble, we're not moving it down the field. As the clock runs down, we find ourselves in terrible field position, two points behind our adversary. What we need is "impossible," a seventy-seven yard field goal. Can our Star Kicker do it? I wouldn't bet against Him. Yahweh says, **"Is My**

hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, by My rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert. Their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst.” (Isaiah 50:2) Yahshua’s return to the “field” in the last moments of the fourth quarter will prove once and for all who *owns* this game. And the “fish,” the spectators, will find their fortunes suddenly reversed. Those who have bet everything on the Adversary will find themselves gasping for breath, but those fish who had almost lost hope in Yahweh’s Home Team will find themselves suddenly refreshed and cleansed in streams flowing with living waters.

You find that a little too generalized? Okay, how about *this* for specifics? **“But on that day, the day that Gog shall come against the land of Israel, declares the Lord Yahweh, My wrath will be roused in My anger. For in My jealousy and in My blazing wrath I declare, On that day there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel. The fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the field and all creeping things that creep on the ground, and all the people who are on the face of the earth, shall quake at My presence.”** (Ezekiel 38:18-20) He’s speaking of a yet-future all-out Islamic invasion of the Land of Israel—one that will take place (according to the revealed Last Days timeline) during the first half of the Tribulation, beginning roughly one year into it. “Gog” (said to be “of the land of Magog”—Islam’s northern non-Arabian contingent) is the leader of a multi-national Islamic coalition. If I had to guess, I’d say he’s the one the Muslims will hail as the long awaited Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam of Islamic eschatology (a self-fulfilling prophecy from their point of view, but a prophetic *fait accompli* from Yahweh’s). The battle and its outcome consume two amazing chapters, Ezekiel 38 and 39.

A couple of things bear particular notice. First, Yahweh will not obliterate the Muslim hordes *until* they enter His Land: they will fall on the “mountains of Israel.” Second, they will be decimated with a variety of “natural” (that is, divinely administered) causes—an earthquake (as we see here), fire and brimstone (as in Sodom and Gomorrah fame), pestilence, floods, and hail—as well as a disastrous level of fratricide (the same thing that killed the Midianite hordes that Gideon confronted). Neither Israel’s vaunted IDF nor the Antichrist’s U.N. Peacekeepers (it’s a long story: see *Future History*, chapters 15-17) will logically be able to take any credit for the Mahdi’s ignominious defeat. Third, because of the mode of the Muslims’ annihilation, the whole world will be put on notice that Yahweh Himself is fighting for Israel. Most notably, Israel will begin to awaken to the reality of their God, for we read, **“And I will set My glory among the nations, and all the nations shall see My judgment that I have executed, and My hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am Yahweh their God, from that day forward.”** (Ezekiel 39:21-22)

But what was that about fish? **“The fish of the sea...shall quake at My presence.”** This is but a restatement of my third point—that the world’s lost masses will have

received an unmistakable sign that God is real, and that He's willing to defend His people. They may or may not respond appropriately, but they will at least be made aware of the "elephant in the room." They will "quake" at Yahweh's presence, and not just because of the earthquake." The fear of Yahweh, after all, is the beginning of wisdom.

There's one more fact about the Battle of Magog of which we should all be cognizant. There have been wars before, and Israel has been invaded many times. But *this* will prove to be the final little push that sends human civilization as we know it careening off the cliff of destiny. That is, it will escalate into a thermonuclear nightmare, World War III—and worse. Zephaniah delivers the bad news: **"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth," declares Yahweh. 'I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, and the rubble with the wicked. I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,' declares Yahweh...those who have turned back from following Yahweh, who do not seek Yahweh or inquire of Him.**" (Zephaniah 1:2-3, 6) Once again, the "fish of the sea" represent the lost souls Yahweh goes so far out of His way to "catch" in His nets of love. And if you'll recall, the "birds of the heavens" are symbolic of the consequences of our choices. Yahweh won't force us to enter His net, even though, in the end, it's the only safe place.

But it's not all bad news for the fish. Some have already responded to Yahweh's "bait," the love He showed us through Yahshua's self-sacrifice—and more will. As Paul put it, His kindness leads to repentance. In a glimpse of the world during Christ's Millennial kingdom, we read, **"And he [an angel] said to me, 'This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, and enters the sea.' He's describing a stream that flows eastward from the temple, healing the Dead Sea! **"When the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh, so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea.**"** (Ezekiel 47:8-10) Besides the astonishing literal ramifications, there may be a symbolic component to this as well. The Millennial mortals—the offspring of the relatively few "sheep" who will survive the Tribulation and enter the kingdom age as blessed but mortal souls—will still be born with sin natures, just as we were. They too will require the attention of "fishers of men," just like we of the church age did. Here we see that even where life was formerly impossible, it will thrive under the reign and restoration of Yahweh's Messiah, King Yahshua.

SERPENT/DRAGON

❧ 3.2.17 ❧

Deceiver

It's kind of depressing when you think about it. The Bible has barely begun when we read of Satan's successful temptation of Eve, who then enticed her husband into the same sin—not so much of eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, but rather of placing human desires and reason above God's clear instructions. It was the first demonstration of “religion” in the scriptures.

It's impossible for us to know how “literal” Eden's serpent was. Obviously, snakes don't ordinarily talk to people, nor do they seem to have an agenda of evil toward us. And yet, the story of mankind's fall into sin is recounted with a perfectly plausible talking serpent playing the role of the villain. Not only is the slithering menace talking, he's seen debating, persuading, making what seemed to the naïve and innocent Eve a reasonable argument. **“Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that Yahweh, God, had made. He said to the woman, ‘Did God actually say, “You shall not eat of any tree in the garden”?’ And the woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die....”’”** Eve was doing okay until she decided to embellish Yahweh's instructions: God never actually said not to *touch* the tree—that was something Eve added in order to “put a hedge around the law,” a practice that would one day be elevated to the status of an Olympic event (and a contact sport at that) by the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis of Israel, thoroughly obfuscating what Yahweh's intended message had been.

Having thus gained his opening, the serpent struck. **“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die.’** Technically, he was right: if she merely touched the tree, she would be perfectly safe. But now Satan began planting the seeds of sedition in her mind by impugning God's motives. **“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** The correct answer would have been, ‘I don't care *why* God said not to eat the fruit. He has told us what to do, and I trust Him to know what's best for me. So I'm going to go over there and get myself a banana instead.’ But what she did (as we all know) was accept the serpent's argument. **“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”** (Genesis 3:1-7) The score was Snakes-1, People-0. But the game was far from over.

Eve's subsequent confrontation with Yahweh established the serpent's symbolism: he was a deceiver. **"Yahweh, God, said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'"** (Genesis 3:13) Ironically, if she hadn't bought into the serpent's lie, she may never have known that he *was* a deceiver. The only thing she "gained" by eating the fruit was the "knowledge of evil." So presumably, before she disobeyed Yahweh, she was not equipped to recognize evil for what it was. Most of us were just like Eve at one time in our lives—it's called infancy. One of my very first childhood memories is deciding I wouldn't play in the front yard, like mom said, but I'd take my tricycle for a spin around the block. I must have been three or four years old. When she finally caught up with me, I couldn't figure out why she was so angry. But all I had ever known was love and shelter; I had no idea how dangerous the world could be, though mom did. My "sin" had put the one she loved (me) in jeopardy, whether I knew it or not. And her reaction was not unlike Yahweh's. The difference between me and Eve, however, was that I hadn't been *deceived* by anyone but myself—I was *born* with a propensity for disobedience.

Back in Eden, **"Yahweh, God, said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field. On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.'"** (Genesis 3:14-15) This is the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible. The "offspring" of the woman—who would turn out to be Yahshua the Messiah—has indeed endured the "bruising of His heel," though the serpent still hasn't gotten his "head" bruised—yet. The word translated "bruise" (the Hebrew *shuph*), means to crush or batter—a repeated striking motion causing injuries. Although you can't actually kill a spirit, "bruising" or "crushing" his head would indicate that he *can* be permanently put out of commission, insofar as his ability to affect events is concerned. "Bruising" one's heel, while causing inconvenience and pain, is nowhere near as debilitating. Considering the mechanics of crucifixion, it is true that Yahshua's physical heel was *literally* crushed during the passion. But note that the word for "heel" (Hebrew: *'aqeb*), in addition to the back of one's foot, can also mean both "movements, formally footsteps, i.e., the places one moves about in a daily routine as a figurative extension of a footstep," and "a rear guard, i.e., the back part of an army or military band." (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages*) Thus it is no stretch to see the "heel," that which the seed of the serpent would bruise, as the church—we who follow in Yahshua's footsteps as a "rear guard" behind our Messiah. It could even denote humanity in general: the "rear guard" of Adam and Eve. Satan has been "bruising" us all since the beginning.

And what about the rest of this prophecy? Does **"On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life"** mean that the snake was divested of his legs

because his species was used by Satan to tempt Eve? No, it doesn't. Serpents have apparently been legless ever since God introduced them into the biosphere (although there are some very old and rare snake fossils with two "hind" legs). I once saw a photo of an interesting fossil find—a snake coiled around a clutch of dinosaur eggs, frozen in time in some rapid inundation. But what we have here in Genesis is a *figurative* description of Satan's destiny in light of his role as tempter—he, formerly the most splendid angel of them all, was to be utterly abased. Rather than being able to hold his head high in the courts of Yahweh, he would be forced to "lick the dust" of the earth in abject humiliation. We get a picture of the same sort of thing in this passage from the prophet Micah: **"The nations shall see and be ashamed of all their might. They shall lay their hands on their mouths; their ears shall be deaf. they shall lick the dust like a serpent, like the crawling things of the earth. They shall come trembling out of their strongholds. They shall turn in dread to Yahweh our God, and they shall be in fear of you."** (Micah 7:16-17) He is describing the conditions that will prevail at the end of the Tribulation and the beginning of Christ's Millennial reign, when Israel has been restored and elevated to the status of "capital of the world." The nations who formerly stood against her—a description that's increasingly turning out to be "all of them"—will grovel at her feet. Israel will at last receive respect, not because of her own greatness, but because of who her God is. The nations, like Satan in the Garden, will learn first hand what awaits those who go out of their way to harm to Yahweh's children.

Unfortunately, the deception that went on in Eden, the sort of thing that got us into this pickle in the first place, is not a thing of the past. As I said, the serpent isn't done bruising us. Paul writes, **"I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you may well put up with it."** (II Corinthians 11:2-4) Once again, the dichotomy between religion and relationship is being stressed. It is quite possible to deceive people who fancy themselves "religious" into believing all sorts of goofy (not to mention unscriptural) things. The "Jesus" acknowledged by Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, and even some Catholics and liberal Protestants bears no real resemblance to the Yahshua of history, prophecy, and Torah symbol. Why anyone would want to invent an alternate "Jesus"—one who is something other than God incarnate, one whose sacrifice is not quite sufficient for the atonement of our sins—is beyond me. Even a little child knows the difference between *a* daddy and *my* daddy. You'd think grown-ups would be more discerning, since eternity itself is at stake.

By the way, based on the Genesis record alone, it might seem a stretch to declare that the serpent who tempted Eve is actually Satan. All things considered,

we have very little hard information about our Adversary in scripture. But at the very back of the Book, we're finally told who's who in no uncertain terms: **"And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan."** (Revelation 20:2) The "dragon" (as we shall soon see) is Satan's terrifying persona as it applies to the events of the Last Days, just as the cunning serpent is how he was presented in the Garden. "Devil" is the Greek *diabolos*, meaning slanderer or accuser. And Satan (transliterated from the Greek *satanas*, which is in itself a transliteration of the Hebrew word *shatan*) means "adversary"—one who opposes another in purpose or act. If there were any question about it, it is laid to rest here: all four words refer to the same demonic entity. Note too who is seen "seizing" the dragon here at the un-battle of Armageddon: it's *not* King Yahshua. It's "just" an ordinary angel from heaven. It took a while, but the promise of the Garden's curse has finally come to pass: Satan is at last being compelled to slither on his belly and eat dust, so to speak. Couldn't happen to a more deserving creature.

Since serpents are so obviously depicted as deceivers, I've always had a hard time understanding this statement from Yahshua: **"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."** I've never thought of "wisdom" as being a component of deception. It helped, therefore, to look up the word translated "wise." It's the Greek *phronimos*, meaning intelligent, shrewd, prudent, sensible, mindful of one's interests, or having the capacity to understand. This is contrasted with being "innocent," the Greek *akeraios*, literally denoting "unmixed, pure (as in wines or metals)...without a mixture of evil, free from guile." (*Strong's*) We are to be both things as once—shrewd and pure. I'm afraid we Christians have a tendency to forget either one or the other of these essential attributes. But both things are needful, because of what we face in the world: **"Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for My sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."** (Matthew 10:16-20) In other words, we aren't to play the game the world's way, lying to gain an advantage—even if we are on God's side: the end does *not* justify the means. But we aren't to "check our brains at the door," either. When contending with "governors and kings," we can rest assured that logic and factual data will *always* support God's truth, even if the world doesn't want to hear it.

Moses was someone who appeared "before governors and kings" for Yahweh's sake, and interestingly enough, serpents played a role in his

presentation of God's message before men. To understand what happened, we must first go back to the burning bush, where Yahweh's theophany told Moses what to do to convince the Israelites that he had indeed been sent by God: **"Then Moses answered, 'But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'Yahweh did not appear to you.'"** Yahweh said to him, **'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.'** And He said, **'Throw it on the ground.'** So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it." The first lesson is that any tool Yahweh assigns for our use—in this case, the shepherd's staff—will be efficacious as long as we're holding on to it; but if we let go, it can become something dangerous. **"But Yahweh said to Moses, 'Put out your hand and catch it by the tail'—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand"** The second lesson is that Satan's power to deceive can be neutralized if we'll grab it by the tail—that is, seize the initiative to immobilize the threat. Bear in mind, however, that we're to catch the serpent *by the tail*—it's God's job to "bruise" his head. **"—that they may believe that Yahweh, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."** (Exodus 4:1-5) Note too that the *only* good reason for dealing with "snakes" at all is to facilitate belief, to encourage people to make good choices.

Same song, second verse: **"Then Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, 'When Pharaoh says to you, 'Prove yourselves by working a miracle,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.'"** There was nothing special about the staff Moses was using—the same thing happened to *his brother's* staff when used in obedience to Yahweh's instructions. **"So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as Yahweh commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts. For each man cast down his staff, and they became serpents."** Part of Satan's strategy of deception is presenting counterfeits of God's deeds if they'll serve to obfuscate the issues. But his counterfeits are eventually revealed to be worthless fakes, as demonstrated by what happened next: **"But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs."** (Exodus 7:8-12) This should have been Pharaoh's first clue: at the very least, Yahweh's "magic" was more powerful than the sorcery of his own court magicians. I would hate to have been the guy assigned the task of explaining to Pharaoh precisely what had happened to his magicians' staffs. But the nuance was apparently lost on him. It's still true today, unfortunately: politicians see only what they want to see.

There was one more "serpent" incident in Moses' experience. And this one would turn out to be a potent Messianic prophecy. **"And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food....'"** *Really?* This took place not at the beginning of the exodus, when they didn't really have a very

good handle on Yahweh's constant provision. This was closer to the end of the forty-year sojourn, as they approached Canaan—when they should have known better. No water? Not one single Israelite perished of thirst during the entire wilderness experience. And food? They'd had manna to eat for *decades*. It was (if given a fair assessment) perfectly nutritious, tasty, abundant, and free. The only thing it lacked is variety. I must admit that, until recently, I've never been able to empathize with the Israelites. I'm an American, used to the kind of abundance and wide selection of foods about which they could only dream—along with most of the rest of the world, to this very day. But of late, I've been forced by reason of health and prudence to become a vegan (of sorts). It's not a "religious" thing, I assure you; I have no moral qualms at all against killing animals and eating them. It's strictly a health consideration. Anyway, all of a sudden I miss eating meat; I miss poultry; I *really* miss cheese and eggs. I've even given up coffee, 'cause I prefer it with cream and sugar. Don't even *ask* me about chocolate. If I concentrated on what I *don't* have now (rather than on the amazing bounty I still enjoy) I, like the Israelites of old, might be tempted to complain.

But I *won't* complain, not even one little bit. Not after reading of Yahweh's reaction to the Israelites' ungrateful attitude: **"Then Yahweh sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died."** There's nothing like a plague of poisonous snakes to help you sort out your priorities. **"And the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you. Pray to Yahweh, that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people."** We've all been there, repentant and expectant, waiting to see how Yahweh would extricate us from our self-made predicaments. This time, however, God's solution was a bit stranger than usual: **"And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."** (Numbers 21:4-9) The people's sin (as usual) consisted of failing to trust Yahweh—though He had provided food and water for them since the day they left Egypt. To conclude at this late date that things had changed is an indication that they were self-deceived—hence the form of the curse God sent to remind them of what they'd face if He weren't there 24/7 protecting them: *serpents*.

The generalized Hebrew word for a serpent, snake, viper, dragon, or even a sea serpent is *nachash*. Interestingly enough, it's virtually identical to the word for "bronze" (or copper). Spelled the same (though apparently pronounced slightly differently), the two words are so similar we should at least take notice. It may be a mere linguistic coincidence, but if it's not, the serpent (symbolic of deception) is associated in the Hebrew tongue with bronze (symbolic of judgment). The fact is, deception and judgment *are* causally linked in scripture. Anyway, this "bronze serpent on a pole" was supposed to serve as a visual reminder or representation of

the people's sin. It wasn't an object of worship—or at least, it wasn't *designed* to be. But somewhere along the way the Israelites began burning incense to it, as if it were some sort of pagan god, so King Hezekiah destroyed it (see II Kings 18:4) as part of his reforms. Yahweh's instructions specified that only when the Israelites "looked at it," that is, when they came to terms with the fact that their own self-deception had brought the poisonous plague upon them, could they be healed. If they refused to face the reality of their sin, they would die from sin's effects.

In symbolic hindsight, it's rather obvious that the serpent on a pole in the wilderness was prophetic of the crucifixion of Christ. Yahshua Himself tied the two things together as He explained what His role was going to be to the curious Pharisee, Nicodemus. **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."** (John 3:14-15) Moses' bronze serpent represented the sin of the people—their self-deception concerning the gracious provision of Yahweh. Looking at it in faith was the only possible way to be saved from death once the viper of sin had struck. But this was all only a pale reflection of what the Messiah's crucifixion achieved in the world. In a symbolic sense, Yahshua *became* that bronze serpent mounted on a pole: He took upon Himself the sin that had been perpetrated by all mankind—all of our rebellion, ingratitude and delusion—suffering the judgment (which is what bronze signifies) that was our rightful due. As Paul put it, **"For our sake [Yahweh] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."** (II Corinthians 5:-21) Not exactly a fair trade, but I'll take mercy over justice any day of the week. In the same way (sort of) that the Israelites obtained mercy, we too may obtain forgiveness: by "looking" in faith at the One who took our sins upon Himself—that is, by honestly acknowledging our condition as lost, sinful, dying people. We must admit that we're snake-bitten, that we've swallowed Satan's lie, that we've been deceived, and that we are in desperate need the kind of help that only God Himself can provide.

The imagery is a bit easier to get a handle on once we realize that the Greek word invariably translated "cross" in our English Bibles (*stauros*) actually denotes a stake or upright pole, not a T-shaped device. When Moses "lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," he did it on a "pole," the Hebrew *nes*, which literally means something lifted up—a standard, signal, ensign, banner, sail, or flag, including the pole upon which such a standard is displayed. Isaiah delivered a prophecy concerning a nation that (according to my analysis) can only be identified as last-days America. One of the clues to this people's identity is as follows: **"All inhabitants of the world and dwellers on the earth: when He [i.e., Yahweh] lifts up a banner [*nes*] on the mountains, you [the nation in question] see it; and when He blows a trumpet, you hear it."** (Isaiah 18:3) That banner, standard, or pole is the "cross" of Christ (and by extension, what it signifies—atonement for our sins). Throughout its history, America has been *the* nation that—when contrasted with all others—

has *seen* this standard and responded to it, paid attention to it, heeded it, and found delight in it (all of which is implied in the verb *ra'ah*—to see). Beyond that, the “trumpet” (the *shofar*) is inextricably linked in scripture to the rapture of the church. So according to the theory (and not a bit unreasonably), America will be affected—one might say “brought to its knees”—by the rapture far more extensively than other nations will (though the rapture will be a harvest of souls from *all over* the earth, both living and departed).

Unfortunately, Isaiah 18 pronounces “woe” upon this nation: it is destined to be pruned back like a diseased grapevine. And when will this pruning take place? *Before* the harvest—that is, prior to the rapture. When I first figured this out—decades ago—I hoped that I was wrong about that assessment; but now, as I write these words, it has become patently obvious that my beloved homeland is indeed being pruned back by God in an effort to bring it back to repentance and health. Whether through “natural” disasters, enemies foreign and domestic, or godless (not to mention *clueless*) governance, we are beginning to experience the same kind of curses that Israel once faced in the wake of her idolatry. It’s like we’re channeling the Israelites of the exodus, being bitten by the poisonous serpents of apostasy and ingratitude. We need to look once again upon the bronze serpent on the pole (i.e., Christ), honestly confront our sins, and receive Yahweh’s cure.

Paul points out precisely the same thing. **“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.’ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.”** These things are a clear reference to the nonsense described in Numbers 21-25, from the snakes to the Balaam debacle. But it’s not just ancient history. There’s a moral to the story: **“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** (I Corinthians 10:6-13)

In the case of the serpents in the wilderness, the “way of escape” was to look (as instructed) upon the bronze snake Moses had mounted on the pole. While Paul’s point—that we are never subjected to temptations to sin that are physically or emotionally impossible to withstand—is perfectly true, I must point out that none of us has flawlessly “endured” the temptations that confront us—none of us has taken full advantage of the “way of escape” God has provided. In the terms of Numbers 21, we have *already* sinned: we’re *already* snake-bit. And once the

bread dough is leavened, it can't be *unleavened*. Once the toothpaste is out of the tube, so to speak, there's no way to put it back. As Solomon put it, **"If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer."** (Ecclesiastes 10:11) And David adds the rather depressing truth that the charm-proof "serpent" has bitten us all: we're "born bad" under Adam's curse. **"The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter."** (Psalm 58:3-5) We all *start out* "wicked." (See John 3:18—we're all "condemned already" if we haven't been born from above in Yahweh's Spirit.) So the lesson of the serpent on the pole in the wilderness (not to mention that of the cross of Christ) is essential: we may receive what Paul called "the way of escape" *retroactively*. Even though the serpent of self-deception has already struck, even though we are each condemned by both our common human heritage and our individual history, we may still receive life if we will look in faith upon what God has placed upon the pole. Yahweh has run the banner of His redemption up the flagpole. It's up to us to salute.

Ever since the Garden of Eden debacle, snakes have been universally portrayed in scripture as evil, something to be avoided. If someone is compared to a serpent, it's always a bad thing—notwithstanding the fact that Yahshua called them "shrewd" in the Matthew 10 passage we looked at above—a quality to be emulated as we present His truth to the world, though tempered with peaceful intentions. David, who spent his entire adult life as a man of war, longed for such peace, knowing that wars don't just happen: they're the purposeful invention of evil, covetous men. He says, **"Deliver me, O Yahweh, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps."** (Psalm 140:1-3) A "tongue as sharp as a serpent's" is a reference to the sort of deceptive counsel Eve received from the serpent in the Garden. The verb *shaman*—to sharpen—used here bears a revealing secondary connotation: to teach (as in, to sharpen the mind). Satan's "sharp tongue" deceptively "instructed" Eve, so David prays for protection from similar deceitful "snakes" with evil on their minds: **"Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the throng of evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows."** (Psalm 64:2-3) There is a common proverb that says, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." David (and Yahweh) would beg to differ.

The sixth trumpet judgment of Revelation describes a two hundred million man army from beyond the Euphrates River (other clues identify them as being a

Chinese military force—no surprise there), riding horses—symbolic, as we have seen, of military might, with whom they will conquer the entire Far East, killing one third of the earth’s already-decimated population—roughly 1.7 billion souls. These “horses,” however, are not of the literal equine variety, but are described as having three very un-horselike weapons up front: **“By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths.”** I would guess that conventional, nuclear, and bio-chemical weapons are being described. But that’s not all they’ve got. **“For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.”** (Revelation 9:18-19) These serpent-like tails are our concern here. Since the Greek *ophis*—snake or serpent—carries the same secondary connotation that the word does in English, that of a sly, sneaky person, I’m inclined to read in this description the same thing David saw above: **“The secret plots of the wicked...who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows.”** That is, in addition to weapons of war, the Chinese (who are understood to be operating under the suzerainty of the Antichrist and the dragon at this late date) are using either spycraft or bad-faith negotiations with the more formidable of their neighbors in order to undermine their ability to defend themselves. Included in the description of the serpents’ abilities might be such things as economic blackmail and cyber terrorism—both things China excels at even today.

We’ve seen how horses are symbolic of military strength—especially man’s version of it. It’s interesting that horses are seen in the same context as serpents several places in scripture—specifically associated with one tribe of Israel, Dan. Jacob had prophesied concerning his son, **“Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse’s heels so that his rider falls backward.”** (Genesis 49:17) Dan was assigned a particularly nice plot of land to settle in—near the coast in the middle of the country. But relying as they did on their own strength instead of God’s, they soon decided that the fight for their inheritance was too tough for them. So they sent spies up north, who found a poorly defended region they figured they could take without Yahweh’s help. (The story is related in Judges 18.) The city of Laish was conquered and renamed Dan. Thus Dan forsook real strength (found only in Yahweh) and used deception instead: they had become the “serpent in the way.” Their move to the far north of Israel, besides putting them on the geographical and cultural fringe of their nation, also made Dan the first tribe to see invading armies coming from the north—like Assyria and Babylon—the inevitable result of Israel’s apostasy and idolatry (see Deuteronomy 28:49). So we read: **“For a voice declares from Dan and proclaims trouble from Mount Ephraim. Warn the nations that he [Nebuchadnezzar, in this case] is coming; announce to Jerusalem, ‘Besiegers come from a distant land.’”** (Jeremiah 4:15-16) Oops.

Jeremiah gets a bit more specific a few chapters later: **“Yahweh our God has doomed us to perish and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned**

against Yahweh. **We looked for peace, but no good came; for a time of healing, but behold, terror.**” There he goes, sugar coating it again. No wonder Jerry was so popular among his contemporaries—*not!* **“The snorting of their horses is heard from Dan; at the sound of the neighing of their stallions the whole land quakes.”** The Babylonians were invading from the north (where the fords of the Euphrates were). So Dan was the territory who heard “the snorting of their horses” first. (I say “territory,” and not “tribe,” because the Assyrians had chewed up Dan and spit them out long before Jeremiah wrote this.) **“They come and devour the land and all that fills it, the city and those who dwell in it. For behold, I am sending among you serpents, adders that cannot be charmed, and they shall bite you, declares Yahweh.”** (Jeremiah 8:14-17) There it is again: horses, serpents, and Dan, all in the same prophetic breath. The lesson: honor Yahweh and heed His word, or be prepared to face both horses *and* serpents: both invasion and evasion, destruction and deception.

In light of all this, is it any wonder that Dan will be the only tribe of Israel *not* represented among the 144,000 sealed witnesses of Revelation 7 and 14? It’s not that they’re extinct, however: Dan is listed among the tribes receiving an inheritance during the Millennial Kingdom. But they’ll be situated furthest from Jerusalem (see Ezekiel 48:1), relegated to the far north, just where they chose to be during the conquest of Canaan. It’s still in Israel, to be sure, but as far away as you can get from the center of blessing and still be within the promised land. What did they give up? Only downtown Tel Aviv—the Millennial equivalent of Manhattan, London, or Hong Kong.

If you’ll recall, in our discussion of wine as a scriptural symbol, I characterized man’s propensity for drunkenness as a strategy for dodging reality—whether good or bad. At it’s root, substance abuse stems from the same root cause that made the tribe of Dan want to leave their allotted parcel of land and find an easier path: failure to trust in Yahweh. It is revealing, then, that Solomon links drunkenness with the sting of a poisonous snake—the same symbol prophetically attributed to Dan: **“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things.”** (Proverbs 23:29-33) What does it mean for “your eyes to see strange things?” It means that your mind has been deceived. Like Eve in the Garden, your willingness to let “serpents” call the shots in your life (in this case with alcohol, but any worldly substitute for Yahweh’s word would do the trick) will result in your being misled and betrayed—by your own mind.

Is the serpent (i.e., deception) the problem, or the punishment? Actually, it can be both. Amos wrote at a time when Israel—both the northern and southern

kingdoms—were enjoying prosperity and security, with a strong economy and weak neighbors. These circumstances lulled them into a false sense of well-being: even while thriving materially, they were sinking deeper and deeper into a morass of apostasy, idolatry, materialism, immorality, and injustice—deceived by their comfortable situation into believing they *must* be okay with Yahweh, since He hadn't done anything (yet) to *force them* to pay attention to His word. (Once again, it reminds me of recent American history.) But Yahweh doesn't work that way: first He sends warning after warning—and prophet after prophet. So Amos, the shepherd and farmer, became a prophet and preacher: **“I saw Yahweh standing beside the altar, and He said: ‘Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake, and shatter them on the heads of all the people; and those who are left of them I will kill with the sword. Not one of them shall flee away; not one of them shall escape.’”** This all sounded absurdly unlikely to his immediate audience, but within thirty years, it had come to pass in Ephraim, the northern kingdom. There was to be no escape: **“If they dig into Sheol, from there shall My hand take them. If they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from My sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them.”** Here we see the snake metaphor as a “sea serpent,” perhaps indicating that the peril would arise (as it did) from the gentile world—Assyria. **“And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them. And I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good.”** (Amos 9:1-4) Not even exile and enslavement would turn away God's wrath: if they would not repent, He would see to it that bloodshed followed them wherever they went. Over the past two and a half millennia, that dire prophecy has proven all too accurate.

It isn't just that Israel broke a few rules. It isn't that they failed in their attempts to negotiate the maze of Torah precepts Moses had handed down. And it isn't that they didn't comprehend that Yahweh's Instructions were a prophesy of the coming Savior of all mankind. They didn't *have to* understand. The Torah was a paint-by-numbers kit. All they were asked to do was try to stay within the lines and use the right colors, and trust God to make it all beautiful in His time. But they *didn't* trust God. In Judah, the effort to honor Yahweh's Instructions was sporadic and often insincere; in Ephraim, it was nonexistent. Why? Because Israel had, to a large extent, deceived itself: they were following the serpent, not Yahweh.

This truth, however, wouldn't become clear until the One whom the Torah had been designed to reveal was here to explain it. The chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees—the religious elite of their day—assumed that they were in compliance with God's Law, when in truth they were merely following their own traditions—teachings that had grown out of the same man-centric mindset that had gotten their ancestors thrown out of the promised land in the first place. Edersheim

writes, “It is one of those strangely significant, almost symbolical, facts in history, that after the destruction of Jerusalem the spiritual supremacy of Palestine [which is what Judea was properly called in Edersheim’s day, the 1880s] passed to Babylonia, and that Rabbinical Judaism, under the stress of political adversity, voluntarily transferred itself to the seats of Israel’s ancient dispersion, as if to ratify by its own act what the judgment of God had formerly executed.” (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.) Yahweh had incessantly told His people to flee *from* Babylon, to escape the judgment that was to fall upon this symbol of organized idolatry. But the rabbinical elite of Yahshua’s day had retreated *to* Babylon—and everything it represents. Even today, the Babylonian Talmud is held in higher regard among religious Jews than is the Jerusalem Talmud.

Yahshua therefore took the religious leaders of Israel to task for their spiritual affiliation with those who had stood against the prophets that Yahweh had sent to warn His people: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’”** The hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees was that they posed as defenders of the prophets (who, having been vindicated by history, were seen as heroes of the faith by the Jewish laity) while promoting the same sorts of heresies that had been promulgated by the prophets’ persecutors. **“Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”** (Matthew 23:29-33)

By calling them “serpents” and a “brood of vipers,” Yahshua was identifying who their spiritual father was: **“the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan.”** (Revelation 20:2) Since we’re in the Greek scriptures now, let us define our terms. The ordinary Greek word for serpent is *ophis*—a snake or evil person; the ancient emblem of cunning and shrewd sagacity. The parallel “viper” is the Greek *echidna*—a poisonous snake; also a cunning, malignant, or wicked man. Note that as in English, a snake, serpent, or viper is both the slithering reptile and a metaphor for a person who acts in a sneaky, conniving, deceptive manner—a characterization that (because some snakes are poisonous) implies a high degree of danger. The “dragon” is a transliteration of the Greek *drakon*, a hideous, serpent-like monster, a demonic animal representing Satan. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* notes, “Of all beasts, the serpent [i.e., the *drakon*] was regarded as demonic in antiquity, thereby revealing the duality of the ancient conception of demons. It plays a great part in Persian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian and Greek mythology, and in essence this role is always the same: it is a power of chaos which opposes God either in the beginning or at the end of things, or both.” *Drakon* is a word used to describe Satan thirteen times in the Book of Revelation alone.

Yahshua wasn't the only one who had a handle on the true nature of the religious elite. John the Baptist also recognized their devious agenda: **"But when [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.'**" John preached a message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, and his message was quite popular among the masses. The Pharisees desired to get a "bump" out of being associated with the charismatic prophet. But John recognized that their plan was to deceive: they had no intention of actually repenting of anything—of turning around and going in a different spiritual direction. He, like the Messiah he had come to announce, saw right through them. **"And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."** (Matthew 3:7-10; cf. Luke 3:7-9) This "fruit" that John (not to mention Yahshua) kept talking about was the *evidence* that their attitudes had been adjusted for the better—that they had actually repented and were thus proper candidates for the baptism of John. God was looking for "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control" (as Paul put it in Galatians 5:22-23). But while appearing outwardly righteous, the Pharisees and Sadducees were actually growing "fruit" of another kind—perhaps not all of Paul's alternative listing of the works of the flesh, but certainly some of it: "hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, and heresies," along with pride, greed, racial prejudice, and a bumper crop of delusion.

Yahshua too stressed the "fruit" they were bearing, coming to the same conclusion John had—that the Pharisees were a "brood of vipers." Their spiritual parent was Satan. **"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."** (Matthew 12:33-37) What had the Pharisees said, specifically, that brought down this tirade upon their heads? Yahshua had performed a couple of wonderful healing miracles. So far, so good. But He'd done it *on the Sabbath*, providing "rest" to the afflicted. The Pharisees, of course, couldn't see past what day of the week it was, and what they had unilaterally decided that this must mean: no "work" of any kind was to be done, by anybody. (I guess they'd never read about all the stuff the Torah commanded the High Priest to do on the Sabbath—he worked his butt off.)

First, Yahshua had told a man with a withered hand to stretch it out—and it was instantly healed. I don't quite get it. Technically, the only “work” that had been done was by the guy who stuck out his hand. Either Yahshua had healed him without actually “doing” anything—displaying the power of God—or the man had healed himself by poking out his shriveled paw. Although it was obvious to everyone what had really happened, there was no *evidence* that Yahshua had actually done any “work” on the Sabbath. That kind of conundrum has to be frustrating, if you're a Pharisee.

But then a demon possessed guy showed up, who was both blind and mute. Yahshua (being God in flesh) healed him too. Though the *results* of His actions were plain to see, the source of His power (which should have been equally obvious) eluded the Pharisees. Since they were clueless concerning Yahweh's power and desperate to trash Yahshua's reputation, they claimed that Yahshua had used “Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons,” to exorcize the poor fellow. In other words, they claimed Yahshua was working *for* the devil by working *against* the devil. Somebody's confused. Healing a demoniac was obviously a “good work,” and yet the Pharisees refused to *call* it good, simply because of who had done it and when it had been done. Their envy of Yahshua had boiled over into rage-induced delusion. And they had revealed *themselves* to be a brood of vipers, the spiritual offspring of Satan.

In Yahshua's handling of the Pharisees, we were given a subtle hint or preview of what it would mean to “bruise the head of the serpent's seed,” the fulfillment of the Genesis 3:15 Messianic prophecy. Eventually, Yahweh will see to it that every deceptive ploy Satan ever used against mankind will be brought to light and proved to be a lie. In the meantime, we must content ourselves with symbols, examples, and the sure word of Yahweh describing the inevitable outcome of our situation. One such symbol was introduced when Yahshua sent out seventy-two disciples to prepare the way before Him, healing the sick and proclaiming the good news of Messiah's coming. The results of their “short-term missions trip” were enlightening: **“The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name!’ And He said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”** (Luke 10:17-19)

His very first instruction was, “Don't fixate on your spiritual authority, but rather celebrate the life I have given to you.” How sad it is that some folks would ignore that admonition, take the “authority to tread on serpents” symbol hyper-literally, and build a whole new religion out of it. The Great Commission as recorded in the Gospel of Mark didn't help in that regard: **“And He said to them, ‘Go**

into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons. They will speak in new tongues. They will pick up serpents with their hands. And if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them. They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Mark 16:15-18) In the early 20th century, mostly in rural Appalachia, it became fashionable among hyper-charismatic churches to stress these “signs” over all else as a demonstration of one’s salvation. (Never mind what God actually *said*—that love was the litmus test.) So “snake handling” became an indicator of unbalanced religious fanaticism—an object of ridicule for critics of Christianity in general. It mattered not that this sort of thing was neither commanded nor encouraged by Christ: the signs enumerated were merely examples of what sort of power and protection might be evidenced, as needed, in the lives of Spirit filled believers. The signs were intended to be witnesses to the lost, not entertainment—and certainly not an occasion for pride—for the saved. They were neither necessary for, nor proofs of, one’s salvation.

I don’t want to muddy the waters, but I should point out that these verses *may not* even be in the original text. Ryrie notes, “These verses do not appear in two of the most trustworthy manuscripts of the New Testament, though they are part of many other manuscripts and versions. If they are not a part of the genuine text of Mark, the abrupt ending at verse 8 is probably because the original closing verses were lost. The doubtful genuineness of verses 9-20 makes it unwise to build a doctrine or base an experience on them, especially verses 16-18.” That being said, *all* of these signs except one actually appear in the scriptural record as indications of the Holy Spirit’s power manifested in the lives of the early saints and apostles. The sole exception, as it’s translated here in the ESV, is “**drink any deadly poison,**” but that translation is a bit presumptuous: the word “poison” isn’t actually there in the Greek. The text merely reads, “drinks anything deadly.” The connotation is roughly the same as in this observation: “**No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**” (James 3:8) “Deadly” (the word is based on *thanatos*) might be more accurately translated, “that which causes death.” So it seems the real meaning of Mark 16:18 is, “If these believers encounter any spiritual peril—something that if ‘swallowed’ would cause separation from God—it will do them no harm.” Or something like that.

So the Pentecostal serpent handlers of rural Appalachia are on shaky ground, theologically. But there was an instance, recorded in the book of Acts, in which a poisonous viper played a role in vindicating the apostle Paul among a group of naïve and superstitious pagans. He and his companions had been shipwrecked on the journey to Paul’s trial in Rome. “**After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold.**”

When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, ‘No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live.’” It appeared at first as though karma had come home to roost. But the Maltese witnesses didn’t have all the facts: “He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.” (Acts 28:1-6) Well, that wasn’t quite right either, but it was true that Paul *worked for* a god—the *real* God. Paul still had a job to do, letters to write, people to witness to, and a life to surrender in honor of his Savior. So the Boss said, “No dying on the job, son. Break’s over. Time to get back to work.”

There are three undefined beasts mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures that, symbolically at least, can be thought of as related to serpents. The *tannin*, *rahab*, and *leviathan* all take on somewhat mythical proportions, if for no other reason than their descriptions don’t support identification with any single species of animal to the exclusion of all others. It’s probably just as well, however, because these creatures are seldom spoken of in a literal sense (as are cattle, sheep, or birds), but are invariably recruited as literary metaphors for some characteristic or attribute that God deemed important for us to know.

The *tannin* is presumed to be a dragon, serpent, sea monster, a large venomous snake, or even a whale. It is (or was) a real creature (i.e., not mythological), for it was mentioned in the inventory of Yahweh’s work on the fifth day of creation: “And God said, ‘Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.’ So God created the great sea creatures [*tannin*] and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.” (Genesis 1:20-21) Since the word “sea” is not in the Hebrew (although “waters”—*mayim*—is), it would be premature to define it as a “whale.” Consider this: “How could one have chased a thousand, and two have put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock had sold them, and Yahweh had given them up? For their [i.e., Israel’s enemies’] rock is not as our Rock; our enemies are by themselves. For their vine comes from the vine of Sodom and from the fields of Gomorrah. Their grapes are grapes of poison; their clusters are bitter. Their wine is the poison of serpents [*tannin*] and the cruel venom of asps.” (Deuteronomy 32:30-33) At the very least, then, the *tannin* seems to describe a broad class of large, noteworthy creatures. It would probably be best to translate it as “monster” and call it a day.

Moses' use of the word in Deuteronomy gives us our first clue as to what we are to discern about the *tannin* monsters: metaphorically, they are (like serpents) dangerous and destructive to God's people. We need never encounter them if we are mindful of Yahweh's Instructions; we needn't fear them if we are resting in His love. But the *tannin* is out there, lying in wait, hoping to prey upon unsuspecting souls who have forsaken Yahweh. Like Satan, it is going about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (as it's put in I Peter 5:8). The *tannin* has therefore been recruited as a metaphor for Satan and the peril he represents. We'll find this true of *rahab* and *leviathan* as well.

Jeremiah spent decades warning people of the Babylonian menace in their future—the inevitable result of Judah's apostasy. He reports: **"For thus says Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel: 'The daughter of Babylon is like a threshing floor at the time when it is trodden. Yet a little while and the time of her harvest will come.'"** Then Jeremiah speaks prophetically for the hapless Judah: **"Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me. He has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel. He has swallowed me like a monster [*tannin*]. He has filled his stomach with my delicacies."** (Jeremiah 51:33-34) A colorful description, to be sure, but one that proved uncannily accurate. You don't have to know what a *tannin* is to get the picture.

It didn't have to be that way. Yahweh has made it possible for His people to treat the monsters of this life with indifference and impunity—but only if they rested not in their own strength, but in His. The Psalmist describes the protection Yahweh affords for the one who "dwells in the secret place of the Most High" and who "abides under the shadow of the Almighty": **"Because you have made Yahweh your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone...."** Satan, while not exactly admitting that Yahshua was the Messiah, applied this promise to Christ immediately after His baptism by John, and Yahshua did not contradict him. What we often miss is that the promise is made to *anyone* who honors Yahweh—not only His "only begotten Son." Considering Yahshua's subsequent human history (not to mention ours) it is clear that these are spiritual truths—we aren't being promised temporal protection from any and all evil that might visit our mortal bodies, but rather spiritual defense against anything that might separate us from Yahweh's love.

As if to remind us that "text without context is pretext," however, we find that Satan's quote was incomplete. The Psalmist goes on to state what the one who trusts in Yahweh can do to *the devil*: **"You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent [*tannin*] you will trample underfoot."** That's right: the *ordinary believer* will (in the strength of Yahweh, of course) overcome any "authority" Satan exercises in the world, and he will crush the poisonous spiritual

monsters that slither across his path. So Yahweh says, **“Because he holds fast to Me in love, I will deliver him. I will protect him, because he knows My name. When he calls to Me, I will answer him. I will be with him in trouble. I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him My salvation.”** (Psalm 91:9-16) *What* will Yahweh show to His loved one? Actually, the question should be *“who.”* The English reads “My salvation,” but the Hebrew is *yâshuw`ah*—phonetically indistinguishable from the Messiah’s name: Yahshua.

So much for the *tannin*. What about *Rahab*? This is a mythical sea monster, supposedly the monstrous embodiment of primordial chaos, conceptually similar to the Babylonian goddess Tiamat. The name is based on a verb meaning to behave like a storm—i.e., boisterously, arrogantly, or insolently. Thus Job describes Yahweh: **“By His power He stilled the sea; by His understanding He shattered Rahab [NKJV: ‘He breaks up the storm’]. By His wind the heavens were made fair; His hand pierced the fleeing serpent.”** (Job 26:12-13) The point is that chaos and confusion cannot stand before Yahweh; destruction and disorder flee before Him. Interestingly enough, the nation of Egypt is sometimes metaphorically referred to as *Rahab*. As the acknowledged world center for “Islamic scholarship” (I know, it sounds like an oxymoron), and especially considering the turmoil Egypt has experienced in recent days—and will continue to endure until the Tribulation—the chaos of *Rahab* would seem the perfect epithet for this hapless people.

Again, referring to the irresistible force that is Yahweh, Job asks, **“Behold, He snatches away; who can turn Him back? Who will say to Him, ‘What are You doing?’ God will not turn back His anger. Beneath Him bowed the helpers of Rahab. [NKJV: ‘The allies of the proud lie prostrate beneath Him.’] How then can I answer Him, choosing my words with Him?”** (Job 9:12-14) We can see the symbol beginning to gel. *Rahab*—the proud, insolent, chaotic storm—is being personified as a beast that, for all its bluster, arrogance, and anarchy, will be brought under submission to Yahweh. The question, then, is how we puny mortals can presume to pretend to hold our ground before Him, to shake our fists in the face of God and demand to know, “What on earth do you think You’re doing?” Yahweh may be patient, but He’s not stupid. Don’t mistake His longsuffering for weakness.

In a passage in which many commentators equate *Rahab* with Egypt, the Psalmist Ethan, like Job, personifies *Rahab* as the proud sea, tossed in the storm’s chaos by the wind. **“You [Yahweh] rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, You still them. You crushed Rahab like a carcass. You scattered Your enemies with Your mighty arm.”** (Psalm 89:9-10) *Who* stilled the waves? Yahshua did. This is one of those innumerable instances in which Yahweh is predicted in the Old Testament to do something, only to see it literally fulfilled later by Yahshua, the “Son of Man.” They are the *same person*. **“Then [Yahshua] rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, ‘What sort of man is this, that**

even winds and sea obey him?” (Matthew 8:26-27) What sort of man? The “sort” that is in reality God in the flesh. Since we (here in the shadow of the resurrection) know that, we are in a position to discern something else here that the ESV totally misses. **“You crushed Rahab like a carcass”** *sounds* like it’s *Rahab* who has been slain, like some sort of beached sea monster. But a more literal translation would read, “You crushed *Rahab* as one slain.” In other words, it’s the other way around: Yahweh defeated *Rahab* (the personified chaos) *by dying*—i.e., through the act of Yahshua’s crucifixion. The word translated “wounded” is *chalal*, meaning slain, fatally wounded, pierced, or bored through. In the shadow of Yahshua’s resurrection, the imagery is hard to miss.

Let’s review another “*Rahab* sighting.” Isaiah writes, **“Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of Yahweh. Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces, that pierced the dragon [tannin]?”** The Prophet is referring to something in Israel’s past, some event in which the “arm of Yahweh” was in glorious, indisputable evidence. He then clarifies what this event was: **“Was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?”** (Isaiah 51:9) The reference is to the destruction of the Egyptian armies in the Red Sea.

A couple of things bear notice. First, *Rahab*—the monster of chaos—is once again associated with Egypt (which is in turn symbolic of “bondage in the world”). Second, *Rahab* is metaphorically equated with the *tannin*—the demonic “sea monster.” If nothing else, this parallel usage should serve as a warning against fixating on what these beasts might be in a literal sense, and to concentrate rather on what the spiritual ramifications of the symbols are. Third, Isaiah is asking Yahweh to come once again to the rescue of Israel, just as He did in the days of Moses. That Yahweh will indeed to this—during the darkest days of the Tribulation—is a prophetic *fait accompli* a hundred times over: it *will* happen, or God is a liar. And fourth, for those skeptics who are in their desperation still seeking ways to explain away every overt miracle God is ever said to have performed—in this case, insisting that the armies of Pharaoh were not drowned in the Red Sea, but rather merely got bogged down in a shallow marsh called the “reed sea”—note that Isaiah calls the waters “the great deep” and “the depths of the sea.” Somebody’s confused, and it isn’t Yahweh or His prophets.

Another unidentified serpent-like animal recruited in scripture to symbolize the forces of evil lurking in the world is *Leviathan* (a transliteration of the Hebrew term—*liviathan*). This beast, like *Rahab*, is used to illustrate that from which Israel was saved in the Red Sea—and it wasn’t just the Egyptian army: it was Satan himself. We just read a passage from Isaiah that parallels *Rahab* with the *tannin*—the serpent/dragon. This is also done in the case of *Leviathan*. Asaph writes, **“Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation [yâshuw`ah] in the midst of the**

earth. You divided the sea by Your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters [*tannin*] on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.” (Psalm 74:12-14) In case you were wondering, “heads” (in both instances—of the *tannin* and of *Leviathan*) is plural. He’s not saying that the animals upon which these symbols are based have multiple heads; he’s saying that we face many spiritual enemies, not just one; but Yahweh has “crushed the heads” of all of them on our behalf.

Another example: “In that day Yahweh with His hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting [or coiled] serpent, and He will slay the dragon [*tannin*] that is in the sea.” (Isaiah 27:1) Yahweh doesn’t “punish” dumb animals, since they have neither free will nor the capability of making moral choices. But what those animals *represent* (like the serpent, the dragon, *Rahab*, and *Leviathan*) is another matter. In the end, they comprise a complex euphemism for the deceiver, Satan—our adversary. *This* is he whom Yahweh will punish—the one He will “slay” (insofar as its ability to deceive mankind any longer is concerned—the word *harag* can also mean to ruin or destroy). Note that the dragon—the *tannin*—is said to reside “in the sea,” that is, figuratively speaking, within the gentile nations. This, then, is a subtle rebuke against anti-Semitism. Those who blame everything on the Jews need to look closer to home for the culprits—like beneath the rocks under which they themselves live. The dragon is “in the sea.”

The lexicons suggest that *Leviathan* is some sort of sea monster or dragon, a large aquatic animal, a serpent-like sea creature that assumes mythological and terrifying proportions. Perhaps it was (in the literal sense) a whale or crocodile. Confirmation that a literal beast is at the root of the symbol is evidenced by passages such as this: “O Yahweh, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom have You made them all. The earth is full of Your creatures. Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan, which You formed to play in it.” (Psalm 104:24-26) But once again, it matters not what the animal *is*; what’s important is what it *means*, what comprises the symbol’s objective.

Once we come to terms with the fact that all of these quasi-mythical beasts are actually stand-ins for Satan, the pointed cross-examination of Job by Yahweh makes more sense. God asks, “Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook or press down his tongue with a cord? [Picture putting a bit in a horse’s mouth to control him.] Can you put a rope in his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook? Will he make many pleas to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant forever? Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on a leash for your girls? Will traders bargain over him? Will they divide him up among the merchants? Can you fill his skin with harpoons or his head with fishing spears?” (Job 41:

1-7) As a man representative of his race, Job could honestly answer, “Well, yes, sort of. Someday I will be able to hunt and kill whales in wooden ships—or if the Leviathan is a crocodile, I’ll be able to shoot him and make a pair of cowboy boots out of his hide. It was Adam’s original job, after all, to exercise dominion over all of Yahweh’s creation—including the *Leviathan*—to fill the earth and subdue it.” But when we realize that *Leviathan* is actually a euphemism for Satan, we, like Job, can only stand there like an idiot and shuffle our feet. No, we can’t capture, contain, or toy with our spiritual adversary. No, he won’t negotiate with us, reason with us, or serve us. No, we won’t be able to tame him, use him, sell him, or slay him. The best we’ll ever be able to do with *Leviathan* is to hide from him, flee from him, find refuge from his terrifying presence in the arms of Yahweh our Father. There, and only there, will we find safety.

Liberals and atheists (among others) long for a world free from the inconvenient presence of evangelical Christians. Since the doctrine of the rapture (though grossly misunderstood) has become fodder for ridicule among the mainstream media, some of them are even beginning to cynically voice their fondest desire: that the rapture would finally occur and rid the world of all of us troublemakers, leaving them in peace to create a one-world socialist utopia, a worker’s paradise, free from the Christians’ tiresome morals, superstitions, and religious hysteria. Be careful what you wish for, folks: you just might get it. Yahweh has a message for these mockers: **“Woe to you who desire the day of Yahweh! Why would you have the day of Yahweh? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.”** (Amos 5:18-19)

What was true when Israel was facing destruction in Amos’ day is no less true today—when the whole world is facing judgment. Notice the symbols used to describe the change in circumstances between “business as usual” and “the day of Yahweh.” First, the lion (representing authority, legitimate or not) is replaced by the bear—symbolizing raw, brute strength. Those who confuse liberty with license, who opine that anarchy is preferable to ordered (they’d call it *repressive*) society, and who therefore long for the demise of duly constituted human governments, are in for a shock. When the rule of law is replaced, it won’t be with licentious freedom, but with the rule of force, and blood will flow in the streets. This was true when the “bear” was Sennacherib or Nebuchadnezzar, and it will be no less so when the democracies of the world surrender their sovereignty to the new world order and bow before the Antichrist.

Amos' second example is more directly germane to our present topic—serpents. At issue is where to find safety. It used to be that a man's home was his castle, at least in principle. As long as you minded your own business and kept your own counsel, you were relatively safe from those who would rule over you. But in the day of Yahweh' wrath, safety, even within one's own four walls, is an illusion. Here, the danger is stealthy, sneaky, and treacherous. Focusing strictly on the last-days ramifications of Amos' prophecy, it is clear that our homes are no longer the bastions of privacy they once were. Personally, I think privacy is overrated: nothing is hidden from God, after all. But government isn't God—they have no legitimate right to our thoughts and dreams, or even our beliefs. It is here—in our homes—that the “serpents” that would deceive us are least expected and most dangerous. Between our email correspondence, our social networking activities, and our cell phone usage, our lives are an open book to anybody with tech skills and the desire to examine our lives. Online commerce, digital communication, mass media and the Internet are capable of great good—and great harm—and our lives are getting increasingly dependent on these things. Living “off the grid,” however, isn't really a viable solution. The technology is spiritually neutral—it in itself is not the problem. But the principle we must remember at all costs is to trust in Yahweh. Filter everything you see, hear, and read through the truth of His word; say nothing to your neighbor (read: your Facebook friends or your Twitter feed) that you wouldn't want to have to defend before God.

Isaiah saw the same basic truth from a different angle. But this time, instead of “Be careful what you wish for,” it's “Don't count your chickens before they hatch.” **“Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the serpent's root will come forth an adder, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent.”** (Isaiah 14:29) When he wrote this (715 BC) Assyria was the reigning regional menace. Philistia had already lost their independence to Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria by 732 BC, and the ten northern tribes of Israel were taken by Sargon II in 722. But in 701 BC, Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem would end in disaster for the invaders, when Yahweh killed their entire 185,000-man army in a single night (see Isaiah 36-37). The “rod that had struck Philistia” was indeed broken. But it was too late for the Philistines: although the poor of the land survived (see 14:30) the national entity that was Philistia never recovered. It was swallowed in turn by Babylon and then by Persia, disappearing forever into the recycling bin of history by the late fifth century BC.

The last-days ramifications of Isaiah's prophecy are even more interesting, if you're willing (as I am) to see the modern permutation of “Philistia” as symbolic of Palestine—i.e., the Arab Muslims who occupy the former Philistine territory of the Gaza Strip. (I'm fully aware that Philistia had been *history* for over half a millennium when Rome's Emperor Hadrian evicted the rebellious Jews from the promised land and renamed the place “Palestina”—after the ancient and extinct

Philistines—in a vain effort to sever Israel’s emotional ties to the land. And it would be *another* half a millennium before the Muslims invaded the place, late in the seventh century.) What did Isaiah say? **“From the serpent’s root will come forth an adder, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent.”** The “serpent” in this case would be Muhammad, the great deceiver of men—whose “root” was Satan himself. The “adder,” then, would appear to be the “Gog” mentioned in Ezekiel 38—a charismatic Muslim warlord (known in *Islamic* eschatology as Imam Mahdi or the Twelfth Imam) who will unite the world’s non-Arabic Muslim forces into an unprecedented coalition whose sole aim is to drive Israel into the sea. The invasion will utterly fail, but only because of the direct and devastating intervention of Yahweh Himself on Israel’s behalf. Who then is this “flying fiery serpent” described as the “fruit” of the adder? It’s none other than the Antichrist (or the demonic “dragon” who manages him) who will cobble together a one-world government under Luciferian ideology from the ashes of the world war that will be precipitated by Gog’s invasion, the Battle of Magog.

Symbolically, the point of all this is that Islam, a prison of false hope built and run by the father of lies, will be replaced with an even grander deception during the last days—one that will sweep the entire globe. It is little wonder that serpents and dragons pop up time after time in the Apocalypse narrative. Spiritual fraud will be the order of the day. The Tribulation—and especially the second half, the forty-two month “great” Tribulation, a.k.a. the “time of Jacob’s trouble”—will be characterized by Satan’s unprecedented preoccupation with the destruction of man—and especially Israel—for he knows (as we shall see in a moment) that his allotted time is just about over.

In Revelation 12, John saw a vision revealing (in admittedly esoteric terms) what the role of Satan—the dragon—would be. **“And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”** I’m no astronomer, but I’m told that the position of the stars at the time of Christ’s birth—specifically as they related to the constellation Virgo—is accurately reflected in this description. From a symbolic point of view, it is all too obvious (in light of historical events) that the “woman” is Israel. **“She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.”** This was the role Israel was assigned to play from the very beginning—bringing Yahshua the Messiah into the world. **“And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns [more on this detail in a moment], and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.”** Anyone familiar with the Gospel narratives will easily be able to sort out the characters here. The “great red dragon” is Satan; the “stars that he swept out of heaven” are the spiritual beings that he was able to deceive into mutiny against God—making them fallen angels,

demons. Amazingly, fully a third of the angels were so deceived. That must have been some line he fed them. **“She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne....”**

This is the history of the thing, boiled down to its bare essentials. The “male child” is Yahshua (as we can see from His subsequent description as the One who wields a rod, or scepter, of iron). Satan wanted to “devour” the Christ-child before He could fulfill His mission. (The thwarted attempt is recorded in Matthew 2.) But Yahshua “escaped” from his clutches, albeit the hard way—by submitting to the cross, taking the penalty for our sins with Him. I find it interesting that the word rendered “caught up” here (*harpazo*) is the same Greek word (filtered through its Latin equivalent) from which we get our concept of the “rapture.” Yahshua, we are reminded, is *first* in everything.

“And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days....” The rest of this is yet future from our perspective: Israel (the “woman”) will be compelled to flee from the dragon, finding refuge “in the wilderness” for three and a half years, nourished (and, dare I say, *educated*) by God. As we saw in Volume 2 of this series, the wilderness is a place of preparation and trial, positioned between bondage in the world (where Israel has been living) and the “Promised Land” (ultimately, the place of blessing and security in Christ’s Millennial kingdom—something foretold in literally hundreds of prophecies).

Satan has been free to roam the earth since Eden. Why then was his advent described as “a sign appearing in *heaven*?” I believe it’s because of what John saw next: **“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.”** There it is again—the equivalence of the dragon, the serpent, Satan, and the devil—not to mention the identification of his primary character trait: *deceiver*. **“He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him....”** Remember, the term “satan” means “adversary.” I know, it’s customary to capitalize it as if it’s a name, but it’s not. The devil has been spending the bulk of his time in heaven accusing us before Father Yahweh. It’s not always slander, however. He’s usually got a strong case against us because we are, in fact, guilty as sin. But the penalty for our crimes has already been paid—by the Judge’s only begotten Son, no less. So after eons of enduring slick, pointless testimony and thinly veiled contempt from this slithering fork-tongued prosecutor, Yahweh has finally run out of patience, ordering his bailiff, Michael the archangel, to evict the dragon from his courtroom once and for all.

This is the paradigm shift we've all been waiting for: **"And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them!'"** It's a good news-bad news story. Our accuser no longer has access to God (not that Yahweh was listening to him anyway). And we who were "the accused" have won our case, sort of. Actually, it's been thrown out of court on a technicality: the blood of Christ has been deemed worthy to atone for our many sins. That being said, Satan the disgraced and disbarred prosecutor has begun to take the law (as he sees it) into his own hands, killing as many believers as he can (though he's not picky: any human still alive will serve nicely as a target). **"But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!..."** There's the rub: Satan knows that once he has been formally banished from the courts of Yahweh, the clock is ticking. Time, times, and half a time; forty-two months; 1,260 days—any way you count it, Satan's days on earth are numbered. When they're over, he will be thrown into the lake of fire for a thousand years, unable for the first time in man's history to deceive anybody.

The whole thing plays out like a TV drama. Unwilling to shoulder the blame for his own faults (does that sound familiar?), the villain goes berserk, seeking revenge on those he deemed responsible for his woes, i.e., "getting caught." His first target? Israel, the vehicle through which Yahweh brought redemption to the human race. **"And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child."** It's a time honored tradition among the damned: attack the messenger. God, however, has other ideas. **"But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time...."** That's three and a half prophetic years, forty-two months, 1,260 days, during which (as Daniel put it) "the power of the holy people will be completely shattered." Israel's remnant will be totally dependent upon Yahweh, and for once in their lives, they'll realize it.

Escaping to the wilderness will prove to be an adventure in itself: **"The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth...."** This may be a literal flood, but I sort of doubt it. I find it more likely that a "deluge" of troops will be sent out to capture the rebellious Jewish escapees, but like Korah before Moses (see Numbers 16) the ground will open up beneath the horde of pursuers, swallowing them whole.

“Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Unable to touch Israel, the frustrated serpent (a.k.a. the dragon, the devil, and Satan, being represented by the Antichrist) turns to his secondary target, the “church of repentant Laodicea,” as I like to call them. Remember, at this point in time, the rapture of the church is long past, but multitudes have subsequently realized their error and have come to faith in Christ, informed of their situation—and their “options”—by angelic messengers, described in Revelation 14:6-13. The results of the serpent’s attacks on these new believers are recorded in Revelation 7:9-17. They are martyred by the millions for their faith, only to find themselves redeemed, cleansed, and blessed in the presence of the Lamb of God. Who are these martyrs? Since Satan can’t touch the Jews, they are by default *gentiles*, something that’s confirmed (if we heed the symbology) in the last sentence of the chapter: **“And he [the dragon] stood on the sand of the sea.”** (Revelation 12)

The “sea” invariably represents the gentiles, as “the land” indicates Israel. Note that the dragon “stood” on them; that is, he held the entire gentile world under submission. This is confirmed in the very next chapter, as the Antichrist (here called “the beast”) is introduced. **“And I saw a beast rising out of the sea [defining him as a gentile], with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.”** You’ll recall how both the *tannin* and *Leviathan* mentioned in Psalm 74 were described as having multiple heads. **“And the beast that I saw was like a leopard [the swift killer]; its feet were like a bear’s [having brute strength], and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth [that is, the beast speaks with authority].”** And where did these abilities come from? From Satan himself. **“And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority....”**

The ignorant elite of Yahshua’s time were always asking him for signs and wonders. So their spiritual descendants, we may presume, will be quite impressed with the dragon’s showmanship. **“One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast.”** Those who were skeptical of Yahshua’s resurrection despite the evidence will swallow the devil’s counterfeit hook, line, and sinker. **“And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?’”** (Revelation 13:1-4) Oy vey! We’ve sunk a long way from the reverential wisdom of Job, haven’t we?

“And the beast [i.e., the Antichrist or the demon that inhabits him, deriving his power from the dragon] was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming His name and His dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.” This would include both the raptured saints and the Tribulation martyrs—those whom Satan can no longer touch. We will be posthumously be

held up as scapegoats. The blame for the Antichrist's "man-caused disasters" will be laid at our feet, like disingenuous politicians blaming anything and everything on their predecessors. Remarkably, this time the ploy will actually work, turning public opinion against the neo-Christians and the Jews who are so belatedly coming to comprehend the nature of Yahweh their God: **"Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. Authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain."** That last sentence is one of the scariest in the Bible, for it speaks of a time when *everyone on earth* will have received either Satan's spirit or Yahweh's. There will be no more sitting on the fence; no more choosing not to choose; no more passive agnosticism; no more insidious apathy. And the vast majority (it would appear) will have chosen the dragon over the Lamb. It makes my heart sick to consider it, but we must take God's prophecies as they're given to us. **"If anyone has an ear, let him hear."** (Revelation 13:5-9)

I observed that the first beast (i.e., the Antichrist) will be a gentile, since he is said to come "from the sea." But he has a powerful ally of Jewish descent: **"Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast."** (Revelation 13:11-12) This man, also known as "the false prophet," gets his power and authority from the same place the Antichrist does—from the dragon, Satan. This demonic duo will attempt to fool all of the people all of the time, and they'll apparently come terrifyingly close to achieving that goal. While the Antichrist doesn't have the proper credentials to be recognized as Israel's Messiah (a prevarication high on the dragon's priority list), the Jewish false prophet is there to provide the requisite *bona fides*—giving Jews and gentiles alike a reason (however illogical) to accept the Antichrist as *der Führer*, the "anointed one," the messianic leader for which the lost world has been clamoring.

A few pages back, we looked at a great Far Eastern army revealed under the sixth trumpet judgment. We see them again under the sixth bowl judgment, this time preparing to answer the dragon's call to invade Israel one last time. The objective is genocide: to succeed where the hordes of Magog failed (see Ezekiel 38-39). **"The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east."** The theory is, after killing off upwards of a billion and a half souls back home, rubbing out a few million helpless unarmed Jews ought to be child's play. **"And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God"**

the Almighty.... And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.” (Revelation 16:12-16)

Not surprisingly, the Antichrist, the false prophet, and the dragon that empowers them both are all singing out of the same hymnal: “kill the Jews.” In truth, this has been the rallying cry of Satan’s followers ever since the exodus. As a “sign” indicating who’s side you’re on (Yahweh’s vs. Satan’s), this one is absurdly simple and completely foolproof. Were it not for the dragon’s insane hatred of everything that Yahweh loves, the Jews would be an irrelevant blip on the world’s demographic radar screen. There are more people living *in Guatemala* than there are Jews in the world today (as far as we know). The world’s incessant collective angst concerning this otherwise insignificant population serves to demonstrate the extent of the spiritual warfare that’s constantly being waged all around us. God’s promise to Abraham has never ceased being true: **“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:3)

The book of Isaiah ends with a statement that would seem to describe the fate of the losers of Armageddon, those, like the Antichrist, whom the returning Christ will “consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.” (II Thessalonians 2:8) Isaiah says, **“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against Me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”** (Isaiah 66:24) But I think there’s more going on here than meets the eye. First, the “they” who are viewing the slain are described in the previous verse as “all flesh,” those who “shall come to worship before Me, says Yahweh,” that is, the redeemed of the Millennial kingdom—both mortals and immortals, I’m guessing. Does this mean that the rotting corpses of the Tribulation rebels will just be left lying on the ground so people can look at them in revulsion and disgust? No; I think there’s something even worse going on here.

Our first clue is that **“their fire shall not be quenched.”** Since any literal fire that might be used to dispose of dead bodies would eventually go out, we’re being given a hint. This is speaking of their *spiritual* condition: with their souls indwelt with the spirit of Satan, these hapless denizens of hell will suffer Satan’s eternal fate—the unending, everlasting torment of knowing that they have deceived themselves by rebelling against Almighty God. Yahshua used a figurative term for this state: Gehenna (a.k.a. the valley of the sons of Hinnom) was the place, just south of old Jerusalem, where Molech worshippers used to burn their infant children alive to appease this bloodthirsty false god. It later became a site of perpetual trash fires, an apt metaphor for hell itself. The fires of remorse will never go out. Those who allied themselves with the serpent will experience the horrible, unceasing realization that they threw away God’s love.

But the second clue is the clincher. When Isaiah says, **“Their worm shall not die,”** he’s speaking not of maggots invading physical corpses. The word translated “worm” here is our old friend *nachash*—the Hebrew word for serpent or snake. This “serpent” that won’t die is Satan, the deceiver who led these wretched souls to their eternal doom in the first place. John explains how this “worm who won’t die” lost his freedom: **“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.”** (Revelation 20:1-3) What’s remarkable about all of this is that, according to Isaiah, the citizens of Christ’s Millennial kingdom will be able to witness—and be horrified by—the fate of those who chose to be deceived by the serpent. And yet many of them, born into this perfect world, will *still* choose the same disastrous path when Satan is released for a short time to tempt them at the close of the kingdom age (see Revelation 20:7-9). How could this happen? It’s hard for me to comprehend, but the words of the prophet are still true: **“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?”** (Jeremiah 17:9)

Thus from the beginning to the end of the human experience, deception—the agenda of the serpent—is our constant nemesis. How relieved we should be, then, to read this prophecy: **“And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”** (Revelation 20:10) No more deceit; no more fraud; no more lies and half-truths designed to encourage us to betray our heavenly Father. It was no accident, of course, that the serpent showed up as soon as man was given the “breath of life,” the *neshamah*, the thing about us that makes spiritual indwelling possible. Nor is odd that the demon-serpent was allowed to slither among us for as long as the sons of Adam walked the earth. Without the possibility of deception, the agency of choice would be rather meaningless. Free will isn’t exactly “free” if we have no alternatives to choose between. So as odd as it may seem, I thank God for creating the serpent; I rejoice in the capacity I’ve been given to choose to reciprocate His love.

But I’m *really* looking forward to the day when the slithering deceiver will be locked away for good—and I, along with countless brothers and sisters, will be counted as having chosen wisely, rejecting the dragon’s deceptions and choosing instead to revere Yahweh, rely upon His Messiah, and receive His Spirit.

Every Tree of the Garden

Having taken a good long look at the fauna in God’s symbolic lexicon, it’s now time to turn our attention to the flora—again with an eye toward exploring its usage as symbols in scripture. In their own unique way, trees, shrubs, and grasses are living creatures, designed by Yahweh to fulfill a need (actually, several of them) on this planet. They remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, replacing it with oxygen; their roots hold the soil in place; they provide fruits and grains for us to eat (and their leaves are the base of the food chain for the animals who share our world, as well). Basically, plants make our planet livable.

The very fact that plants are alive, but enjoy a very different *kind* of life than animals do, should perhaps be taken as confirmation that by God’s design, there is more to *our* lives than our mere mortal existence. That is, if plants and animals are both “alive” but with radically different modes of life, would it not be reasonable to suspect that there might be yet another kind of life-form within our universe? I’m speaking, of course, of *spiritual* life, the kind of quickening, we’re told, shared by God and His created spirit-messengers, commonly known as angels (and yes, demons as well), hinted at throughout scripture. Spiritual life is as different in its characteristics from faunal life as faunal is from floral. Spirits are immortal, incorporeal, unrestricted in mobility, and powerful beyond our imagining.

Creative storytellers in our past have wondered what it would be like if trees could awaken to have the same kind of life that people do. From Aesop’s fables to Dante’s *Inferno*, to Tolkein’s droll “ents” in *the Lord of the Rings*, to Walt Disney’s *Silly Symphonies* (and let us not forget *VeggieTales*), plants and trees have “come to life” in the imaginations of men, taking on “human” characteristics and emotions. These are all just the ingenious fantasies of imaginative men, of course: they have no power to actually change one kind of life into another. *But Yahweh does*. That is, He has not only the power, but also the desire to take mortal men and transform the life we experience in this world into a different kind of life—the sort of spiritual life by which He Himself is defined. Why would He do this? Because (as Paul puts it), **“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption....”** And God *wants us* to inherit His kingdom—it’s the whole reason we were created. **“We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”** (I Corinthians 15:50-51) Yes, changed from mortal men, subject to decay and corruption, into spiritual beings who can live forever in Yahweh’s presence—if we choose to allow God to transform us according to His wishes.

Imagine being transformed from a humble shrub into a sentient human being. The transformation God has in mind will be even more radical.

But for now, plants are still plants, and people must remain mortal—which is not to say plants don't have anything to teach us. As with so many other things in our world, God has enlisted plants, and especially trees, to teach us about His plan and purpose. The lessons began in Eden. **“And Yahweh, God, planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground Yahweh, God, made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”** (Genesis 2:8-9) Trees aren't accidental quirks of evolutionary happenstance. Like us, God created them on purpose. We have only to ask why. **“Yahweh, God, took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”** Even when things were perfect, we had a job to do. Eden was no “welfare state.” **“And Yahweh, God, commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”** (Genesis 2:15-17) As we saw in our study of birds, different kinds of plants have been recruited to reveal diverse truths. Here, at the very beginning, we are being given our first simple lesson in holiness—separation of good from evil. Most trees promoted life; but one of them could, in its own fashion, bring death. Adam and Eve, like all of us ever since, were instructed to be discerning—and to be holy.

In addition to the individual symbolic lessons God has assigned to differing varieties of plants—the subject of this chapter—we are generally reminded that they, like us, are living things: they'll thrive or wither according to how much *water* is available to them. And what does water symbolize? Restoration and cleansing. So, **“Thus says Yahweh: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from Yahweh. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land...’”** The man who trusts only himself will be neither restored nor cleansed by Yahweh. Worse, salt inhibits the growth of plant life.

On the other hand, **“Blessed is the man who trusts [*batach*: to have confidence, to feel safe] in Yahweh, whose trust [*mibtach*: refuge—the object or state of confidence] is Yahweh. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”** (Jeremiah 17:5-8) Note two things. First, if our hope is in Yahweh (and not our own devices), we need not worry about external circumstances: God's provision *will* prove sufficient. And second, the evidence of our trust in Him is our continued “fruit bearing,” specifically, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and everything else on the Galatians 5 list.

“Bearing fruit” is what it’s all about, whether you’re a plant or a person. The fruit, the genetic component of a plant’s being, is what passes life onto the next generation. Without it, extinction looms. So Yahweh stressed seeds and fruit in the creation account: **“Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed is in itself, on the earth’; and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, the herb that yields seed according to its kind, and the tree that yields fruit, whose seed is in itself according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. So the evening and the morning were the third day.... And God said [to Adam], ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.’”** (Genesis 1:11-13, 29) There is a stunning truth here, one we usually miss altogether. What people were given to eat is (as God phrased it) the seed, the fruit, the genetic part of the plant. In other words, in order for us to be nourished and sustained, future generations of plants must be sacrificed. One type of life is offered up in order that another, *higher* form of life may survive and thrive.

This picture is mirrored in the Levitical sacrifices, in which an innocent animal is sacrificed on behalf of guilty mankind—to atone for his sin or to provide any of a dozen other functions connecting us with our Creator. In each case, a lower life-form provides life-giving nourishment or sustenance to the higher. This life-for-life swap is, at its core, a picture of grace. It is the essence of the unmerited favor that Yahweh wishes to shower upon us. We *don’t* provide our own food: a plant (or lower animal) must, by God’s design, sacrifice its life so that we may eat. And neither can we provide our own redemption, salvation, or justification. But Christ’s sacrifice as a man doesn’t make our mortal life possible, but rather our subsequent *spiritual* existence. God took on the form of a “lower being” (man) in order to sacrifice Himself so that we could then live in His presence. This explains why God is so preoccupied with his children “bearing fruit”—the spiritual variety—themselves. Future generations of believers depend on what we do here and now.

As Eve learned in the Garden, “fruit” can be either good or bad. We can’t logically assume that everything that crops up in life is beneficial: we are to be discerning. While we (who are far from perfect ourselves) are not to judge or condemn other people, we *are* instructed to be “fruit inspectors.” So Yahshua warns us, **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”** Patently good advice, but how are we to tell who they are? **“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”** This “good fruit” boils down to one thing: *love* (from which flows a whole range of other positive attributes). This simple litmus test will help us separate the true prophets (forth-tellers of God’s word, if not foretellers) from the false ones. The false

prophets may be “correct” about a great many things, but they will foster an atmosphere of dissention, pride in one’s superior knowledge, impatience with (and condemnation of) people less “perfect” than themselves, or overt hatred toward lost people for whom Christ died. **“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”** (Matthew 7:15-20) Note that He doesn’t say that *we* are to “cut them down and throw them into the fire.” That’s God’s job—to be done on His schedule.

This all makes dealing with the lost one of the trickiest facets of the believer’s experience: loving some people while hating the falsehoods they espouse is not exactly easy to sort out in the real world. It helps to remember that the vast majority of today’s apostates and idolaters are not so much perpetrators as they are victims, dupes, and collateral damage—held in error and bondage by the comparatively few “gurus” at the top of the cultural food chain (if not by their own lusts). So Paul’s advice to young Timothy helps to bring things into focus: **“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.”** (II Timothy 3:1-5) Note once again that he didn’t say to *attack* such people, even though their “fruit” is bitter and inedible. He merely said to leave them alone—have nothing to do with them. It is perfectly appropriate to attack *messages* of hate and ignorance, but not the *messengers* of such things. Yahweh will handle that Himself, personally, in His own good time.

Yahshua used the “fruit” symbol time and time again: **“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”** (Luke 6:42-45) As an example of how this works, we note the records of the lives of the kings of Judah, some of whom were listed as “doing right in the sight of Yahweh,” while others “did evil.” What they *said* and *did* (their “fruit”) defined their status as “evil” or “good.” But the “good” kings made disastrous mistakes at times, and the “evil” kings no doubt had their moments of benevolence as well. What characterized them as being good or evil—what prompted them to say and do the things they did—was their relationship (or lack of it) with Yahweh. It is His Holy Spirit that produces “good fruit” in us. So if that Spirit is missing in one’s life, so will be the ability to produce good fruit: you’ll be more like that miserable shrub in the desert of which Jeremiah spoke.

Especially telling of our attitudes are the words we speak: **“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.”** Yahshua is pointing out the futility of trying to pick “good fruit” off of a “bad tree.” There’s no point pretending to be godly if you’ve made God your enemy. Even if your peers are still clueless, God knows what you’re really doing—and why. **“You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.”** There are several prominent men in America right now who love to put the title “Reverend” before their names, but who travel the country stirring up hatred and division. How can folks miss the fact that “reverence” for God is the *last* thing motivating them? **“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”** (Matthew 12:33-37) It can’t be stressed enough that *what we say* reveals what we think—and whose we are.

As always, we should define our terms. The usual Hebrew word for “tree” is *'ets*, but it connotes more than just the living plant itself. It can also mean wood, timber, lumber, a plank, stick, or log, or even some of the things made from trees, like firewood or a gallows. The Greek *dendron* is apparently more focused, meaning only “tree” in the normal sense. But a second Greek noun, *xulon*, picks up the figurative slack, denoting not only a tree (including its metaphorical sense—a gallows or cross), but also wood, timber, or that which is made from wood. Thus *xulon* is the word used to describe the clubs or cudgels wielded by the mob sent to arrest Yahshua, and the “stocks” used to restrain the hands and feet of prisoners like Paul.

Notice, then, that the wood itself is an essential component of the Levitical sacrifices. For example, **“Then he shall kill the bull before Yahweh, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood [*'ets*] on the fire. And Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, as an offering by fire with a pleasing aroma to Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 1:5-9) The symbolic picture is that of judgment: not only was the altar (though made of acacia wood) covered with plates of bronze (indicating judgment: see Numbers 16:38), but the means of judgment’s implementation was fire (as opposed to what theoretically could have

been chosen as symbols by God, but weren't—such things as immersion in water, burial in the ground, being allowed to rot, or being devoured by beasts). Fire (as we have seen) is linked to the separation of pure elements in metal (like bronze or brass) from the dross and impurities, because separation—not punishment—is the essence of “judgment” in scriptural usage. The issue is holiness: it transpires that God isn't particularly shocked or angered when people are naughty, but the fact remains that only when they are separated from the wicked world—and set apart instead *to* Him—are they able to stand in His presence. “Judgment,” then, is merely a statement of what the reality is, a declaration or revelation of the choices we ourselves have already made, for good or ill.

If fire and bronze are God's chosen symbols indicating judgment, then wood is the element He specified to make judgment “live.” That is, wood is the fuel that keeps the fire alive. Hence Yahweh's instruction: **“The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not go out. The priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall arrange the burnt offering on it and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out.”** (Leviticus 6:12-13) Again, considering the symbolic alternatives God could have chosen but didn't, note that He didn't specify olive oil (a flammable liquid) as fuel for the fires of judgment: olive oil, rather, was enlisted as a symbol representing the Holy Spirit of Yahweh. The Spirit does not impose its will upon man. It is our own choices that bring judgment upon us. The Spirit merely reveals the choices we ourselves have made. The only other readily available fuel I can think of (since the Israelites didn't have coal, petroleum, hydroelectric power, nuclear reactors, or wind farms) was dried animal dung—which, as our pioneer forefathers discovered, burns quite nicely, and was on hand (since they were shepherds and herdsmen) in prodigious quantities. But using dried poo on God's altar would also have sent the wrong message—that God will make your mortal life *crap* if you don't religiously toe his line: “Love Me *or else!*” Yes, our choices have consequences, but they're almost invariably *natural* consequences. God doesn't have to go out of His way to “penalize” you for breaking the law of gravity (for instance)—jumping off the roof of the tall building. The street below will provide its own “punishment.”

Wood, on the other hand, was a perfectly appropriate symbol for the fuel of God's separation/judgment. It is something that was once alive, but was cut down—*sacrificed*—to achieve Yahweh's purpose. In that respect, it is one more metaphor revealing the mission of the Messiah. But notice something else: the “fat of the peace offerings” is there to help keep the fire constantly going. Fat, if you'll recall, represents “the very best,” both on Yahweh's part—sending His “only begotten Son”—and on ours: the service and devotion we owe our God in light of His unfathomable love. Fat, like olive oil, is flammable (something you may discover by barbecuing cheap hamburger). On the altar, it helps to keep the metaphor of judgment through separation alive and burning brightly.

Because of this intimate association between wood and judgment, we should not be surprised to find that wooden implements may be defiled—made symbolically unclean and unfit for use in Yahweh’s service (until it is cleansed). **“And these are unclean to you among the swarming things that swarm on the ground: the mole rat, the mouse, the great lizard of any kind, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the lizard, the sand lizard, and the chameleon. These are unclean to you among all that swarm. Whoever touches them when they are dead shall be unclean until the evening. And anything on which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether it is an article of wood [’ets] or a garment or a skin or a sack, any article that is used for any purpose. It must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening; then it shall be clean.”** (Leviticus 11:29:32) At issue here is what may be properly used in God’s service. Being touched by death and uncleanness, even unintentionally, disqualifies something (or *someone*) from serving, at least temporarily. The classic example is Israel itself, which has found itself disqualified from carrying (or *being*) the torch of Yahweh’s truth for the past two millennia. In the wake of their national rejection of the Messiah (though many individuals may have believed in Him), they found themselves being “fallen upon” by the dead, unclean vermin that was Rome. Israel will someday find themselves back in Yahweh’s service, but not until the sun has set on their apostasy, and not until they have been washed clean by the Holy Spirit.

The sad state of affairs in which Israel finds itself today (notwithstanding the fact that Yahweh has finally begun to bring them back into the Land) is due to something Moses foresaw even before they entered Canaan for the first time. **“When you father children and children’s children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of Yahweh your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed....”** In the most harrowing prophetic high-wire act you can imagine, this very thing happened: the political existence of Israel was “utterly destroyed,” while at the same time, God preserved intact their family identity, as promised in such passages as Genesis 22:15-18. To my knowledge, this circumstance is absolutely unique in the annals of human history. Met any Hittites, Amorites, or Medes lately?

“And Yahweh will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where Yahweh will drive you.... Few in number? Yes: there are more people living in *Guatemala* than there are Jews in the world today—some four thousand years after the covenant was established with Abraham. And how’s *this* for a revealing statistical comparison? In Numbers 26:51, the total fighting force available to Israel—a number that included every able-bodied male from twenty years old upward—was 601,730. A recent survey put Israel’s military strength—

including active duty, reserves, and paramilitary forces—at 749,550. And these days, their ranks include women! It seems to me that Israel hasn't gained much ground (in terms we can actually track) in the past thirty-five hundred years. They haven't gone extinct, but they haven't (yet) become as numerous as the visible stars or the proverbial sand on the seashore, either. Their national blessing awaits their national repentance.

“And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.” (Deuteronomy 4:25-28; cf. Deuteronomy 28:36, 64) Did you catch the poetic connection between the sin and its natural consequences here? **“If you act corruptly by making a carved image... you will serve gods of wood and stone.”** In other words, the Israelites of old—just like all the rest of us—got to choose their own destiny: life or death, blessing or cursing, the logic of love or the insanity of service to lifeless, powerless objects that they themselves had made. It boggles the mind—*until* we wake up and realize that most of us do the same thing today. Oh, we don't carve idols *per se*, but we *do* serve things we've made, things that are just as dead, objects as dumb as a box of rocks. Our careers. Our homes. Our toys. Our cultural heroes. Our pleasures. A hundred years from now, that for which we gave up our lives will look positively idiotic—*unless* that object of devotion is still there, still worthy, still righteous and loving and significant. Only one thing fits that description: Yahweh.

That's why Moses warned his people to destroy any and all wooden idols they found in the land of Canaan: **“You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place.”** (Deuteronomy 12:2-3) Asherim (the plural of Asherah) are the groves the pagans set up for idol worship (or the wooden carved images themselves). The name (Asherah) is synonymous with the Babylonian-Canaanite “goddess” of fertility, fortune and happiness, the supposed consort (or *mother*, in some permutations) of Ba'al. She is also known (depending on where you lived and what language you spoke) as Asheroth, Astarte, and Ishtar (the origin of our word “Easter”). Modeled on the proto-Babylonian queen Semiramis (wife of Nimrod and mother of Tammuz), this same “goddess” became known outside her home neighborhood as Isis, Cybele, Fortuna, Ceres, Rhea, Minerva, Athena, Diana, Venus, Parvati, and Shing Moo, and she also takes on the persona of the “goddess of fortresses” and the “queen of heaven” (the form in which she is worshipped among pagan-leaning Catholics even today, much to Mary's chagrin, I'm sure).

If the Israelites weren't supposed to leave any of the pagan worship centers standing, they *certainly* weren't to create such places themselves—especially as

some sort of blending or compromise between the worship of Yahweh and the pagan rites of Canaan. **“You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of Yahweh your God that you shall make. And you shall not set up a pillar, which Yahweh your God hates.”** (Deuteronomy 16:21-22) That “pillar” (Hebrew: *matsebah*) could be anything from the stump of a tree used for ritual purposes to a stone obelisk like those found in Egypt—or Washington D.C., for that matter. Why do Christians—especially *American* Christians—find it so hard to follow God’s lead? Yahweh says *He hates pillars*, so we erect an obelisk like the heathens do to celebrate the life of our first, and perhaps most godly, president! Something’s wrong here. Compromise (the antithesis of holiness) is bad enough; willful disobedience (precipitated by willful ignorance) is even worse.

Such things (compromise and ignorant insubordination) inevitably lead to *purposeful* rebellion. Once Solomon compromised with Babylon during his old age, it was all downhill for Israel: **“And Judah [under Rehoboam, the son of Solomon] did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and they provoked Him to jealousy with their sins that they committed, more than all that their fathers had done.”** In case you’re fuzzy on your history, that’s *a lot*. **“For they also built for themselves high places and pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations that Yahweh drove out before the people of Israel.”** (I Kings 14:22-23) My knee-jerk reaction is to condemn Israel for being so unbelievably stupid (in light of Yahweh’s instructions). But then I remember the place from which my beloved America has fallen, and all I can do is weep. In a land that has (largely) forsaken God in its pursuit of power, pleasure, and money, I must admit that we too place “Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree.” And we are cursed as well with our own shameless “male cult prostitutes.” They’re called “lawyers.”

Notwithstanding Shakespeare’s infamous recipe for successful rebellion in *Henry VI*, “first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers” (which is echoed in Saul Alinsky’s promotion of lawless anarchy as a means by which a socialist utopia might be created), lawyers aren’t the only whores in Babylon’s brothel. The politicians, princes, pundits, and even some of the preachers, the academicians, captains of industry, and cultural champions of our day—anyone and everyone who conspires to compete against Yahweh for man’s affections, attention, and authority—is castigated in scripture as a spiritually adulterous “idol maker.” Isaiah writes, **“All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit.”** Note: it’s not only the carved image that’s “nothing.” It’s also the one who makes it. **“Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together....”** Three times in

this one short passage, “shame” is pronounced on those who make things designed to detract from God’s authority.

Isaiah then points out how ridiculous it is to make an idol out of a tree: **“The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house.”** As I said before, nobody actually thinks such idols are real gods. Rather, they *represent* what the idolater considers worthy of his worship. Thus the prophet has identified the chosen “god” of idolatrous man: *man himself*, the deity of atheistic secular humanism. **“He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it...”** Ironically, man relies upon Yahweh to provide him with the raw materials from which to carve his idol.

“Then it becomes fuel for a man.” And this is where fallen man’s “brilliant intellect” is proved to be utter foolishness. The same tree (something God created and nourished) is used by man for both “sacred” and “profane” purposes—proving (if we would but open our eyes) that the wood in itself—that substance that comprises the idol—is nothing special: **“He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, ‘Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!’ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!...’”** It should be patently obvious (but apparently isn’t) that nothing we have made—or even that *God* has made—is able to help us. Only Yahweh Himself can provide for us, deliver us (from both our enemies and ourselves), and show real love to us.

Why can’t idolaters perceive the obvious? Isaiah explains that, too: **“They know not, nor do they discern, for He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, ‘Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?’ He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, ‘Is there not a lie in my right hand?’”** (Isaiah 44:9-11, 13-20) We see this sort of thing over and over again in scripture: people choose to reject the word of God, so in response, God makes the truth unavailable to them—giving them precisely what they wanted: self-delusion. How many times can you slam the door in Yahweh’s face (so to speak) before He’ll get tired of the noise and lock it?

Isaiah brought all of these images—idols, groves of trees used for idol worship, sin, lust, delusion, and death—together in one scathing indictment: **“Who are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue?**

Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit, you who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks?" (Isaiah 57:4-5) The mention of the "slaughter of children" is a reference to what is arguably the most horrific form of idol worship of them all—that of Molech (a.k.a. Chemosh), whose devotees burned their children alive to appease him in groves like the Valley of Hinnom, just south of the old city of Jerusalem. This abomination earned "Gehenna" a place in the metaphorical lexicon of Christ: He used the word as a euphemism for hell. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this practice—in a manner of speaking—is still with us. I find it sadly ironic that the people who most vociferously defend the "trees" (everything from the rain forest to the sustainable logging industry, with all their political corollaries—whales, harp seals, polar bears, snail darters, etc.) are usually the *same* people who are religiously hysterical about "women's reproductive rights," that is, the legal right to abort their unborn babies (preferably at the public's expense). There's nothing wrong with safeguarding the environment, of course: it was Adam's day job, and God still requires it of us. But really, *I don't get it*: if the lives of trees and animals and fish are so precious to liberals, why do they consider human life so utterly worthless? I'm afraid Molech worship is alive and well among the children of transgression and the offspring of deceit, who burn with lust to this very day.

Trees (well, one of them) figured heavily in the imagery surrounding God's plan for man's redemption. I'm speaking, of course, of the "cross" of Christ, sometimes referred to euphemistically as a "tree." As I said, the Hebrew word for tree (*'ets*) is sufficiently broad in its usage to encompass a gallows or cross. And in Greek, the word *xulon* is employed to describe things made from wood—including the implement of Christ's crucifixion. The word normally translated "cross" is *stauros*, which speaks not of the material from which it's made, but its shape: it is literally a stake, pole, or pike—not a "T" shaped device. *Stauros* is derived from the verb *histemi*, meaning "to stand upright." The *xulon*, on the other hand, describes its composition, its origin—something once living that had given its life in the service of God and man.

Even though crucifixion as a means of execution wasn't invented until the rise of Assyria (perhaps 700 BC), the Torah contains a prophetic reference to "hanging someone on a tree," designed to help us understand the spiritual function of the cross. **"And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not**

defile your land that Yahweh your God is giving you for an inheritance.” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23) Hanging someone on a tree was not (at this point in time) a method of execution, but rather a way of subjecting his corpse to disgrace and ridicule. It was seen as the ultimate insult—and as a warning to those who might be tempted to follow in the victim’s footsteps. So we see Joshua employing the practice in the early days of the conquest of Canaan: **“And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.”** (Joshua 8:29) Joshua was careful to follow the letter of the Torah, even as he dealt with the corrupt kings of Canaan, the leaders of pagan society. Another example: **“Afterward Joshua struck them and put them to death, and he hanged them on five trees. And they hung on the trees until evening. But at the time of the going down of the sun, Joshua commanded, and they took them down from the trees and threw them into the cave where they had hidden themselves, and they set large stones against the mouth of the cave, which remain to this very day.”** (Joshua 10:26-27)

Notice a few factors: (1) Hanging a man on a tree meant he was cursed *by God*—not just by men. (2) Since sunset is a metaphor for the end of one’s mortal life, leaving the dead man hanging on the tree overnight would have been symbolic of cursing him in the afterlife. And *that* is Yahweh’s prerogative alone. Man is therefore being warned (as he is so often) not to usurp the authority of God. Specifically, we are not to take it upon ourselves to determine whether a man is saved or lost, or, if he’s obviously lost, to decide whether he’s damned or “merely” spiritually lifeless. These issues are not our call. (3) Such usurpation defiles the land (or the *life*, as the case may be)—making it unsuitable for Yahweh’s purposes: filthy and in need of cleansing.

Paul—whose thought process admittedly isn’t all that easy to follow—ties it all together for us. **“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them....’”** His first point is that we’re all cursed, for we haven’t perfectly kept God’s law. And there’s no point in kidding yourself, as he himself (being a Pharisee) had done for years: if you’re relying on your own good works (i.e., your super-human ability to flawlessly keep every nuance of every precept in the Torah), then you are—by the Torah’s definition—cursed, for no one has *ever* been perfectly successful in performing the rites of the Law, no matter how much they tried, no matter how much they loved Yahweh. Paul left unanswered the issue of whether or not it’s *theoretically* possible to be saved by keeping the Torah. As a practical matter, it can’t be done, and it hasn’t been done. Note that he’s *not* saying that the Torah shouldn’t be observed, nor that it’s obsolete. He’s merely stating what should be obvious: nobody was ever saved, justified, or redeemed before God by his own adherence to God’s Instructions.

That, of course, leaves us in a pickle: we're all cursed, disqualified by our own actions from participation in Yahweh's life. So Paul points out what Abraham (long before the Torah even existed) discovered: **"Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith.' But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them....'"** In other words, there is a difference between obedience (which nobody, from Adam on down, has ever been able to demonstrate to God's satisfaction) and faith (which *is* accessible to every human who ever lived, even if he never even heard of the Torah).

So far, so good, but it all begs the question: faith in *what*? Abraham, for his part, believed in specific promises that had personally been made by God to him and his progeny, and his faith was counted by Yahweh as righteousness. But God made no such temporal promises to us, nor did he demand of us our willingness to slay our firstborn to prove our trust. No, the faith *we* are asked to exercise resides in the very object lesson provided by Abraham's almost-sacrifice of his son Isaac: it was all designed to teach us to trust Yahshua. And this is where the tree comes into the picture: **"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written [in Deuteronomy 21:23], 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' [Greek: *xulon*]**—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."** (Galatians 3:10-14) Those living before Christ's advent, of course, didn't have the specific details of His atoning work in which to exercise their faith. But they didn't have to. Job, in the oldest writings in the entire Bible, stated his faith that "his Redeemer lived," and that he would someday see Him for himself (see Job 19:25-27). For that matter, Adam and Eve had enough evidence to support their faith in a coming Redeemer before they even left the Garden: see Genesis 3:15.**

The "firewood" in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is analogous to the "tree" upon which the Messiah was offered up: **"Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together."** Other symbolic correlations here: Abraham=Yahweh; Isaac=Yahshua; fire=judgment for the sins of mankind; and the knife seems to represent the Holy Spirit: that which achieves holiness, separating good from evil, life from death. Note that they (in the end, Yahweh and Yahshua) went *together* to the place of sacrifice. **"And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here am I, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'" That's one of those "wow" statements that we all too often gloss over.** Not only had Yahweh miraculously provided Abraham with a son in his old age (who was now playing the part of the sacrificial lamb in this little drama), but Yahweh also provided the ram to *literally* stand in for Isaac on the altar. This substitution is the essence of grace: the innocent paying the penalty for the guilty. It is mirrored a hundred different ways in the Torah: Yahweh provided *for*

Himself the Lamb for the burnt offering. That “Lamb’s” name is Yahshua, meaning “Yahweh is Salvation.”

“So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him [Mount Moriah, the very spot where Yahshua would be crucified two thousand years later], Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.” Here we can see the graphic equivalence between Isaac’s firewood and Yahshua’s cross. **“Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of Yahweh called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”** (Genesis 22:6-12) I’m pretty sure the issue wasn’t exactly whether or not Abraham was willing to kill his son on that altar. A lot of *Molech worshipers* did that. Rather, it was his unshakable faith that Yahweh’s promise—to bless the whole world through his son Isaac—was genuine. Abraham *believed* that God would keep His covenant no matter what he did—even if He had to raise Isaac from the dead to do it.

A few more “tree” examples from the Tanach may help to round out our understanding. When interpreting the dream of a couple of his cellmates in prison, Joseph predicted very different results from two rather similar dreams (both of which, it transpired, came about just as Joseph had foreseen). The butler (i.e., the king’s cupbearer) saw a vine with three branches budding grapes, which he made into wine for the pharaoh. Joseph interpreted this to mean that “within three days” the cupbearer would be restored to his former station. The tree (the vine) was bursting with life. This may be a subtle prophecy of Christ’s resurrection—of Yahshua being restored to His rightful former glory within three days of His trial. But there’s a flip side to this coin: **“When the chief baker saw that the interpretation [of the cupbearer’s dream] was favorable, he said to Joseph, ‘I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.’ And Joseph answered and said, ‘This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you.”** (Genesis 40:16-19) Birds, you’ll recall, represent the consequences of our choices. In this case, the choice had been made (by the guilty baker) to usurp what rightfully belonged to the king—ultimately symbolic of Yahweh. The three days are the *same* three days seen previously, but this time the picture is that of someone rejecting that which Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection signified—Yahweh’s means of reconciliation. The consequence of choosing to thus rebel against the King (which is what this rejection of His provision symbolizes) is death—followed by the disgrace of being hanged on a tree. In a way, the difference between the butler and the baker represents the dichotomy between religion and relationship. The baker is metaphorical of those

who would usurp Yahweh's authority by trying to reach Him by means of their own invention. But the cupbearer conveys life and pleasure to the King by rightly handling the wine—representative of the blood of Christ.

The tree plays a same-but-different role in the Book of Esther. This time it's a gallows intended for the servant of God, Mordecai. If we see Mordecai as prophetic of Christ, and Haman symbolic of Satan, this little morality play comes into sharper focus: **"But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai."** Satan hated it when Christ withstood his temptations, and he hates us when we refuse to cave in to his pressure. We need neither give him respect nor tremble in fear at his presence. **"Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh."** I see Zeresh and these "friends" as those who advance Satan's cause in this world, giving aid to our adversary and doing his bidding. **"And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. Then Haman said, 'Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared.'" We read about that feast, if you'll recall, in our study of "horses." "And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate...."** Queen Esther, if I'm not mistaken, is symbolic of Yahweh's beloved and redeemed believers. She had been raised and taught by her uncle Mordecai (read: Yahshua), though Haman (read: Satan) didn't comprehend their true relationship—a fact that would destroy him in the end. Note that Esther is forced by her circumstances to deal with Haman on a daily basis (just as we are). But her relationships with the King (read: Yahweh) and Mordecai (Christ) enable her to overcome the constant peril.

And this is where the "tree" comes into play: **"Then [Haman's] wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows [*'ets*] fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast.' This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made. (Esther 5:9-14)** The prophetic parallels to the crucifixion of Yahshua are hard to miss. To make a long story short, Haman ended up getting hanged on the very gallows he had built to execute Mordecai. The same thing (sort of) happened in the life of Christ, but with a twist. Satan intended to do away with the Messiah once and for all at Calvary, but his plan backfired because he didn't factor in the power of the Living God. Yes, the devil succeeding in getting almost everybody's envy and hatred focused on Christ, and he even succeeded in getting him crucified (though in truth, Yahshua went to the cross voluntarily). But in the end, we'll see Satan, like Haman, "hoisted on his own petard," so to speak. Christ's death, burial, and resurrection—foretold in the first three of Yahweh's seven holy convocations—spelled doom

for our adversary. Just like Haman, Satan was blinded by his hatred. He couldn't see what was really going on right under his nose.

There's a subcurrent that keeps flowing through these "tree" passages—something that only the comatose could chalk up to coincidence. It's the recurring reference to "three days." With Abraham and Isaac, it was the journey in faith to the place of sacrifice: **"And he cut the wood ['ets] for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar."** (Genesis 22:3-4) In Joseph's prison tale, it was the length of time between the vision (i.e., the promise) and its fulfillment. In Esther's story, it describes the period of fasting and prayer that preceded Esther's bold, illegal, and potentially lethal approach to her husband the king concerning the "Haman problem." She sent to her uncle Mordecai this message: **"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."** (Esther 4:16) In retrospect, we can see that the "three days" in each case were prophetic of the passion: *three* successive days, *three* essential acts, to be celebrated separately in the first *three* Levitical convocations: Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Firstfruits—the three most significant days in all of human history.

There's one more generic "tree" incident worth mentioning, and sure enough, the "three days" are there once again. **"They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' And he cried to Yahweh, and Yahweh showed him a log ['ets], and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet."** (Exodus 15:22-25) Our lives, mired in sin and bitterness, can become sweet through the cross of Christ, through which he cleansed us and refreshed our souls. Where did this happen? Three days' walk into the wilderness—the place of anticipation and preparation. These three days are, once again, a symbolic echo of the first three convocations on Yahweh's annual schedule. Yahshua's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection—which fulfilled those three prophetic "feasts"—gave us the hope of new life in Him, and prepared us to stand cleansed and upright in the presence of God. Sweet!

In a fascinating twist, the "tree" was even used as a prop in scripture to teach us about resurrection. Job was mulling over what he thought was his imminent demise, when he considered second-growth trees. **"For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put out branches like a young plant..."** Where I now live is a forested area that was once (probably half a century ago) logged over. Many of the trees have "double

trunks,” that is, there are now two trees (or more) growing from single old root systems that were left behind when they cleared the land. So I know what Job was talking about. And it gives me hope.

At first glance, it seemed to Job that when man dies (unlike a tree’s potential) it’s all over but the worm feast: **“But a man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he? As waters fail from a lake and a river wastes away and dries up, so a man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake or be roused out of his sleep.”** But as Job thought about it, another, more encouraging prospect occurred to him: perhaps we’re something like trees after all. **“Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until Your wrath be past, that You would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. You would call, and I would answer You. You would long for the work of Your hands.”** (Job 14:7-15) Like God calling forth abundant new life from a ravaged, logged-over wasteland, we too (who are of a mind to listen to His call) can expect to “sprout” anew after death—not in the same bodies in which we died of course, but rather raised “in newness of life.” Someday, we’ll have bodies as fit for eternity as our present ones were suited to the temporal earth. It all depends on our roots. The Hebrew word Job used for “roots” is the versatile *shoresh*—“the underground part of a plant that anchors and nourishes the plant... the source, formally root, i.e., that which is the derivation of an object, physical or logical... the sole, i.e., the very bottom part of the foot that makes contact with the ground... a base, the portion of an elevated land mass which is below the ground, which anchors the mountain... or a family line, i.e., a kinship of successive generations.” (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*)

A “root,” then, is that upon which something is based. For a believer, it’s a perfect metaphor for Yah, but there are those who base their lives on falsehood instead: **“Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from Yahweh our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike.”** (Deuteronomy 29:18-19) Moses’ warning was to Israel—not to turn away from Yahweh in order to serve something inferior (which, by definition, is *anything* else). Although the covenant Yahweh made with Israel was to be ratified by their observation of the Torah (which in turn was to be, as Isaiah put it, “a light to the gentiles”) we among the gentile nations who have learned to revere Yahweh through the life of Yahshua of Nazareth should heed Moses’ admonition as well. The false gods of our forefathers—gods of power, sex, money, pride, and superstitious fear—still beckon. And we, like Israel, will fall prey to them if we base our lives on falsehood rather than on our Messiah. Lest there should be any

confusion (since our religious traditions can so easily blind us to our true spiritual status) the litmus test, as always, is the fruit we bear. If we're yielding a harvest of "poisonous and bitter fruit"—dissent, rancor, fear, bondage, suspicion, and anger—we'd best check our "stubbornness of heart" meter.

In our section on "Serpents," we encountered this passage from Isaiah, and sorted out some of the possible prophetic ramifications. **"Rejoice not, O Philistia, all of you, that the rod that struck you is broken, for from the serpent's root will come forth an adder, and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent. And the firstborn of the poor will graze, and the needy lie down in safety; but I will kill your root with famine, and your remnant it will slay."** (Isaiah 14:29-30) This time, I'd like to focus on the concept of "roots." The source or basis of all the evil that Philistia would suffer was Satan himself—that is, the poor choices the Philistines made because they pursued the devil's agenda over God's. But then Yahweh says **"I will kill your root with famine."** In other words, that upon which Philistia had based its culture—the knowledge, power, and greed of men—would, as Moses had described it, be "swept away, the moist and dry alike." Despite the fact that "Philistine" has become an epithet for a crude, boorish person, the Philistines, and the "Sea Peoples" from whom they descended, had a rich and prosperous culture, as long as it lasted. They knew (as the Israelites did not) the secrets of smelting iron, and they were not only great seafarers, they were also a fearsome military presence on land, Israel's most formidable enemy until the rise of Assyria. But they shared the Babylonian religious proclivities of the Canaanites, so their culture—rooted in Satan—was doomed.

In the days of King Hezekiah, Judah came within a whisker of suffering the same fate its northern neighbor Ephraim had—being swallowed whole by the Assyrians. But Yahweh promised to deliver Jerusalem: **"And this shall be the sign for you [that the Assyrians wouldn't take Jerusalem]: this year eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs of the same. Then in the third year sow and reap and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of Yahweh will do this."** (II Kings 19:29-31; cf. Isaiah 37:31) Out of twenty kings of Judah, only eight of them did what was right in the sight of Yahweh, and Hezekiah was one of them. But until his reforms, Judah had lost its bearings. It had been uprooted from its God through apostasy and disobedience. Here Yahweh is pledging to honor the turn toward the light that Hezekiah had made: the Assyrians would not be used as implements of God's wrath against Jerusalem, as they had been against Samaria. Judah would, rather, be given a chance to once again establish roots in Yahweh, which would enable them to sprout branches upward, bearing good fruit with which to feed the world—ultimately Yahshua the Messiah.

The same prophet who delivered this good news to Hezekiah saw the nature of what would spring up through Judah's roots, as tenuous as they were, in their God. Considering the glorious reigning "Son of David" they were expecting, Isaiah's description must have left the Jews scratching their heads. **"Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of Yahweh been revealed? For He grew up before Him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed him not."** (Isaiah 53:1-3) *Huh?* This doesn't sound at all like the Savior/King of legend, ruling in undiminished glory upon the throne of David. Granted, it's a whole lot easier to see in the shadow of Calvary: there were to be two advents of the Christ—a suffering servant atoning for the sins of mankind by offering Himself up as the sacrificial Lamb of God, followed (two millennia later, it would transpire) by the magnificent conqueror, the reigning King—"mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Why the dichotomy? One reason (among many, no doubt) is that at the time of Christ's first advent, Israel, and indeed, the whole world, was "dry ground." We were desperately in need of the restoration and cleansing that only Yahweh's Spirit could provide. When Christ returns in glory, however, all men will have chosen either to receive this Spirit or reject it in favor of demonic indwelling. The "ground" (Hebrew: *eretz*, read: the earth or the land) will no longer be "dry." It will have been washed clean, scrubbed vigorously with the bristle brush of Yahweh's judgment. And it will be ripe for the restoration and refreshing of Yahshua's Millennial Kingdom.

Again, it is Isaiah who explains: **"In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of Him shall the nations inquire, and His resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord [*adonay*] will extend His hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of His people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea."** (Isaiah 11:10-11) The regathering of Israel back into the Land from the nations into which she had been scattered will be the first order of business for the "root of Jesse." Who? Jesse was the father of King David. His "root" is that from which *he* came, the One upon whom Israel's royal dynasty was based—ultimately, Yahweh Himself.

But note that "the nations," that is, the gentiles (Hebrew: *goyim*), are also seen "inquiring" of Yahweh at this time, heeding the "signal" or banner (Hebrew: *nes*) that He has raised. If you track down the scriptural usage of this word *nes*—something lifted up, a standard, signal pole, or ensign—you'll discover that it is metaphorical of the cross of Christ. The same word is used to describe the pole upon which the "serpent in the wilderness" (see Numbers 21:6-9) was raised, something that was in turn linked directly to the cross (see John 3:14). The *nes* is thus seen as a rallying point for a people who are recognized worldwide as being

those who heed the message of the cross: **“All inhabitants of the world and dwellers on the earth: when He [Yahweh] lifts up a banner [*nes*] on the mountains, you [the nation being described, which I believe to be the United States] see it; and when He blows a trumpet [a call to action, but probably also indicative of the rapture], you hear it.”** (Isaiah 18:3) This is all the legacy of the “root of Jesse.”

In the closing passage of the Bible, the issue of precisely how this “root” will be manifested is addressed. Yahshua says, **“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing My recompense with Me, to repay everyone for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.... I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”** (Revelation 22:12-13, 16) Yahshua is *both* the root (the forebear, progenitor, and basis) of David, *and* his offspring, his physical descendant. The only way this could be possible (since you can’t be your own grandfather) is for Yahshua, who lived among us in history as a human being, to actually be God—Yahweh manifested in flesh.

Feel free to deny this if you wish. It’s your choice to make. But know this: belief is a package deal. You can’t logically receive “Jesus” as a great teacher and moralist and at the same time deny that He is God—the ultimate authority. You can’t expect God to answer your prayers for peace and prosperity without reference—and deference—to Yahshua of Nazareth. You can’t logically hope for God to act in this world in a manner inconsistent with His own word—something that reveals judgment, justice, and recompense. **“Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before Yahweh, for He comes to judge the earth. Oh give thanks to Yahweh, for He is good; for His steadfast love endures forever!”** (I Chronicles 16:33-34) When Yahweh comes to judge the earth, it will be in the persona of Yahshua. That’s good news if you’re His, and bad news if you’re not.

Nature—led by the trees, it seems—has never been unaware of the glory of Yahweh. But the time is coming when nature’s overt demonstration of its enthusiastic obeisance before Yahweh will be more obvious than usual. **“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before Yahweh. For He comes, for He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in His faithfulness.”** (Psalm 96:11-13) In both of these passages, the exuberant celebration of nature is linked to Yahweh (as King Yahshua) coming to judge the earth. It’s not that heaven and earth, the sea, the grasses, and trees have all of a sudden become sentient beings with minds of their own. It is, rather, that all of nature will have *cause* to rejoice when Yahshua assumes the throne of David. Fallen man has been hard on the earth, and the events of the Tribulation will only serve to accelerate his drive toward the extinction of life. Between inadvertent pollution and the purposeful rape of the planet, we—especially in the

last century or so—have given the marvelous mechanisms God instituted to keep our world pristine a run for their money. Don't take this the wrong way: I'm not one of those "earth-first" types who, having decided that creation was all just an unending series of happy accidents that could never happen again, choose to worship "mother-earth" like some sort of pagan goddess. But as far back as Eden, it was man's assigned responsibility to look after the earth, to care for it and for all of the things living upon it. So when God's judgment is complete, when man's greed and sloth and pride and stupidity have all been pruned back, and creation has once again been placed under the personal care of the Heavenly Vinedresser, then **"all the trees of the forest [will] sing for joy before Yahweh."**

At the moment, it all may seem like a pipedream, of course. Yahweh has told us in a thousand little ways that He intends to let the world run without much overt "interference" on His part until the appointed time. So all we see as we look at the world today is "increasing entropy," things getting worse and worse at an ever increasing pace. But this too was prophesied, so that we might have peace—albeit with a renewed sense of urgency—as we saw the end coming. We were told to *expect* wars, rumors of war, famine, diseases, and earthquakes, not to mention irrational hatred, betrayal, the rise of false prophets, an increase in lawlessness, deception, and a decrease in love. But remember what Yahweh said through His prophet Isaiah: **"My word that goes out from My mouth shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for Yahweh, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."** (Isaiah 55:11-13) Under the coming reign of Yahshua, the earth will bud and bloom like the Garden of Eden, celebrating its own miraculous healing under the scepter of the Anointed King.

The idea of "bearing fruit" is very important to Yahweh. Even when judgment and warfare were in the picture, trees that bore fruit were to be considered sacrosanct. Consider this admonition to the Israelites as they were about to invade Canaan—under instructions to utterly destroy the pagans: **"When you besiege a city for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. You may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down."** Fruit trees were to be considered a resource that the Israelites would need long after the Canaanites had been driven out. To waste them on timber for fortifications or weapons—or to cut them down out of spite for the enemy—was

the wrong way to treat a gift from God. **“Are the trees in the field human, that they should be besieged by you?”** In other words, don’t punish the trees for the sins of their owners. **“Only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, that you may build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it falls.”** (Deuteronomy 20:19-20) Only if the trees bore no edible fruit (or nuts, I surmise), were they approved for use as lumber.

Trees of every sort can be replaced and regrown, of course, even though it can take decades for a tree (like a person) to mature. So the issue of “bearing fruit” seems (to me, anyway) to be laden with symbolic significance. Could it be that God is telling us *not* to prevent the people we meet from bearing their fruit, *even if it’s bad*? As odd as it sounds, that might be the case: the *pretense* of goodness and godliness has led more people to hell than all the overt vice and violence in the world. Keeping rules is not remotely the same thing as having a relationship with God. Religious hypocrisy is a smokescreen that prevents honest searchers from perceiving the real love of Yahweh. So John reports the words of the angelic messenger concerning the end of days: **“Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.”** (Revelation 22:11) Be yourself, he says, ’cause you’re not fooling anybody anyway.

So God says, “Don’t cut down the fruit trees of your enemy.” In a revealing vignette from Muslim lore, we read that after Muhammad had turned against the Jews of Yathrib (a.k.a. Medina), he went against his own former proclamation (which he had no doubt picked up from the Talmud, which is loosely based on the Torah) and in a fit of pique, cut down the palm trees of the Jewish Beni-Nadir tribe. In the Sunnah (*Ibn Ishaq* #437), we read, “After telling his Companions about the treachery which the Jews had meditated against him, the Apostle [Muhammad] ordered them to prepare for war and to march against them.” The Jews hadn’t actually *done* anything to harm Muhammad, you understand. They had merely considered his messianic claims and found them less than compelling. That was his idea of “treachery.” So, “Muhammad personally led his men against the Nadir and halted in their quarter. The Jews took refuge against him in their homes, so he ordered their date palms to be cut down and burnt. They shouted, ‘Muhammad, you have forbidden wonton destruction of property and have blamed those who perpetrated it. Why are you doing this?’” *Why?* Because he was a pathologically narcissistic, satanically inspired hypocrite. But realizing at last that he had proved himself to be a petty, inconsistent fool (which is presumably a bad thing if you’re a “prophet”), he “conveniently” conjured up a timely revelation from Allah: “The palm trees you cut down or left standing intact was by Allah’s dispensation so that He might disgrace the transgressors.” (Qur’an 59:5) In other words, the ends justify the means. Well, what’s a false god good for, if you can’t put words in his mouth?

What if someone's "fruit" is good, but it's making yours look evil in comparison? That very thing happened to the prophet Jeremiah. When the men of Anathoth (Jeremiah's birthplace, a mile or two north of Jerusalem) got tired of his less than flattering prophecies, they plotted to kill him. But **"Yahweh made it known to me and I knew; then You showed me their deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, 'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.'** But, O Yahweh of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You have I committed my cause." (Jeremiah 11:18-20) That's one way to get rid of the fruit: cut down the tree that bears it. If Jerry's critics had perceived the Torah's symbolism, they would have realized that when Yahweh had forbidden "cutting down your enemy's fruit trees," He was speaking of *people* as well. Of course, if you've made Yahweh your enemy, you can't expect to understand much at all. So in the end, who was "remembered no more?" Jeremiah's words have been read all over the globe by multiplied millions of people. But Anathoth? I'm fairly conversant with Israel's geography, but I had to look up Anathoth in a book.

Yahweh had "judged" between Jeremiah and the men of Anathoth—elevating the status of His prophet and diminishing the influence of his detractors. This is a recurring theme throughout scripture: God lifting up the humble and debasing the proud. Using trees as a metaphor, He stated His intentions: **"And all the trees of the field shall know that I am Yahweh; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am Yahweh; I have spoken, and I will do it."** (Ezekiel 17:24) He's not speaking of the arboreal arts here; He's using trees to teach us about His dealings with people and with nations. At the risk of over-analyzing this, note that there are two separate criteria in play. Whether a tree is "low" or "high" is a matter of God's gifting. Yahweh makes some of us tall cedar trees, and others humble hyssop shrubs. It's no sin to be "short" in some area—beauty, personal charisma, intelligence, wealth, etc. It's how we use what we've been given that matters. God's gifts are not an occasion for pride; they're given to us as tools to be used in His service.

But "green" *versus* "dry" is a slightly different matter. This time, the "gift" is water—metaphorical of the source of life itself, and in the long run, spiritual life in Christ, as evidenced in the restoration and cleansing it provides in the life of the believer. If we resist the Holy Spirit, if we balk at restoration and refuse to be made clean, God reserves the right to withdraw the Spirit's influence. He has done this in response to man's bad choices as long as our race has walked the earth. But conversely, if we—thirsty shrubs languishing in the desert of sin—reach out our roots in search of the God we perceive is calling to us, He has promised to provide the cleansing and restoration we need to stand upright in His presence.

Israel at the time of Christ's advent was "green wood." They (many of them) were living in expectation of the coming Messiah: Anna, Simeon, and John the Baptist were but the tip of the iceberg of Israel's prophetic anticipation. But when Israel's rulers turned their backs—and their whips—on the Messiah, Yahweh removed His Spirit of protection from the nation. As He was bearing His cross toward Golgotha, Yahshua was heard saying, **"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood [*xulon*] is green, what will happen when it is dry?"** (Luke 23:28-31) The "wood" was dry enough in 70 AD, when the Romans under Titus sacked Jerusalem, and it was downright crispy when Emperor Hadrian came back to finish the job in 133.

Will Israel ever become "green wood" again? Yes, but only when they return to Yahweh and recognize His Messiah, Yahshua—the one known to Christians as Jesus Christ. Unless I am mistaken about a great many things, the day is not far off when *this* will happen in Israel: **"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.'"** This will become glorious reality on the definitive Day of Atonement—the sixth of Yahweh's seven holy convocations, preceding the commencement of Yahshua's Millennial kingdom by just five days. **"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."** (Isaiah 35:3-6)

This isn't the first time wood and water were connected in the context of judgment in the Bible. The first time, of course, was during the flood of Noah (see Genesis 6). The earth Noah knew was wiped clean and restored like a blank slate while he and his family were lifted to safety in a huge wooden boat built to Yahweh's exacting specifications. The same combination of symbolic factors was seen several times during the ten plagues of Egypt. For instance, the first plague: **"Thus says Yahweh, 'By this you shall know that I am Yahweh: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood. The fish in the Nile shall die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will grow weary of drinking water from the Nile....'"** The Nile was the Egyptians' lifeline—the one thing they relied on more than anything else—in other words, its "god" in the most simplistic sense of the word. Each of the ten plagues dethroned one or another of Egypt's pagan deities. In this case, Hapi (the "spirit of the Nile") and Khnum (its "guardian") were shown to be powerless. The plague didn't stop with the water flowing in the great river. **"And Yahweh said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their**

ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood ['ets] and in vessels of stone.”” (Exodus 7:17-19) “Vessels of wood” were (I’m guessing) mostly things like water troughs for animals and irrigation sluices—the point being that the ramifications of worshipping a false god like the waters of the Nile would not be restricted to men alone, but would affect every facet of Egypt’s national existence.

Trees and plants were once again targets of the seventh plague: **“There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the people of Israel were, was there no hail.”** (Exodus 9:24-26) The Egyptian “sky goddess” was called Nut. Either she was working for Yahweh (choke, cough) or she didn’t really exist. Either way, the plants and trees were decimated: the God of the Israelites had had just about enough of the fruit of Egyptian society. The Jews, who lived in Goshen, were spared (just as they had been from the flies, the disease killing the cattle, and the boils—and would soon be from the locusts, the darkness, and most significantly, the curse upon the firstborn).

Next on Yahweh’s divine “hit list” was the supposed protector of crops, Seth (or Set), and one of Egypt’s biggies, the “earth-mother” goddess of life itself—Isis. Neither one of them stood a chance against Yahweh’s armies of locusts: **“The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.”** (Exodus 10:14-15) Once again, the trees and plants—the basis of everyone’s diet, whether animal or human, had been targeted. God wanted the Egyptians (and us) to understand that His provision is provisional: if we won’t acknowledge Him as the source of our life, He reserves the right to remove what He’s provided to sustain life.

The ninth plague—darkness—once again demonstrated Yahweh’s absolute control over the food supply, since the photosynthetic plants that comprise the base of the food chain derive their own sustenance from the sun. The Egyptian “god” toppled here was Ra—the sun god. Trees are again directly connected to judgment in the tenth and last plague—the death of the firstborn. Here, the blood of the Passover lamb was to be applied to the wooden doorposts and lintels of those who trusted Yahweh for their protection—a blatantly obvious dress rehearsal for the passion of the Messiah. Besides Pharaoh (who fancied himself a god) the Egyptian deity brought to its knees here was Osiris, the supposed giver of life. I find it fascinating that the last three (and most terrifying) plagues directly

targeted the “gods” that correspond to the proto-trinity of ancient Babylon: Osiris is analogous to Nimrod, Isis to Semiramis, and Ra to Tammuz. One by one, they were destroyed by the One True God, Yahweh—which is not to say their worship didn’t persist in so many permutations you can’t even count ’em, even as it does to this day in the humanist veneration of power, sex, and money.

Remarkably, over the centuries, even the nation of Israel embraced this curse. In a scathing indictment of a nation who turned its back on its own history (pay attention, America) Yahweh instructed His prophet Jeremiah to write off Judah as a total loss: **“As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me, for I will not hear you.”** What could be so horrible that God would declare His people to be beyond salvage? They had embraced the very gods He had proven were insipid forgeries way back in Egypt. And as usual, we see trees and judgment in the same view: **“Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven.”** This “queen of heaven” is the same Isis who had been stripped bare and dethroned in Yahweh’s plague of locusts—the Asherah we saw so roundly condemned a few pages back, in Deuteronomy 12:2-3. Yahweh next points out that their idolatries don’t hurt *Him* one bit, but they bring shame and wrath on the ones who practice them. **“And they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke Me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke? declares Yahweh. Is it not themselves, to their own shame?”** And notice what will bear the brunt of His anger: the trees, the “fruit of the ground.” **“Therefore thus says the Lord Yahweh: behold, My anger and My wrath will be poured out on this place, upon man and beast, upon the trees of the field and the fruit of the ground. It will burn and not be quenched.”** (Jeremiah 7:16-20) As I said, Yahweh’s provision is provisional—it depends upon our response to it.

Centuries after Judah had been exiled to the Babylon they seemed to like so much—and were then allowed to return to the Land to give it another try—John the Baptist expanded the thought. **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’** Actually, Jeremiah had. *All* of the prophets had. But the religious elite weren’t exactly coming to John to escape from God’s wrath. By visiting the first prophet to arise in Israel in four hundred years, they were merely trying to earn popularity points among the populace, like a hopeful politician desperately trying to identify with the most respected guy around. (There’s a reason American presidents over half a century consulted with Billy Graham, and it’s *not* because they were repentant or receptive.) **“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”** (Matthew 3:7-10, cf. Luke 3:7-9) Like a broken record, we

see the trees—the producers of fruit—symbolically bearing the brunt of God’s judgment against us.

Jude too made it clear that “trees” are a metaphor for mankind’s “fruit-bearing” (whether good, bad, or non-existent) in this world: **“But these people [earlier described as “ungodly men who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ”] blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error and perished in Korah’s rebellion.”**

These three men serve as examples of the type, who turned their backs on God out of pride, greed, or ambition. **“These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, looking after themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted.”** (Jude 10-13) By late autumn, fruit trees are supposed to have hit their peak—loaded with luscious, sweet fruit, ripe for the picking. But these ungodly men of whom Jude speaks are described as “fruitless.” They’re good for nothing, like clouds that scud by overhead but give the earth no rain. Actually, they’re *worse* than nothing, for they hold out the promise of good but produce only disappointment. A lie is worse than silence.

If trees, then, are a metaphor for people subject to judgment (whether good or bad) the apocalyptic vision seen by John on Patmos does not bode well. Before the “great divide” known as the Tribulation gets underway, we see this vignette: **“After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree.”** In other words, God’s wrath is being held in check for the time being. He has a very good reason for doing this: **“Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.’ And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.”** (Revelation 7:1-4) These 144,000 Jews (or more properly, Israelites) will be made immune to the ravages of the times. They can’t be touched by the warfare, disease, famine, and natural disaster that will characterize these seven years. All 144,000 of them are seen (prophetically) greeting the returning Messiah on Mount Zion (see Revelation 14:1), a scene that will take place on the definitive Day of Atonement, only five days from the end of the Great Unpleasantness.

But between their “sealing” and their vindication, the whole earth is in for an unprecedented trial: **“The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.”** (Revelation 8:7) This, unless I miss my guess, indicates widespread

thermonuclear warfare. (What, did you think fallen man could build weapons like that and not use them?) A dozen separate prophetic factors force me to the conclusion that eretz Israel will never be nuked. (I wish I could report similar prophetic clues concerning America's deliverance, but I can't.) Logic dictates that one of the reasons all 144,000 will make it alive until the end of the Tribulation is that they will all have emigrated to Israel before the shooting starts. A nuclear weapon, after all, is quite indiscriminant. The "trees being burned up" here are literal, of course, but I can't help but wonder if there's also a symbolic component to this. If we think in terms of "bearing fruit," could this mean that mankind's ability to do right or wrong—as individuals—will be severely curtailed at this time? Daniel reports that the power of the holy people shall be "completely shattered." I have a feeling that they won't be alone.

The shoe is on the other foot (so to speak) during the fifth trumpet judgment: **"The fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads."** (Revelation 9:1-4) This time, the trees are specifically *exempted* from wrath. But then again, these aren't ordinary locusts—devourers of vegetation. These beasties are demonic, and their target—for five long months—will be those who are not sealed by God against their onslaught, and especially (I surmise) the recipients of the mark of the beast.

Does our observation still hold that a "tree" metaphorically speaks of the ability or potential of mankind to bear spiritual fruit? At this point in the Tribulation (well past the halfway point, past the abomination of desolation and the commencement of the Antichrist's ironfisted rule), few if any will be left "undecided" between Yahweh and Satan: most of the world will have made their choice (and most, sadly, will have chosen Satan's man). So the fruit one bears—whether good or evil—will be especially revealing. If we take Matthew 25:31-46 (the prophecy of the separation of the "sheep" from the "goats" at the Tribulation's conclusion) as our cue, "good fruit" will consist of meeting the needs of Christ by meeting the needs of His "brethren" (Jews, and perhaps also other believers), while bad fruit (or no fruit) will be defined as refusing to do so—a circumstance that will earn the goats a home in hell.

Judgment in Biblical parlance doesn't necessarily mean condemnation. Technically, both in Hebrew and Greek, it denotes separation of good from evil, a judicial decision based on evidence and testimony—the declaration of what it means to be "holy." So even though for most of humanity (those who choose to

walk the broad path that leads to destruction—see Matthew 7:13), God’s “judgment” will result in a sentence of separation from Yahweh, it *can* result in blessing. The Psalmist writes, **“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of Yahweh, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”** (Psalm 1:1-3) A good, healthy tree, he says, bears fruit when the time is right. And what makes this tree—the blessed man—healthy? Abundant water (read: the work of the Holy Spirit) and the Torah: Yahweh’s symbolic, systematic unveiling of the mission of His Messiah.

Solomon spoke often of this same sort of “tree of life.” **“[Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.”** (Proverbs 3:18) **“The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise.”** (Proverbs 11:30) **“A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.”** (Proverbs 15:4) We’re used to being encouraged to “do good.” But stating this as negative proposition may help to bring it into focus: folly, wickedness, and an unbridled tongue are a tree of death whose fruit is poisonous. Just as the “tree of life” symbolically yields good fruit, this bitter harvest is the rightful “food” of those who prefer the counsel of the ungodly, the path of sinners, and the position of those who ridicule God’s truth.

And who knows? Perhaps the “tree of life” isn’t *entirely* symbolic. There could well be a literal component as well. I don’t suppose it really matters. But Christ’s word to the church at Ephesus included this promise: **“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree [*xulon*] of life, which is in the paradise of God.”** (Revelation 2:7) And later in the same vision, John saw the tree of life looming large in the garden of the redeemed: **“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree [*xulon*] of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.... Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.... I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”** (Revelation 22:1-2, 14, 18-19) In the end, the tree of life is cross of Christ. Its leaves are the word of God; and its fruit is love.

HYSSOP

3.3.1

Humility

“God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men... and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.” (I Kings 4:29-34) It has been my experience that knowledge, in and of itself, is overrated. What is needful is what Yahweh gave Solomon: “wisdom and understanding,” the ability to utilize knowledge for good. While pursuing knowledge and factual data, Solomon considered not only the big, self-important things (characterized by the cedar tree). He also took into account what may seem insignificant by comparison, like the humble hyssop, for it too is part of God’s creation: it’s there for a reason. Without looking at both ends of the spectrum, our perception of the world around us will be skewed. Remember: whales can’t live without plankton.

It is instructive to note how often in scripture hyssop is seen contrasted or in combination with cedar. They are, as we saw above, used to represent the least and the greatest, presented side by side to make a point. So since “the last shall be first,” let us begin our examination of the symbolic meanings of individual trees and plants with hyssop. The Hebrew word for this shrub is *'ezob*. It’s likely from the mint family, possibly related to marjoram, probably from the genus *Origanum*. As plants go, it’s known for its insignificance, as revealed by Yahshua’s usage of the concept: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”** (Matthew 23:23) The idea is, “You guys attend to the little stuff, the religious minutiae, but you’re missing the big picture altogether. The ‘Law’ you claim to be following has symbolic significance that points toward Me. Yes, you *should* tithe, but it will do you no good to calculate out the correct amount to the last little cumin seed or sprig of mint if you ignore or forget the fundamentals: you are to show your love for Yahweh by loving your neighbor.”

Hyssop is one of three elements symbolically grouped together time after time in the Torah. It represents (as we saw in Solomon’s usage) the small, seemingly insignificant facets of life. Cedar, by contrast, was the most magnificent tree to be

found in the region—thus symbolic of strength, splendor, and longevity: the other end of our experiential spectrum. The third element is scarlet, an expensive red dye derived from the eggs of the female kermes or cochineal scale insect (found on kermes oak trees). The color is the clue: it represents blood, and specifically, the blood of the Messiah—or, what that blood was designed to cover: our sin. The point is the same as that Yahshua made to the religious hypocrites: the small details of the Torah (the hyssop) and the big picture (the cedar) of Yahweh’s plan are both to be perceived within the context of the means of salvation (the scarlet). In the end, you cannot separate these three things.

Helping us get our bearings is this statement, wrapping up a lengthy passage on “leprous disease” where the ritual use of hyssop and its two companions are specified: **“This is the law for any case of leprous disease: for an itch, for leprous disease in a garment or in a house, and for a swelling or an eruption or a spot, to show when it is unclean and when it is clean. This is the law for leprous disease.”** (Leviticus 14:54-57) “Leprous disease” here (Hebrew: *tsara’ath*) isn’t restricted to classic clinical leprosy, a.k.a. Hansen’s disease (*Elephantiasis graecorum*), but encompasses a broad range of skin infections and environmental infestations such as mildew, mold, and fungus in clothing or houses. “Leprosy” is a thinly veiled euphemism for sin: it is something that separates us from the community of faith, and it will ultimately, if left untreated, kill us.

“Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘This shall be the law of the leprous person for the day of his cleansing.’ “Cleansing” is a rather misleading translation. The Torah never tells us (directly, anyway) how we may be cured of the disease. These instructions, rather, point out what to do *in response* to our cleansing. What’s in view here is the official declaration or pronouncement that the leper has *already* been healed. **“He shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall look...”** As long as he is “officially” a leper (having at some point previously been declared unclean) the patient may not enter “the camp,” that is, the congregation of the saints. This is, if we’re honest with ourselves, the state into which we have all been born—“condemned already,” as Yahshua put it in John 3:18.

Since “leprosy” is analogous to sin, however, it follows that the death, burial, and resurrection of Yahshua have provided a cure—to *everyone*. Each of us, from Mother Teresa to Adolph Hitler, has been provided with the means to be made free of our disease. But it is up to us to receive the cure, to choose to implement Yahweh’s treatment. Therefore, until we do (symbolically) what is indicated here in the Torah, we will remain separated from God, cure or no cure. That is the situation being described: **“Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person [potentially true of every person on the planet], the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet**

yarn and hyssop. And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease.” (Leviticus 14:1-7) This, of course, is usually where our eyes glaze over and our train of thought gets shunted onto a siding. What in the world is he talking about?

If this isn't purely symbolic, then it would seem that Yahweh has a truly twisted sense of humor. It seems obvious to me that each element of the ritual (of which I'm only discussing the portion involving hyssop—there's quite a bit more to it) is prophetic of some facet of God's plan for our redemption. (1) The “Priest” who directs the whole affair is Christ. It is He who ventured “out of the camp” on our behalf when we were yet sinners, putting Himself in harm's way for our benefit. (2) The “two live clean birds” are analogous to the two goats used on the Day of Atonement: one will be sacrificed, while the other one, “baptized” in the blood of the first, will be set free—it's a picture of grace. On another level, both birds represent Christ: one slain, the other “risen from the dead,” a state we will emulate if we are in Him. Remember that “birds” represent the consequences of choice—whether ours or Yahweh's. (3) The “earthenware vessel” reminds us that we are made of dust. It represents our mortality. The first bird, you'll notice, is killed “in” this bowl. That is, Christ's death is intimately associated with the mortality of mankind: although He was God, He became a man in order to save men. Moreover, we in our mortal state are what “holds” His shed blood. It's a sobering picture, if you think about it. (4) The “fresh water” is more than just “not salty.” The phrase actually denotes running or flowing water, but the *literal* translation of the Hebrew is “living” water. The slaying of the first clean bird in the earthenware vessel is to take place “over” this living water. It's pretty clear to me that this juxtaposition indicates the work of the Holy Spirit, flowing beneath—underpinning, upholding, and supporting—the whole crucifixion scenario. And since water represents both cleansing and restoration, we can begin to perceive how the death of the Messiah—followed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26, 16:7)—ultimately achieves these objectives in our lives.

That leaves only the three symbolic elements that were to be placed into the blood. (5) The scarlet (or a bit of yarn dyed scarlet) represents the blood of Christ, pointing out (albeit subtly) that the literal blood of the clean bird was only a symbol, a temporary expedient, a harbinger of the ultimate expression of God's love. Isaiah points out the connection between scarlet, our sin, and the atoning blood of Christ: **“Come now, let us reason together, says Yahweh: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”** (Isaiah 1:18) (6) The cedar wood (as we shall see in the next section) is symbolic of strength. Strength can be a good thing or not, depending

upon how it's used. Like beauty or intelligence or wealth, it is a gift from Yahweh, to be used (if you have it) for His honor. But all too often, it becomes an occasion for pride instead. And (7) hyssop indicates the other end of the scale—insignificance, weakness, or humility: what we are in our natural state apart from God, whether we know it or not. Together, these three substances represent the irony of the human condition—its irrational pride, its irrelevance apart from Yahweh, and the seemingly indelible stain of sin's defilement—which may be made white only in the blood of the Messiah's sacrifice. And in the context of declaring people to be free from their "leprosy" (read: sin), these three things also speak of what it took to cure our malady: the blood of atonement, the strength of Yahshua's character, and the incredible humility it took for Yahshua to lay aside the trappings of deity for a time in order to become our "Cure."

This procedure was used for declaring someone clean who had formerly been diagnosed with a disqualifying blemish on his or her skin. But the rite for cleansing (i.e. pronouncing clean) infected *houses* (presumably with mold or mildew issues) was virtually identical. **"But if the priest comes and looks, and if the disease has not spread in the house after the house was plastered, then the priest shall pronounce the house clean, for the disease is healed. And for the cleansing of the house he shall take two small birds, with cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop, and shall kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water and shall take the cedarwood and the hyssop and the scarlet yarn, along with the live bird, and dip them in the blood of the bird that was killed and in the fresh water and sprinkle the house seven times. Thus he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird and with the fresh water and with the live bird and with the cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn. And he shall let the live bird go out of the city into the open country. So he shall make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean."** (Leviticus 14:48-53)

Why was the whole thing process repeated, almost verbatim? It has to do with the distinction between people and "where they live"—their homes, nations, cultures, and societies. I believe what we're being told here is that the same sort of "cleansing" that an individual may enjoy (at his discretion, as a matter of personal choice) is also available, in a way, to the whole community or country. It's healing on a national scale, the kind of thing Yahweh promised to Solomon: **"If My people who are called by My name humble themselves, and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."** (II Chronicles 7:14) Such national restoration must begin with the "cleansing" of its individual citizens, of course. *How many of them* is a matter left unsaid, but finding "seven thousand who haven't bowed the knee to Ba'al" in a nation of seven million (the condition of Israel at the time of Elijah) probably isn't going to cut it.

We are reminded that the “blessings and cursings” passages (notably Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28) are primarily *national* in character and scope. Yahweh was very specific about what it would take for Israel to restore her fortunes. What is being described here, then, is the rough equivalent of declaring “the leprous house” to be clean: **“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where Yahweh your God has driven you, and return to Yahweh your God, you and your children, and obey His voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then Yahweh your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where Yahweh your God has scattered you....”** Remarkably, Yahweh has begun this compassionate repatriation process in Israel *without* waiting for them to return with a whole heart to Him. Perhaps He’s figuring that if He shows them sufficient evidence of His miraculous provision and protection, they’ll eventually get the hint. **“And you shall again obey the voice of Yahweh and keep all His commandments that I command you today. Yahweh your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For Yahweh will again take delight in prospering you, as He took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of Yahweh your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”** (Deuteronomy 30:1-3, 8-10)

I have observed that *literal* compliance with ninety percent of the Torah is virtually impossible to do as a single individual: it can only be done as a community, as a comprehensive cultural system. (For instance, leaving the edges of your field unharvested is pointless if the poor don’t know that you’ve done it so that they can come in and gather something for themselves to live on.) Note that Israel’s national willingness to observe God’s Instructions will be met with the *ability* to do so—something neither they nor anybody else can do today, if for no other reason than that they have no temple or priesthood. Notice too that Moses said “when,” not “if.” Israel *would* (as we now know from history) experience the cursings. But just as surely, they will one day know the blessings as well. When? During the Millennial reign of the Messiah, the One whom the whole Torah was designed to reveal. As I’ve said before, establishing a real relationship with Yahshua the Messiah is tantamount to “keeping God’s Law.” In the end, it is the *only* way to really **“obey the voice of Yahweh and keep all His commandments and His statutes that are written in this Book of the Law.”**

In case you’ve lost your bearings, we were talking about the humble hyssop shrub and its role as one of Yahweh’s symbols of how to deal with the human condition (on both individual and corporate levels). Hyssop indicates our intrinsic insignificance, weakness, and helplessness before God, and it prophetically hints at the Messiah’s subsequent self abasement on our behalf.

Precisely the same three-ingredient combination (hyssop, cedar, and scarlet) is specified in the goofy sounding but incredibly symbol-rich ordinance of the “red heifer.” This is the prescribed rite for cleansing someone who has come into contact with a dead body—something that, in a nation the size of Israel, would have happened quite often. Like the law of leprosy, this one is quite complicated, so once again let us merely concentrate on how hyssop is to be employed. First, Yahweh told Moses, **“Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come....”** As the religious elite of Israel would later define it, this is an extremely rare animal. They insisted that no more than three hairs on its body may be any color other than red. Only nine such animals have ever been used for this purpose in the whole history of Israel—none of them within the last two thousand years. Of course, Yahweh didn’t say any such thing. Judging by the casual way He talks about them, it would appear that by His definition, they might have been unusual but they were common enough for the task at hand. (As I’ve said, Yahweh *never* asks us to contribute something He hasn’t already provided.)

Being a heifer (by definition, a young cow that had never borne a calf), the animal would have contributed nothing to mankind—no offspring, no milk, and no labor—*except* through her death. This, of course, makes her a “type” of Christ, but with a twist: it’s a subtle rebuke to those who find no value in the cross, but esteem Him (or *say* they do) only for his teachings and example. But what Yahweh is saying here is that outside the context of Yahshua’s true mission—atonement for our sins on Calvary’s tree and then raising Himself from the dead—His miracles, teachings, parables, and prophecies are of no more significance than the heifer’s cow patties strewn across the back forty. The red heifer’s whole job (not to mention Christ’s) was *to die* so folks could be indemnified from the curse of death.

“And you shall give it to Eleazar the priest, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him.” The parallels continue: Yahshua was slain outside the city walls of Jerusalem—outside the “camp.” **“And Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times.”** Aaron was still alive when this precept was given, so it’s significant that his son Eleazar is tasked for this service. He is symbolic not only of those who follow Aaron (i.e., his sons in perpetuity, all of them priests of Israel, by definition) but also of us who follow Yahshua (He of whom Aaron himself is symbolic)—believers in Yahweh, both Jewish and gentile, throughout the ages. We are to take a “hands-on” approach in making the blood of Christ’s sacrifice efficacious for the salvation of mankind. How? By spreading the good news that we have been cleansed from the curse of death. What was Eleazar supposed to do with the blood? Use it to point toward the tabernacle—itsself a complex metaphor

for Yahweh's plan for our redemption. **"And the heifer shall be burned in his sight. Its skin, its flesh, and its blood, with its dung, shall be burned...."**

This is where hyssop reenters the picture: **"And the priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer."** (Numbers 19:2-6) Just as in the leprosy ritual, our pride, insignificance, and sin are identified with the sacrifice—this time through fire, indicating judgment through separation. And as before, these elements also point toward the strength, humility, and shed blood of the One undergoing God's judgment in our stead: Yahshua.

So what was to be done once the carcass of the young cow, with the hyssop, cedar, and scarlet, had been reduced to ashes? The ashes, mixed with water, were to be sprinkled upon the one who had encountered death. It should be pretty obvious that the procedure had no intrinsic value in warding off disease or corruption: its efficacy was entirely symbolic. **"Whoever in the open field touches someone who was killed with a sword or who died naturally, or touches a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. For the unclean they shall take some ashes of the burnt sin offering, and fresh water shall be added in a vessel."** This phase of the ritual also involved hyssop, this time as an implement of application: **"Then a clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there and on whoever touched the bone, or the slain or the dead or the grave...."** It wasn't that hyssop made such a fine "sprinkling brush." The symbolic point of using it is that only through humbling ourselves before Yahweh in receiving His gift of life—rather than arrogantly presuming we must (or even *can*) perform well enough to impress God—can we be indemnified from the death our sins have brought upon us.

"And the clean person shall sprinkle it on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day. Thus on the seventh day he shall cleanse him, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and at evening he shall be clean." (Numbers 19:16-19) Since the whole point of the ordinance of the red heifer was to cleanse someone who had "touched death," the timing—the "third day" and the "seventh day"—is noteworthy. These (I believe) are references to the third and seventh "feasts" or "holy convocations" that Yahweh commanded the Israelites to observe. As a group, these seven holidays prophetically commemorate the seven most significant milestones in the unfolding history of Yahweh's redemption of mankind: (1) the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God; (2) the removal of our sins; (3) the restoration of life; (4) the indwelling of Yahweh's Holy Spirit; (5) the transformation from mortality to immortality; (6) the culmination of human choice; and (7) the dwelling of God with man.

The third day, then, is analogous to the Feast of Firstfruits, which predicted the bodily resurrection of the slain Messiah. This act proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that life beyond this mortal existence is not only possible, it's

something Yahweh is prepared to achieve in us. “Touching death,” need neither be fatal nor permanent, though it is the lot of all men. But to avoid the unpleasant after-effects of human mortality, one must be sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer (complete with hyssop, cedar, and scarlet). This must be done in an attitude of humility before Yahweh (hence the hyssop sprinkling implement) on the *third day*—that is, in reference to the renewed life Yahshua proved was possible through His own resurrection.

But we’re still not done. The procedure must be repeated on the seventh day. This time, the reference is to the Feast of Tabernacles, the seventh and final appointment on Yahweh’s calendar. This is an eight-day feast, the first seven speaking of the perfect reign of King Yahshua as God among men upon the earth, and the eighth indicating the eternal state, the everlasting immortal paradigm. It is not enough to intellectually admit that Christ is the Lamb of God; we must also be prepared to welcome and embrace Him as our eternal King. Only then can the one who has been defiled by death (that’s all of us) finish the procedure. We are then to (1) wash our clothes; that is, don the garment of light provided by Yahweh, through which He does not see our sin. (2) We are to wash our bodies in water—an act that symbolized the immersion (read: baptism) into the Holy Spirit. And (3), we are to wait until sundown. This is a euphemism for the end of one’s mortal life, the point being that we cannot stand in the undimmed presence of the Almighty clothed in mortal flesh. We must be—and *shall be*—transformed into beings of immortal purity, a form in which we may fellowship with our God for all eternity—if we have been “sprinkled with hyssop” with the living water of God’s Spirit containing the ashes of the sacrificial red heifer, the scarlet of our sin, the cedar of our irrational pride, and the hyssop of our intrinsic insignificance before Yahweh.

To the uninformed, the incessant Torah practice of sprinkling blood on things seems odd, perhaps even barbaric—and at the very least, unsanitary. But the writer of the Book of Hebrews tells us *why* it was done: **“For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.’ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood.”** If you track down the actual references, it becomes apparent that this is a composite overview of what Yahweh instructed in the Torah. It doesn’t refer to one particular precept but many of them lumped together. The point is stated in the

punch line: **“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”** (Hebrews 9:19-22) Sometimes the implement of application of this blood was the priest’s finger, but it was often (as we have seen) a sprig of hyssop. The difference is obvious: if the implement was the priest’s finger, Yahweh is telling us that the works of one’s hands are being stressed. But if hyssop is the prescribed implement of the application of sacrificial blood, we are being reminded that humility before God is the key to our understanding.

The preparation for Passover was a perfect example of this principle. **“Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For Yahweh will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, Yahweh will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you. You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever.”** (Exodus 12:21-24) There was nothing the Israelites could *do* to physically constrain or influence the angel of death, so the blood was not to be applied to the doorposts with the fingers—their “good works” had nothing to do with it. Rather, the shed blood’s application with a bunch of hyssop was symbolic of the idea that the sacrifice had been made and applied in humble obedience to the word of Yahweh. All of the “work” would be done by God Himself that night. All the Israelites themselves were to do was to trust God and feast upon the lamb who had given its life so that the firstborn of the household might live in its stead.

It was a time of mixed sorrow and celebration. Yes, the life of the firstborn had been saved, but God had seen to it that the lamb had, by the time of its sacrifice, become a friend of the family—almost a household pet. In what turned out to be prophetic of the passion week, the lamb had been brought into the house on the tenth day of the month of Nisan, only to be slain on the fourteenth. Thus on Nisan 10, 33 AD, Yahshua entered Jerusalem to the cheers of the throng shouting, “Hosanna (save now)! Blessed is He who comes in the name of Yahweh!” And after the inhabitants of the city had gotten to know Him, they crucified Him on Nisan 14—just as the Torah had prescribed. Almighty God had humbled Himself and taken on the form of a mere man—and then abased Himself even further, becoming the sacrificial Lamb of God so that we could live. If we are willing to appreciate the symbology of what hyssop means, we’ll come to realize that the blood of Christ was indeed brushed upon the doorposts and lintels of our dwelling places with the implement of abject humility.

But there’s a literal component to this as well: **“After this [after He had been crucified], Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’”** Though written long before crucifixion was even invented, Psalm 22:15

describes the desperate thirst this sort of torture causes. **“A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to His mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished,’ and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”** (John 19:28-30) *Hyssop* again: the implement of insignificance and humility. But at this point, it was indeed “finished.” From this moment on, we would never again see Yahshua of Nazareth subjected to the indignity of a mortal existence. The next time we’d see Him, it would be as our risen Lord, walking the earth for forty days in a body that was capable of things no mortal man could even conceive of—an immortal body that is apparently the model for the ones we His children will someday enjoy. But for Him, this too was but a temporary form: when the world *next* sees our Messiah, it will be as the reigning, invincible King. However, there will still be mortals walking the earth during His Millennial reign, so King Yahshua will inhabit a body that is not lethal to those still cloaked in flesh—though it will be as brilliant and glorious as any mortal man can see and yet survive. Humility (for Yahshua) will have become an obsolete concept. The apparent insignificance that characterized His first advent will be unmasked to reveal His eternal glory.

That’s not to say that hyssop will have no part to play during the Millennial kingdom. But now its use will reveal the true nature of fallen man. The Millennial mortals (the children of the blessed “sheep” of Matthew 25:34) born during Christ’s thousand-year reign will still be laboring under Adam’s curse. They, like David of old—like *every sinner* who ever walked the earth—must come to terms with their own frailty, vulnerability, and insignificance, the need for honest humility before God. David pleaded, **“Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that You have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”** (Psalm 51:1-2, 7-12) As with all men of all ages, only the hyssop of the ordinance of the red heifer will indemnify the Millennial multitudes against their own mortality. Only the hyssop of the law of leprosy can cleanse them from the stain of sin that disqualifies them from fellowship with Yahweh. And only the hyssop applying the blood of the Passover Lamb is able to keep the angel of death at bay.

CEDAR

❧ 3.3.2 ❧

Strength

If the lowly hyssop is symbolic of humility and insignificance, the stately cedar tree (along with fir trees and cypresses, perhaps) represents the other end of the spectrum: strength, power, and prestige—and (unfortunately) that which all too often flows from those happy attributes: pride and self-sufficiency. The cedar symbol is found only in the Hebrew scriptures, where the word describing this lofty, solidly-rooted tree is *'erez*, derived from the verb *'araz*: to be firm or strong. The cedar is a good news-bad news story of sorts. As a scriptural symbol, it is employed both positively and negatively.

Strength *per se* is a spiritually neutral attribute. It can either be a gift from Yahweh or something one seizes for himself—temporarily. And how someone (whether a person or a nation) uses whatever strength he has is an indication of his moral character. It's worth noting that the cedar tree is never used as a metaphor for the strength wielded by Yahweh or His Messiah—something that is absolute and intrinsic. Rather, the cedar “reigns” as the “king of the trees” only at the discretion of “higher powers”—in the literal sense, men with axes.

The fabled “cedars of Lebanon” still exist, but only as an endangered species. The once vast forests have been seriously exploited ever since the third millennium B.C., and all that are left today are small groves located in inaccessible mountainous terrain. Some of these trees, however, are up to a thousand years old and a hundred feet tall, with trunks ten feet across. These magnificent trees spread their branches much wider than the typical North American varieties of cedar. Their wood is aromatic and relatively pest resistant, accounting for the cedar's longevity (if protected from men). I found it interesting that Rome's Emperor Hadrian, who in 135 A.D. crushed Bar Kochba's rebellion and made a concerted effort to eradicate all Jewish presence in Judea, going so far as to salt the fields of the Promised Land to make them unproductive, also instituted conservation efforts to protect the dwindling cedar forests of Lebanon. But as a resource, the cedars of Lebanon were just too tempting. The great forests were brought to the brink of extinction by the Ottoman Turks, who controlled them from the early sixteenth century until the end of World War I.

But our interest here is not the trees themselves, but in what they represent—the strongest, tallest, most magnificent of their type (the symbolic antithesis of hyssop). This is the heart of a parable in which various trees are personified in order to make a point. It was the age of the Judges, and Gideon's successes against the Midianites had the people of Israel begging him to rule over them as

king, and his many sons with him as a royal dynasty—an offer he firmly declined, insisting (as he should have) that Yahweh Himself was to be their ruler (see Judges 8:23). But when he died, the people he had freed from oppression quickly reverted to the worship of Ba'al (Judges 8:33-35). Then one of Gideon's seventy sons (Abimelech, the offspring of a woman from the city of Shechem) made a play to be named king—at least of his mother's home town. (This was *centuries* before Yahweh allowed Saul to be crowned Israel's first king.) So Abimelech proceeded to murder his half-brothers, eliminating the competition, as it were. But one of the seventy, Jotham by name, escaped.

“When it [Abimelech's mass murder] was told to Jotham, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and cried aloud and said to them, ‘Listen to me, you leaders of Shechem, that God may listen to you.’” Shechem was located in the valley between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. This was where the “blessings and cursings” had been recited by all of Israel (see Deuteronomy 27:12), making Jotham's parable all the more significant: **“The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ But the olive tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree said to them, ‘Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?’ And the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine said to them, ‘Shall I leave my wine that cheers God and men and go hold sway over the trees?...”** In other words, the people of Shechem had their pick of leaders, but the men who were qualified to lead were, like Gideon, unwilling to usurp the place of Yahweh.

But the Shechemites were desperate for a human king, someone to fill Gideon's shoes. So they turned to the bramble, the thorny shrub: **“Then all the trees said to the bramble, ‘You come and reign over us.’ And the bramble said to the trees, ‘If in good faith you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade, but if not, let fire come out of the bramble and devour the cedars of Lebanon.”** (Judges 9:7-15) The “bramble,” of course, was the worthless Abimelech, who in his arrogance (as the appointed “king of the trees”) saw himself as superior to the cedars of Lebanon (who, you'll notice, had not even been considered for the job). In a backhanded sort of way, Abimelech had declared his ascendancy not just over the worthy men of Israel, but over Yahweh Himself. Shechem got their bramble-king, but the honeymoon was short lived. In just three short years, they had a serious case of buyers' remorse, having finally begun to see what a foolish choice they had made. This is all beginning to sound *way* too much like American politics. Be careful who you vote for, folks.

A second “parable” employing the comparison of the lofty cedar to something inferior was uttered by one of Ephraim's pagan kings. **“Then Amaziah [one of the eight “good” kings of Judah] sent messengers to Jehoash the son of Jehoahaz, son of**

Jehu, king of Israel, saying, 'Come, let us look one another in the face.'" That is, let our armies meet on the field of battle. **"And Jehoash king of Israel sent word to Amaziah king of Judah, 'A thistle on Lebanon sent to a cedar on Lebanon, saying, "Give your daughter to my son for a wife," and a wild beast of Lebanon passed by and trampled down the thistle. You have indeed struck down Edom, and your heart has lifted you up. Be content with your glory, and stay at home, for why should you provoke trouble so that you fall, you and Judah with you?"**" (II Kings 14:8-10) Jehoash, the pagan king of Israel, was correct in warning Amaziah not to overestimate his strength, just because he had beaten an army of ten thousand Edomites (see verse 7). But Amaziah (the "thistle" who thought he was a cedar) wouldn't listen to reason, and his pride led to Judah's needless and costly defeat at the hands of the Northern Kingdom. The moral of the story: don't go to war—even against Yahweh's enemies—unless He specifically directs you to. To do so is to trust in your own strength instead of God's—and *that* is idolatry.

In the end, Yahweh Himself will determine what kind of "tree" we are—what role we will be asked to play. **"I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of Yahweh has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it."** (Isaiah 41:19-20) Though we differ greatly in our gifts and stature, one thing is certain: if we thrive at all, it is because of Yahweh's constant provision. The "wilderness," you'll recall, is the place of preparation, of transition between bondage in the world and rest in Yahweh. It's where our choices are made, where our course is set. The life Yahweh causes to flourish there is not only for our sustenance; it is also for our consideration and understanding, so we might know that "the hand of Yahweh has done this."

In the previous section, we explored the contrast of cedar with hyssop—of strength with humility. To recap, we saw the comparison in three places: first, in the process of declaring a leper (symbolic of the individual sinner) to be clean: **"The priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop."** (Leviticus 14:4) Second, the same contrast was prescribed in the ritual for pronouncing a house (a metaphor for a society, culture, or nation) to be livable. In both cases, the thing being "cured" (broadly described as "leprosy") was a euphemism for sin. **"Thus he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird and with the fresh water and with the live bird and with the cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn. And he shall let the live bird go out of the city into the open country. So he shall make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean."** (Leviticus 14:52-53) Finally, we saw cedar and hyssop together (with scarlet) again in the rite of the red heifer, the picture of becoming indemnified against death itself: **"And the priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and scarlet yarn, and throw them into the fire burning the heifer."** (Numbers 19:6)

In each of these three cases, the contrast between the cedar and the hyssop points out not only the sin from which we need to be cured if we wish to stand purified in the presence of a holy God, but also the means of achieving that cure—found in the person of Yahshua the Messiah. In the first case (our sin), we are to place both our irrational pride (represented by the cedar) and our equally irrational insignificance (the hyssop) on the altar, recognizing that although we are not remotely strong enough to atone for our own sins, we aren't worthless pond scum, either: the Son of God *died* so that we might have life, proving that (in God's eyes) we're worth saving. In the second case, the dichotomy between cedar and hyssop is illustrated in the character of our Savior. Yahshua, being God incarnate, was the very personification of power; but He set aside His glory and strength for a time. In the ultimate act of humility, He became a man so that mankind might live through Him. That, of course, is where the "scarlet" enters the picture. It is symbolic of both our sin (see Isaiah 1:18) and the blood of Christ that was shed to atone for it.

Used properly, the strength granted by Yahweh to a person or a nation is a good thing. As long as it doesn't devolve into self-sufficient pride, strength is to be preferred over weakness. So throughout the Tanach, we see the cedar tree used to metaphorically describe the possession of God-given power. The symbol is used to describe Israel's glorious destiny, define the circumstances of the righteous man, and confirm the anointing in power of one individual in particular—King David. Cedar also plays a large part—literally and symbolically—in the construction of the temple of Solomon.

The story of the prophet Balaam is a bit unnerving, for it demonstrates that being gifted by God is in and of itself neither a blessing nor a confirmation of one's relationship with Yahweh. It is only an opportunity to make good choices. We might (as Balaam did) try to use our gifts to our own advantage, but in doing so, we can easily turn them into curses upon ourselves. Balaam, you'll recall, had been hired by Moab's King Balak to use his prophetic gift to get Yahweh to curse Israel—something the prophet found impossible. In the end, all he was able to do to earn his keep was to show the Moabites how to get Israel to curse Yahweh, a ploy that worked all too well.

But before that happened, Balaam had been compelled to tell the truth concerning God's chosen people: **"When Balaam saw that it pleased Yahweh to bless Israel, he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face toward the wilderness. And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. And the**

Spirit of God came upon him, and he took up his discourse and said... ‘How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that Yahweh has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters...’ That last prediction speaks of a time when Israel would be like the cedar: strong, firmly rooted in the land, and blessed by Yahweh. That, of course, was the *last* thing Balak wanted to hear: **“And Balak’s anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. And Balak said to Balaam, ‘I called you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have blessed them.’”** (Numbers 24:1-3, 5-6, 10)

In case you haven’t noticed, being a “cedar tree planted by the waters” is not exactly reality in Israel today, nor has it been the literal case for more than a couple hundred years *total* during her long and turbulent history. Today, even though they are once again planted in the Land, they are anything but secure, nourished by streams of peace and blessing. That’s why I found it interesting that the cedars of Lebanon can live to be a thousand years old if they’re protected from their only natural enemy—man. That is precisely the predicted “lifespan” of the coming earthly kingdom of Yahshua the Messiah, a kingdom that will be epicentered in Jerusalem, the heart of Israel. Balaam’s prophecy—and hundreds of others like it—will come to literal fruition during the Millennial reign of Christ, or Yahweh is a liar.

On a personal level, however, the strength bestowed upon His children by Yahweh is an ever-present reality: **“The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of Yahweh. They flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age. They are ever full of sap and green, to declare that Yahweh is upright. He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.”** (Psalm 92:12-15) This, of course, isn’t “strength” the way the world tends to measure it—financial clout or political influence, or even heightened physical prowess. Rather, it is the kind of strength that comes from “being planted in the house of Yahweh, in the courts of God.” That is, it’s moral strength, character, courage, and wisdom—the ability to cope with grace and patience in the face of adversity, knowing through a lifetime of experience that one’s trust in Yahweh is not misplaced. And here’s the amazing part: if God has planted us like cedars in His house, then the knowledge that “there is no unrighteousness in Him” will be reciprocated: in the end, He will find no unrighteousness in us, either.

It is as the Psalmist declared: **“The trees of Yahweh are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that He planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees.”** (Psalm 104:16-17) If we are cedar trees planted and nourished by Yahweh, we will find ourselves in turn to be a blessing to those with whom we share the world: God’s love will flow through us. Remember what “birds” signify? The consequences of choice. When we are rooted in Yahweh, we encourage others to make wise choices.

King David was one such “cedar tree,” someone whom God made strong among his brethren. So it is revealing to track the “cedar” metaphor in his life and that of his son Solomon. For example, **“Then Hiram king of Tyre [a city-state on the coast of Lebanon] sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters and masons. And they built David a house. So David knew that Yahweh had established him as king over Israel, and that He had exalted His kingdom for the sake of His people Israel.”** (II Samuel 5:11-12) It wasn’t just that Hiram had paid homage to his southern neighbor (though perhaps that’s all David himself perceived). If we’re attuned to the symbolism here, we’ll see that what Hiram sent indicated that David had been given strength—the establishment and exaltation of his kingdom. Note that David rightly attributed his success to Yahweh, not his own abilities.

Having been established upon the throne of Israel, all David could think about was honoring the God who had put him there: **“Now when the king lived in his house and Yahweh had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, ‘See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.’ And Nathan said to the king, ‘Go, do all that is in your heart, for Yahweh is with you.”** Yahweh was indeed with David, but it didn’t necessarily follow that the privilege of building the temple would be his. **“But that same night the word of Yahweh came to Nathan, ‘Go and tell My servant David, “Thus says Yahweh: Would you build Me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for My dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, ‘Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?...’”** Between the lines, Yahweh seems to be saying, “I love your spirit, David, but there’s a reason I’ve never asked anyone to build Me a temple of cedar: man cannot add to the greatness of God. You can’t make Me strong. I am omnipotent: power flows *from* Me, not *to* Me. The old tent of meeting I asked Moses to build is a picture of My plan for your redemption. Everything about it—its materials, layout, construction, dimensions, and service—is designed to tell a story. A magnificent house of cedar—as much as you perceive that I deserve it—can only detract from the message. And My message of reconciliation is of the utmost importance.”

Yahweh *would* allow the temple to be built, but to have let David do it would have sent the wrong message—that the kingdom of God can be established through strength: the warfare in which David (even though his name means “beloved”) had found himself embroiled his entire adult life. No, the truth was that our reconciliation with God (that which comprised the lessons of the tabernacle) can only be the *inheritance* of war, and *spiritual* war at that—its aftermath, its legacy, that which is established by perfect peace. So the prophet Nathan was instructed to give David more information than he’d bargained for: **“Now, therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, “Thus says Yahweh of hosts: I took**

you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.” Here again, the thought is that God makes us strong, not the other way around. **“And I will appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over My people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies....”** This sort of peace would happen under David’s son Solomon, but in truth, this was a longer-range prophecy: it would happen fully only under David’s *ultimate* anointed Son, King Yahshua.

David earnestly desired to make a “house” for his God. Yahweh returned the sentiment: **“Moreover, Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.”** Is He speaking about Solomon, or Yahshua? In the short run, it appeared to be Solomon, but he would prove to be a mere dress-rehearsal for the coming Messiah. **“He shall build a house for My name [something Solomon did physically, but Yahshua would do figuratively], and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to Me a son.”** Again, both of them are in view. But here is where the whole thing starts to go sideways, unless we stay on our toes: **“When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but My steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.”** In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.” (II Samuel 7:1-17) Solomon *did* commit iniquity (in his old age) and Yahweh, as promised, did not depart from him, for the sake of his father David. But Solomon was never “disciplined with the rod of men.” Yahshua *was*, though he never committed iniquity. What’s going on here?

The key lies buried deep in the minutiae of Hebrew word usage. The word translated “when” (or “if” in some translations) is *asher*, a primitive relative pronoun that can mean almost anything: when, who, which, what, if, how, because, in order that, etc. *Strong’s* notes, “As it is indeclinable, it is often accompanied by the personal pronoun expletively, used to show the connection.” That’s the key. The phrase, then, really means, “If—or when—He is associated with iniquity....” The prophet is predicting that the Messiah will suffer at the hands of men, not for his own sin, but for ours! Solomon here has become a metaphor for fallen man, we who *deserve* the “stripes of the sons of men” for our iniquity but whose punishment was borne by Yahshua instead.

So Solomon, the representative of fallen man indemnified through grace (not David, representative of those who wield Yahweh's strength on earth), was the one given the privilege of building the temple. Thus we read: **"Now Hiram king of Tyre sent his servants to Solomon when he heard that they had anointed him king in place of his father, for Hiram always loved David. And Solomon sent word to Hiram, 'You know that David my father could not build a house for the name of Yahweh his God because of the warfare with which his enemies surrounded him, until Yahweh put them under the soles of his feet. But now Yahweh my God has given me rest on every side. There is neither adversary nor misfortune.'" Note that Solomon, like his father before him, credited Yahweh for the peace and prosperity Israel was enjoying. "And so I intend to build a house for the name of Yahweh my God, as Yahweh said to David my father, 'Your son, whom I will set on your throne in your place, shall build the house for My name....'"**

We are left to ponder *why* a man who ruled in peace would be allowed to replace the tabernacle with a "permanent" temple, while his father who fought Israel's battles was not. Although it is never stated outright in scripture, I have observed that quite a few of the symbolic details concerning the design and construction of the tabernacle were lost in the building of the new temple (for example, the symbol-rich detail built into the instructions for the four successive covering panels). We are given far more information concerning the design of the tent of meeting than we are of Solomon's temple. We know that the ground plan was scaled up in the latter, while the basic layout of the rooms, their furnishings and their functions, remained constant. I can't be dogmatic of course, but I suspect that the two things (the temple's builder and its compromised design) may be related. Could God be telling us that the real, *unabridged* story of our redemption (represented by the tabernacle) will always be associated with conflict and spiritual struggle (the conditions we face in the wilderness), while the moment we reach what promises peace in this world—the Promised Land—we invariably begin to miss the point? (There is a vast difference between "peace in the world" and "peace *with* the world.") Could it be that the tabernacle represents the essential covenant relationship with Yahweh, while the temple signifies the *religion* that men invariably wrest from it, given half a chance? Is it significant that every "permanent" temple ever built has been destroyed by pagan invaders because of Israel's failures of faith, while the original tabernacle was never attacked, but was merely packed up and forgotten? I honestly don't know, but I have to ask the questions.

On the other hand, there is another—completely unrelated—factor that may explain why Yahweh wanted Solomon, and not David, to build the temple. It's *timing*. Even though Yahweh has held His cards maddeningly close to the vest when explaining His schedule, it should be obvious to anyone sitting at the table playing the game that *He has one*. I can't (and won't) ignore the recurring pattern of sevens—invariably arranged as six plus one—found in scripture: the creation,

Sabbath rest, and a dozen other permutations. If II Peter 3:8 (the idea that with God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as one day) is to be taken literally, then we (or at least I) would expect to see spiritual milestones of stunning significance spaced at precise one-thousand-year increments across the chronological landscape between the fall of Adam into sin and the conclusion of the Millennial reign of Christ—the beginning of the eternal state. After a little research, I did indeed discover such a pattern in history (though admittedly, the dates back past 1000 BC or so are impossible to verify). The “anchor date” would have to have been the passion, which took place in 33AD.

So we’re looking for spiritually significant events spaced at precise, even, one thousand year increments from that. Going backwards, the very first “target date”—967 BC (exactly one millennium before Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection) is the *very year* when Solomon began construction of the temple of Yahweh, that symbol-rich expression of God’s plan for our redemption. Back in our text, then, we read Solomon’s request of Hiram of Tyre, to procure for him the building materials needed to erect a magnificent replacement for the tabernacle. **“Now therefore command that cedars of Lebanon be cut for me. And my servants will join your servants, and I will pay you for your servants such wages as you set, for you know that there is no one among us who knows how to cut timber like the Sidonians.”** (I Kings 5:1-6) The primary structural material to be used in the construction of the new temple was cedar: it was to be a place of *strength*—not the picture the tabernacle presented at all.

A thousand years prior to the building of Solomon’s temple was (if my observations are correct) the almost-sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah (near the temple site, on the exact spot of Christ’s crucifixion, if I’m not mistaken). A millennium back from that brings us to Noah’s corrupt generation, and a thousand years before that, I surmise, the events that started it all were taking place in the shade of the no-no tree in the Garden of Eden. Moving forward from the crucifixion anchor date, we come to 1033, and the literal fulfillment of a complex and rather strange prophetic precept found in Numbers 5, describing the confirmation of Yahweh’s assessment that *both* Israel and the Church had been unfaithful to Him. (I described it in *Future History*, Chapter 3, and explored it a bit further in *The Owner’s Manual*, Volume 1, Chapter 13, Mitzvah #535, so I won’t repeat it all here.) What’s really “interesting” about this line of thought is that the next milestone (if the pattern is actually there) is right around the corner: 2033 (on Tishri 15, or October 8, if you must know). If I were a betting man, I’d lay it all down on the prospect of this being the timing Yahweh has in mind for the second coming of Christ, the definitive fulfillment of the seventh and final holy convocation on Yahweh’s schedule, the Feast of Tabernacles. (Note: I’m *not* referring to the rapture, which is predicted under the *fifth* convocation, the Feast of Trumpets.)

But I digress. We were talking about cedar, and specifically, how it was used in the construction of Solomon's temple. Here are the details: **"So he built the house and finished it, and he made the ceiling of the house of beams and planks of cedar."** So the symbolism of the four successive covering layers picturing the atonement process (linen, goats' hair, rams' skins dyed red, and porpoise skins, as we saw in a previous chapter) was now replaced with a statement of strength, and dare I say, of pride. **"He built the structure against the whole house, five cubits high, and it was joined to the house with timbers of cedar..."** That is, there was a three-story complex of rooms, accessible by stairways, attached to the outer walls of the temple proper. Each story was about seven and a half feet in height.

I may have inadvertently left the impression that Yahweh was not "behind" the building of the temple (because of its truncated symbolism), but that isn't really true. His main concern, however, was that Israel continued to heed the Torah's precepts and statues as they worshipped there. These were what pointed directly toward the coming Messiah. And after all, they (and we) still had the original Instructions concerning the tabernacle, and that's really all we need to comprehend what He meant to tell us. **"Now the word of Yahweh came to Solomon, 'Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in My statutes and obey My rules and keep all My commandments and walk in them, then I will establish My word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake My people Israel...'"** That "word" which Yahweh promised to establish or confirm with Israel is the Hebrew *dabar*—the equivalent of the Greek *logos*. John explained Who this "word" was: Yahshua the Messiah, God who became flesh and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth (see John 1:14).

"So Solomon built the house and finished it. He lined the walls of the house on the inside with boards of cedar." What the record stresses (and what it doesn't) is always significant. We see cedar mentioned time after time, but the temple was actually a stone structure, its blocks being quarried from the beautiful off-white limestone that comprises the very bedrock of Jerusalem. The cedar walls and cypress floors were only a covering—a hint that *atonement* is in view, for that is what the word means. **"From the floor of the house to the walls of the ceiling, he covered them on the inside with wood, and he covered the floor of the house with boards of cypress. He built twenty cubits of the rear of the house with boards of cedar from the floor to the walls, and he built this within as an inner sanctuary, as the Most Holy Place. The house, that is, the nave in front of the inner sanctuary, was forty cubits long..."** These dimensions were twice that of the original tabernacle, but the proportions were the same: the Most Holy Place was square, and the Holy Place was a double square. The record goes on to state (v.19) that the ceiling height was proportional as well: twenty cubits.

For all its stately height and symbolism, cedar is a "softwood," a conifer; it is a more compliant carving medium than, say, oak or maple. And this property was

utilized in the temple: **“The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers. All was cedar; no stone was seen....”** But the cedar wasn’t seen either, it transpires: **“And he overlaid the whole house with gold.”** (I Kings 6:9-18, 22) The picture, then, is a covering of the covering, atonement upon atonement. The cold dead stone (remember, limestone is composed of the shells of dead sea creatures, and “unclean” ones at that) is first covered by cedar wood, symbolic of strength and carved with images of living things—indicative, I believe, of the mortal lives we are given, crafted by Yahweh so that we may make our choices before Him. But then, the cedar—the power and privilege we wield as mortal men imbued with free will—is in turn overlaid with pure gold. This speaks of our atonement, our *covering*, with the immutable purity of Christ, who endured the crucible of mortal flesh so that we might be qualified to stand before the Almighty. This arrangement would be brought into focus by Yahshua in John 3, where He explained the “second birth” in God’s Holy Spirit to Nicodemus. The imagery is different, but the message is the same.

Solomon’s reign marked a high point in the history of Israel, a time of peace, prosperity, and political ascendancy. **“And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah.”** (I Kings 10:27) But it would not have happened if it had not been for the faithfulness of his father, David. It was he who fought the battles, he who taught Israel how to honor Yahweh, and he who collected the vast wealth his son used in the building of the temple. Yes, Solomon’s reign was glorious, but only because he stood on the shoulders of a spiritual giant. Solomon’s kingdom was powerful, but only because David had served Yahweh with a whole heart.

All too often, the strength God has bestowed upon men, (symbolized by the cedar tree) is leveraged into an occasion for arrogance, overconfidence, and self-reliance. Thus we find far more scripture using the cedar as a euphemism for pride than we do for unadorned strength. Typical is this blanket indictment against the proud: **“For Yahweh of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills; against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and Yahweh alone will be exalted in that day.”** (Isaiah 2:12-17) Besides the cedars of Lebanon standing tall and proud with their “noses in the air,” Yahweh has identified several other permutations of pride, all of which will be brought low. (1) Bashan was known

for its bounty and fertility, a place of fat cattle. The haughty, overprivileged women of Samaria were called “fat cows of Bashan” by the prophet Amos because they oppressed the poor and crushed the needy. The *oaks* of Bashan, then, speak of the deadly hardness of their hearts. (2) The “lofty mountains” are a euphemism for political or military power. (3) The ships of Tarshish are a symbol for gaining wealth through trade. These days, we’d call Tarshish “Wall Street.” Though there is nothing wrong with wealth *per se*, there is something *desperately* wrong with making money one’s god, or being arrogant because you are wealthy while others are not.

Again, it’s hard not to see twenty-first century America in these verses, but not in the way you might think. This is *not* a call for the sort of class warfare that insists the wealthiest and most productive must become impoverished through taxation and regulation in order to provide a free ride for the masses in some sort of socialist utopia. Remember, “the lofty mountains” and “uplifted hills,” that is, power in the hands of government, are being taken to task along with the fat cows and investment bankers. No, what God seems to be saying is that *everyone* must realize that they stand accountable before Him. Those He has gifted materially are required by the law of love to provide for their neighbors. Since love is, by definition, voluntary, there is no place in the equation for government sponsored theft. And there is no place for pride.

Lest the “spoilors” of the world—the terrorists, rogue governments, anarchists, and rebels—get it into their heads that it is somehow right and proper to appoint themselves the “righters of wrongs,” we should be aware that Yahweh reserves judgment for Himself. There is one thing prouder than a cedar: the man who presumes to cut it down. **“Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: Because you have prayed to Me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, this is the word that Yahweh has spoken concerning him.... By your servants you [Sennacherib] have mocked the Lord, and you have said, “With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest....” Because you have raged against Me and your complacency has come to My ears, I will put My hook in your nose and My bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came.”** (Isaiah 37:21-22, 24, 29) The Assyrians had indeed been “assigned” by God to prune back the proud and apostate Samaria. But in their enthusiastic cruelty, they clear-cut the entire forest, and then moved on to Judah (whose “iniquity was not yet full.”) He who fells a cedar tree should beware: the trunk might just crush him as it falls.

In the end, of course, there is no one remotely as powerful as the One who made the cedar, caused it to grow tall, and then made men clever enough to bring it down. Humans err greatly if we imagine ourselves to be the top of the food

chain. **“The voice of Yahweh is over the waters. The God of glory thunders, Yahweh over many waters. The voice of Yahweh is powerful. The voice of Yahweh is full of majesty. The voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars; Yahweh breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness; Yahweh shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of Yahweh makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare, and in His temple all cry, ‘Glory!’”** (Psalm 29:3-9) We who “abide in His temple” (see Psalm 15) understand that strength in this world can be derived only from the One who made the world and everything in it. Only there are we able to perceive His glory—even before He finds it necessary to raise His voice.

There doesn’t seem to be anything that Yahweh hates more than human pride. And pride, though not inevitable, is all too often the result of having become strong in comparison with one’s peers. So time after time in scripture, Yahweh refers to cedar trees as a euphemism for this pride borne of strength (real or imagined)—cedars that He *personally* intends to “cut down.” One example, this time referring to Judah: **“I will prepare destroyers against you, each with his weapons, and they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire.... Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages, who says, ‘I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,’ who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you enclose yourself in cedar?...”** Now *there’s* a question that needs to be pondered by anyone who has attained any degree of power in this world—not just the leaders of nations or the heads of corporations, but *anyone* who wields the least little bit of influence over anyone else. God is asking, “Okay, you’ve got a little strength. What makes you think that gives you the right to exercise dominion over your fellow man? What makes you think that this power you wield should be used to abuse those I’ve placed under your care? I alone, Yahweh, am worthy: I rule in love and grace, not oppression and pride. Remember this: the strength I’ve given to you can just as easily be taken away”: **“O inhabitant of Lebanon, nested among the cedars, how you will be pitied when pangs come upon you, pain as of a woman in labor?”** (Jeremiah 22:7, 13-15, 23)

Another example, this time addressing the pride of the Amorites: **“It was I [Yahweh] who destroyed the Amorite before them [i.e., before Israel: see Numbers 21:21-25], whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath.”** (Amos 2:9) That is, their destruction—the result of their unwarranted attacks upon the Israelite pilgrims—was complete and permanent. Met any Amorites lately?

A couple of hundred pages back, when we were examining “eagles” as a symbol, we encountered a complicated parable designed to warn Judah (under

King Zedekiah) to receive Yahweh's rod of correction in the spirit in which it was given. Alas, Zedekiah did not submit to the initial, relatively mild, Babylonian conquest, opting instead to rebel and form a disastrous military alliance with Egypt. Later in the same passage, the parable is explained (sort of). The bottom line reads: **"Thus says the Lord Yahweh: 'I Myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I Myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am Yahweh.'**" (Ezekiel 17: 22-24) In the preceding verses, Yahweh had made it clear that Zedekiah would pay a steep price for his own rebellion. But here, He reveals that He intends (after a suitable "time out" period in Babylon) to once again plant Israel in the Land of Promise, make her strong enough to fulfill His purposes, and make her the spiritual home of anyone who chooses to take shelter in her branches. He's speaking, of course, of the coming of Yahshua the Messiah, the reason Israel *had to be* restored.

The reason the proud Zedekiah had thought he could avoid Yahweh's Babylonian rod of correction (despite the warnings of God's prophets) was that Egypt had presented herself as a viable alternative. So Ezekiel, building upon the symbolic imagery Isaiah had used a century and a half previously, issued this warning to Egypt. **"The word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his multitude: 'Whom are you like in your greatness? Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds....'"** Assyria thought she was pretty hot stuff too, he says. And yet it was doomed to failure, a victim of anarchy and civil war as much as foreign invasion. So you, Egypt, should not imagine that your military strength and rich history will save you. Your pride is misplaced.

Ezekiel continues: **"Therefore thus says the Lord Yahweh: Because it [Assyria] towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it."** The reference, of course, is to Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, who took Nineveh in 612 BC. **"On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it. On its fallen trunk dwell all the birds of the heavens, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit...."** Yahweh is saying that the downfall of Assyria was hastened by His unwillingness to allow another strong leader (like Ashurbanipal or Sennacherib)

to arise. Again, I can't help but see a parallel in American's recent governance. The "cream" is supposed to rise to the top, but all we (like Assyria) have been getting lately is foam, froth, lightweight talent poetically suited to a nation in severe decline.

Still speaking of Assyria's downfall, the prophet says, **"Thus says the Lord Yahweh: On the day the cedar went down to Sheol I caused mourning; I closed the deep over it, and restrained its rivers, and many waters were stopped. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it. I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the pit. And all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the world below. They also went down to Sheol with it, to those who are slain by the sword; yes, those who were its arm, who lived under its shadow among the nations...."** If my observation is valid that America's decline is beginning to look a lot like Assyria's did, then this is pretty depressing stuff. When we go down the drain (as we surely must, during the Tribulation if not before) then the world will mourn for us—and *with* us—for they will find themselves in the same mass grave.

But remember, this was all addressed to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, the point being that he was just as proud of his strength, and was thus just as doomed, as Assyria had been. So Yahweh asks, **"Who are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You [Egypt] shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword. This is Pharaoh and all his multitude, declares the Lord Yahweh."** (Ezekiel 31:1-3, 10-18) What does "Egypt" represent? It denotes bondage in the world, the place from which Israel (read: those who stand with God) are delivered. So it is almost beside the point that this prophecy was literally fulfilled in near-term history. In 605 BC, the Babylonians (with the Medes) defeated both the Egyptians and Assyrians at the battle of Carchemish, closing the book forever on Assyria as an independent political entity. The subsequent—and final—fulfillment will be much more far reaching: in the end, the world's ability to hold people in bondage will be brought to an abrupt end. During Christ's Millennial reign, Egypt (in the figurative sense—the place of bondage) will be consigned to sheol, its power and pride broken forever.

Perhaps the "proudest" of them all was Babylon, the nation Daniel identified as the "head of gold" in his interpretation of the prophetic dream of Nebuchadnezzar II, its greatest king. It was he who cut down "cedar trees" like Assyria, Judah, and Egypt with reckless abandon. So Isaiah writes, **"When Yahweh has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon...."** Bear in mind that this was written over a century before Babylon was even a blip on the radar screen of history. Assyria was the big dog on the block in Isaiah's day. **"The**

cypresses rejoice at you, the cedars of Lebanon, saying, ‘Since you were laid low, no woodcutter comes up against us.’” (Isaiah 14:3-4, 8) He’s speaking (in the short term) of a time when Babylon would have come and gone as a world power, when they would no longer threaten the surrounding nations as a woodsman threatens a tree. As the history worked out, the Persians and Medes conquered Babylon by stealth, without firing a shot, more or less. Instead of going to all the trouble of waging war against Babylon from the outside in (the way the Allies took both Germany and Japan in World War II), they simply cut the head off the snake, so to speak. They diverted the Euphrates River (which ran under the city wall, making the place virtually siege-proof), waltzed in with a small commando force, opened the gates from the inside, killed Belshazzar the regent/king, and took over the government as a going concern, without missing a beat. Even though it had a centuries-long historical impact on the entire region, the “conquest” of Babylon was virtually a non-event. It was brushed over in scripture with two short verses (Daniel 5:30-31).

The “you” being taken to task in Isaiah’s prophecy is the “king of Babylon.” But (as we might have come to expect) that is not only true of a literal, historical king (Nebuchadnezzar, in this instance), but is also prophetic of a symbolic truth, something far more significant, something yet in our future. “Babylon” is not only a literal city in Mesopotamia, but is also metaphorical of false worship in all its guises—religious (of course), but also political, cultural, and financial. In the end, it represents *anything* that men place before Yahweh in their affections, *anything* other than the true and living God that they trust, revere, or bow down to. In this broader sense, then, who is the “king of Babylon?”

A few verses later, Isaiah describes him: **“Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps. Maggots are laid as a bed beneath you, and worms are your covers....”** So far, it sounds like a human king. But that notion is soon eclipsed: The one being described has been cast down from a far greater height than a mere earthly throne. **“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!...”** “Heaven” here is not the usual *shameh*, but is the Hebrew *ma’al*, meaning above, high, at the top, of great degree or high status. So this “person” isn’t in the same league with Yahweh, but he is exalted above his peers. Who is he? He’s called “Day Star, son of dawn,” the Hebrew *helel ben shachar*—literally, shining one or light bearer, son of the dawn or daybreak (or the darkness immediately preceding it). This phrase is sometimes translated “Lucifer, son of the morning.”

This is the only time in the Bible the word *helel* (or *heylel*) is used, making it highly presumptive to assign the Latinized “Lucifer” to it, as if Yahweh has *named* our adversary. Although the one being described here is almost certainly Satan (literally, “the adversary”), *God never told us his name*. The truth is somewhat more prosaic. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes

concerning *helel*, “McKay contends that in the allusion in Isaiah 14:12–15 there is a Canaanite version of the Greek Phaethon myth as mediated and influenced by Phoenician culture during the ‘heroic age.’ The development of the Canaanite version is complex and has affinities with the Ugaritic myth involving Athar, son of Athirat, who was unable to occupy the throne of Baal. It was Phaethon who attempted to scale the heights of heaven and as the dawn star was ever condemned to be cast down into Hades.” That’s not to say that Isaiah is lending credence to a Canaanite myth; he’s only making a literary reference to it, the same way someone in our age might refer to admittedly fictional “dark lords” such as Dracula, Sauron, Voldemort, or the Wicked Witch of the West.

For what it’s worth, I should point out that this profile of evil is also a pretty good fit for the coming Antichrist—the false messiah who, empowered by “the dragon,” Satan, will succeed in becoming a “king of Babylon” in the last days. That is, he will be given dominion over the entire apostate earth during the Great Tribulation—the last three and a half years preceding the second coming of Yahshua the Christ. The distinction between Satan and the Antichrist is academic, of course. They will operate as one (just as Yahweh and Yahshua operate as One).

Lest we lose our bearings, we’re talking about someone who was (or is) in the habit of “cutting down cedars,” that is, who brings down people and nations who proudly fancy themselves lofty and strong, beyond the reach of retribution or justice. You may protest, “That’s *Yahweh’s* profile, is it not?” In the end, yes, but His habitual *modus operandi* in this age is to simply allow our poor choices and bad attitudes to run their natural courses and precipitate their natural consequences. Yahweh builds up; Satan tears down. Yahweh protects; Satan attacks. If we refuse to seek Yahweh’s shelter, we will be left vulnerable to Satan’s “roaring lion” approach. Remember, this whole line of inquiry began by looking forward to when “**Yahweh has given you rest from your pain and turmoil.**” Satan, meanwhile, seeks to devour us like a chain saw biting through a cedar sapling, and if we are haughty and proud, the job is that much easier.

So Isaiah reveals Satan’s ultimate fate: “**How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven [*ma’al*]; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high. I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.**” (Isaiah 14:11-15) Note that Satan isn’t stupid enough to think he can become “god,” no matter what aspirations are attributed to him by the fools who follow him. He has no illusions about being able to dethrone Yahweh. He does, however, crave the worship of man, and he aspires to ascendancy over the entire angelic realm. How successful has he been? The only hint we have is this brief notice: “**Behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.**” This

description, once again, links Satan inextricably to the Antichrist: they operate as one. **“His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.”** (Revelation 12:3-4) If this indeed means that Satan was able to entice one third of the angelic hosts to rebel against Yahweh, we should shudder at the statistic. It means that he is the unparalleled master at “selling the lie.” He is the most persuasive, cunning, and shrewd adversary we could possibly face. We dare not stand against him armed only with logic, intelligence, or good intentions. Our only refuge is in the Holy Spirit of Yahweh.

Isaiah wasn't done describing this evil entity (whether Satan or his Antichrist). **“Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: ‘Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?’”** My prophecy research led me to the conclusion that the Antichrist will touch off a thermonuclear holocaust that will engulf one third of the earth's surface, killing one fourth of its inhabitants and “making the world like a desert.” **“All the kings of the nations lie in glory, each in his own tomb; but you are cast out, away from your grave, like a loathed branch, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the stones of the pit, like a dead body trampled underfoot.”** No grave? Revelation 19:20 states that the Antichrist will be “cast *alive* into the lake of fire burning with brimstone.” **“You will not be joined with them in burial, because you have destroyed your land, you have slain your people.”** That's “*your* people,” not Yahweh's. Folks who conclude that there is an advantage to be gained by following Satan (or the Antichrist) are in for a shock: betrayal is the devil's middle name. Like the big shots of Hitler's Third Reich or Stalin's Russia, they'll be thrown under the bus of expediency (or paranoia) at the first sign of adversity. They will die unsung and unidentified. **“May the offspring of evildoers nevermore be named!...”**

The conclusion of the matter may seem a bit confusing at first: **“Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of their fathers.”** Yahweh has often stated His policy of punishing us for our own sins, *not* for those of our fathers. But the fact remains, people more often than not adopt the attitudes and mindsets of their parents. It takes generations for a new idea (such as forsaking God for the worship of man, for example) to take hold. (See Yahweh's commentary on the Second Commandment in Exodus 20:5.) But what can happen when the *whole world* rises up in opposition to the truth? **“...Lest they rise and possess the earth, and fill the face of the world with cities.”** (Isaiah 14:16-21) Rebellion against God is, even now, dangerously close to becoming a universal reality—and Satan's followers (his “sons”) will indeed “rise and possess the earth” during the Tribulation. Only the children of Israel and scattered pockets of newly repentant “Laodicean” Christians will be left to hold out against it. So “slaughter for his sons” is decreed—within the natural lifetimes of everyone reading these words, if I'm not mistaken about a great many things. I don't want to alarm you, only alert you.

I'd like to cover one final scriptural mention of "cedars" before we move on. This one, like some others we have seen, hits a little too close to home. As Assyria began to threaten the territories of Israel's northern kingdom, the people reacted to their setbacks with pride and defiance—not as they should have, with introspection and repentance. Instead of allying themselves with Yahweh, Ephraim formed a military alliance with King Rezin of Aram (i.e., Syria), their neighbor to the north. So Yahweh sent word to Israel's King Pekah, son of Remaliah: **"The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel; and all the people will know, Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, who say in pride and in arrogance of heart: 'The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place.' But Yahweh raises the adversaries of Rezin against him, and stirs up his enemies."** (Isaiah 9:8-11) The "adversaries of Rezin" were the Assyrians, who conquered Syria in 732 BC. Israel would fall in turn ten years later, in 722, revealing their arrogant boast to be unrealistic and foolish.

The heart of Israel's response was that they were determined to use Assyria's limited successes against them as an occasion to display their defiance and patriotism, rebuilding what had been attacked bigger and better than ever. The trees tell the tale: sycamores are considered common and ordinary. They would be replaced with symbols of strength and pride—the mighty cedars of Lebanon. It apparently never occurred to Israel that Assyria had been allowed to attack them because Yahweh wished to awaken them to their precarious spiritual state.

One would have to be blind not to see the parallels to the 9/11/ 2001 attacks in by Islamic fundamentalists on America's symbols of power—the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. (not to mention the attack that *didn't* succeed, intended for the capitol)—focal points of financial, military, and political might in this country. We reacted not with repentance, but (just as Ephraim did) with defiance, with a determination to rebuild something even more magnificent, in our own strength, without Yahweh's unwanted help. We paid lip service to the proximate cause of the attacks, Islam (though in truth, we were unwilling to see the impetus for their hostility built into their scriptures, but pursued only a symptom, a splinter group named al-Qaeda). But we utterly refused to face the underlying reason we had been attacked: that we had, as a nation, left our first love, Yahweh, in favor of a lesser god of our own manufacture and imagination—*ourselves*. Like those first Assyrian forays into Israel's territory, the Islamic attacks on America were *allowed* by Yahweh (that is, He chose not to miraculously prevent them), so that we might awaken from our self-absorbed stupor and return to Him with a whole heart. It didn't work—for Israel, *or* for us. So if history repeats itself (as it usually does), we're in for it. It's not too late to repent, but it soon will be.

The day after the 9/11 attacks, Tom Daschle (at that time the Senate Majority Leader) delivered America's defiant response, saying, "America will emerge from this tragedy as we have emerged from all adversity—united and strong. Nothing, *nothing*, can replace the losses of those who have suffered. I know there is only the smallest measure of inspiration that can be taken from this devastation. But there is a passage in the Bible from Isaiah that speaks to all of us at times like this." He then read Isaiah 9:10. **"The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place."**

Rabbi Jonathan Cahn, in his book *The Harbinger*, writes, "Daschle has no idea what he is doing here. He thinks he's offering comforting words to a grief-stricken people, but he is actually embracing the spiritually defiant and arrogant words of the children of Israel, proclaiming the ancient and ominous vow of the leaders of that nation. He doesn't realize it, but he is actually inviting more judgment on the nation." And Daschle is not alone. Three years later, Senator (and future presidential candidate) John Edwards invoked the same disastrous curse upon America, quoting the same passage in the speech to the Congressional Black Caucus. I find it hard to fathom the arrogance of spiritually tone-deaf men who attempt to use the word of God to gain political advantage. For His part, Yahweh was apparently not amused: both men ended up professionally ruined and personally disgraced. Cahn writes, "Like Daschle, Edwards thinks he's invoking inspirational and comforting words from the Bible, but he's actually inviting judgment on America. He's repeating the vow that provoked God to bring calamity on ancient Israel." And we probably haven't seen the last of the fallout. In his inauguration speech on January 20, 2009, Barack Obama intoned, "And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that, our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken." But we *should* be brought to our knees—not by the depraved acts of evil men, but by the stark realization of our own guilt before a holy God.

Beyond the tough talk, there were also some other eerie parallels: a big "hewn stone" was quarried in the Adirondack Mountains to serve as a cornerstone for the new "Freedom Tower" project. And a large and rather famous sycamore tree, felled in the Manhattan attack, was replaced with—you guessed it—a cedar tree. Our defiant pride is misplaced. We have no strength at all apart from Yahweh. **"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish. You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to You. But for me it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord Yahweh my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works."** (Psalm 73:26-28)

PALM TREE

❧ 3.3.3 ❧

Righteousness

You may have noticed that these symbolic attributes seldom happen in isolation. As often as not, we find them juxtaposed with others in scripture—the combinations serving to multiply, intensify, and clarify their effect. For example, we just looked at the meaning of the cedar tree: strength—something that can be a good thing or not, depending upon how it’s used, a vehicle for achieving great good, or an enticement to pride. So let us begin our discussion of the palm tree by reprising a passage we visited previously. **“The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of Yahweh; they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that Yahweh is upright. He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.”** (Psalm 92:12-15) The ones who “flourish in the courts of our God” are not only strong (by virtue of their relationship with the Almighty), but they’re also righteous (again, not on their own, but in the uprightness, the righteousness, derived from Yahweh). Strength without righteousness leads to tyranny, but righteousness without strength is unsustainable. Only in the house of Yahweh do both attributes merge in symbiotic alacrity.

Palm trees and cedars do not ordinarily grow together. Cedars prefer the cool, moist climes of their mountain strongholds, a recurring Biblical metaphor for power or authority. But date palms are different. They grow and thrive in the wilderness—the place of preparation. They congregate only where water is available, even if it’s not evident to the untrained eye. Their very presence defines the “oasis,” an island in the desert where restoration and refreshing might be found. The righteous of Yahweh are much the same: they mark the source of living water for a thirsty world. If lost and thirsty people seek out the “palm trees” standing in God’s oasis—that is, the righteous—they’ll find the means of cleansing and restoration. It’s not the palm trees themselves, but that in which they’re rooted, making them productive, **“still bearing fruit in old age...ever full of sap, and green.”** To the wise desert traveler, palm trees are always a welcome sight. Strangely, that’s not always the case with the righteous in this world. This says a great deal about the mental state of those who go out of their way to avoid them. Are they ashamed to admit they’re thirsty? Or have they merely seen one too many “mirages”—nominal Christians who, though righteous in their own eyes, bear no fruit in their lives?

Christians traditionally celebrate something they call “Palm Sunday.” It marks an extremely significant event in the life and ministry of Yahshua, but it didn’t

occur on a Sunday, and the vast majority of Christians remain clueless concerning the prophetic Torah precept that Yahshua fulfilled on this day. Moses was told by Yahweh to **“Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month [i.e., Nisan, the first month of the Jewish calendar—in the spring] every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.”** (Exodus 12:3-6) This was a prelude to the Passover. The lamb was to come into the household of every Israelite family on the tenth day of Nisan, and remain until the fourteenth, when it would be slain—its blood being applied to the doorposts and lintels of the Israelites’ homes to indemnify them from the unwanted attentions of the angel of death.

Palm “Sunday” marks Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, less than a week before His passion. You can track the timeline in the Gospel of Mark. Working backward from the day of the crucifixion (which fulfilled the Passover sacrifice) on Nisan 14—Friday, April 1, 33 A.D.—we find that the triumphal entry took place not on the previous Sunday, but on Monday, Nisan 10, i.e., March 28. The event thus fulfills the requirement that the Passover Lamb must be “brought into the household of Israel” for inspection on that very date. He was crucified only after Pontus Pilate had declared the Lamb to be “without fault or blemish.” The chief priests, of course, didn’t arrange the parade stretching halfway to Bethlehem for Yahshua’s benefit. Their purpose was to bring the chosen lamb (the four-footed one) into Jerusalem for the upcoming Passover celebration. Yahshua merely “retasked” the proceedings to reveal their true meaning. Poetic!

The date of “Palm Monday,” the triumphal entry, also fulfills another prophecy—the amazingly detailed timeline presented in Daniel 9. **“Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks. The street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself.”** (Daniel 9:25-26) The clock started ticking in the month of Nisan (presumably the first day), 444 B.C. The prophesied “command to restore and build Jerusalem” is recorded in Nehemiah 2:1-6. Note that the term “years” is never used. The prophecy is given in terms of 360-day “times” and “weeks” (or “sevens”) of these time units. 7 + 62 of these “sevens” (adding up to 69 of them)

is therefore 173,880 days (69 x 360 x 7), which works out to 476 solar years and 25 days inclusive, i.e., to *precisely* the 10th of Nisan (March 28) A.D. 33. And you thought God was making this stuff up as He went along? Hardly.

All four Gospel narratives record the scene (which ought to give us some idea of its significance). Matthew describes it like this: **“The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them.”** This fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. **“Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.”** Three of the four Gospel writers fail to specify what *kind* of “tree branches” were laid down, but John (in 12:13) informs us that they were palm fronds. This makes perfect sense, of course, since they lay flat on the ground: their purpose (as with the clothes) was to “cushion” the road in honor of the One treading it. **“And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of Yahweh! Hosanna in the highest!’ And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, ‘Who is this?’ And the crowds said, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.’”** (Matthew 21:6-11) The crowds, of course, were totally unaware that Yahshua was there to personify the Passover Lamb. They thought it was all just a happy coincidence. In fact, before the week was out, some of these same people would be calling for His crucifixion. The Passover scenario would play out just as Yahweh had ordained. And we whose “houses” (our lives) had been sprinkled (through our trust) with the blood of the Lamb would once again be spared.

What, then, do the palm fronds that were spread before the Messiah signify? If, as we have observed from Psalm 92, palm trees are a symbol of righteousness, then a stunning truth begins to emerge. Our own righteousness, it appears, must be sublimated to—made subservient to—that of our Redeemer. It doesn’t matter if we’re “better” than our neighbors: before Yahweh, we’re still sinners, estranged from Him. In fact, even the best behavior in the world is not enough to reconcile ourselves to Him. Yahshua warned us, **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:20) Say what you will about the scribes and Pharisees, their overt conduct was unassailable, beyond reproach—even within a society that knew and attempted to practice God’s statutes. (Such “success” at personal righteousness would be even harder to achieve in our corrupt culture.) But it wasn’t good enough. No, even our behavioral perfection (such as it is) must be laid at the feet of Yahshua. Actually, it’s even worse than that—it must be laid at the feet of Yahshua’s *borrowed donkey*. Ouch.

As long as we’re considering “spiritual paving materials,” let us also look at the meaning of the clothing laid on the roadway. Matthew notes, **“Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road.”** Clothing (as we’ll discover *much* later) indicates

“the way God sees us.” Scripture is peppered with symbolic allusions to our garments (or lack of them), whether the nakedness of Adam and Eve after their sin, their pitiful attempt to clothe themselves with fig leaves, or the garments of innocent animal skins Yahweh made for them. Cool, white linen is often used to denote imputed righteousness, and hot, scratchy wool indicates trying to work for God’s favor. Here at the triumphal entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem, the people spread out their cloaks—whatever they were made of—upon the road in honor of the “Prophet” from Galilee. As with the palm fronds, this indicated (whether the crowd comprehended it or not) that the way God sees us is His call, not ours. We must be willing to let God be God—that is, surrender the prerogatives of deity (like deciding how we look as we stand before Him) to Yahweh. In case you haven’t noticed, He is the *first* to point out when “the emperor has no clothes.” And it is He (in the person of Yahshua the Messiah) who will clothe His bride, the called-out church, in “**fine linen, clean and bright—the righteous acts of the saints**” (Revelation 19:8)

The first mention of palm trees in the Bible is this “travel itinerary” entry for the Israelite wilderness pilgrims: “**Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.**” (Exodus 15:27) This is significant mostly for its context: it happened not long after their little Red Sea adventure. If you’ll recall (we covered it a few dozen pages back) three days later, they were thirsty, and the pillar of cloud—one of Yahweh’s “Shekinah” manifestations—led them to a place that had water, but it was bitter. So God instructed Moses to throw a log into Marah’s waters, and they were sweetened. The whole thing was an elaborate object lesson designed to teach the Israelites to trust the God who had delivered them in the first place: He had no intention of leading them out into the desert just to see them die of thirst. Rather, as Moses reports, “**There Yahweh made for them a statute and a rule, and there He tested them, saying, ‘If you will diligently listen to the voice of Yahweh your God, and do that which is right in His eyes, and give ear to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am Yahweh, your healer.’**” (Exodus 15:25-26) Only then did Yahweh lead them to a real oasis, one with twelve water springs (read: restoration and cleansing sufficient for all twelve tribes) and seventy date palms. Seventy, we shall discover, is scriptural code for judgment and justice. Note that at this stage in Israel’s history, there *were* no “commandments and statutes.” Mount Sinai (a.k.a. Horeb) was still in the future. The only “commandment” they had been given at this stage was to *trust Him*. I

would submit to you that we—*all of us*—are still well advised to “diligently listen to the voice of Yahweh our God,” and to “do what is right in His eyes.”

The *second* mention of palm trees in scripture delineates one of those “statutes” Israel was to keep. Palm trees play a small but significant role in the elaborate pantomime that is the Feast of Tabernacles—the final and most joyous of the seven convocations on Yahweh’s annual calendar. Yahweh told Moses to command Israel, **“On the fifteenth day of this seventh month [that would be Tishri, in the fall] and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to Yahweh.”** Palm trees (the fronds) would be used to build these “booths,” along with several other types of vegetation, all of which are fraught with symbolism. **“On the first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work. For seven days you shall present offerings by fire to Yahweh. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present an offering by fire to Yahweh. It is a solemn assembly; you shall not do any ordinary work.”** (Leviticus 23:34-36) Coming as it does at the end of Yahweh’s annual series of holy convocations—*after* the days symbolizing the death of the Messiah, the removal of our sins as He lay in the tomb, His resurrection, the indwelling of His called out assembly with the Holy Spirit, the transformation of believers, both living and dead, into the immortal state, and the reawakening and restoration of Israel—the Feast of Tabernacles is a prophecy of the only thing left on Yahweh’s agenda: God coming to dwell—to encamp—personally among men.

This is the seventh of the seven convocations—in other words, the Sabbath of the series, the day of rest Yahweh has been promising humanity since the very beginning. **“On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of Yahweh seven days.”** These seven days represent, I surmise, the totality of Christ’s Millennial kingdom—the whole thousand year period in which King Yahshua will reign upon the earth. **“On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest.”** (Leviticus 23:39) Unlike the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (which symbolized the complete removal of our sins from us) this is an *eight day* celebration. The eighth day, I believe, is prophetic of the eternal state, when corruption has finally given way to immortality for all of God’s children. It is, in the end, the day of which Yahshua spoke when healing a man who (like us, in a way) was born blind: **“We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”** (John 9:4-5)

So why is this celebration called “the Feast of *Tabernacles*,” or “the Feast of *Booths*?” It’s because the Israelites were instructed to act out before all of mankind the very thing God Himself intends to do during the Millennial kingdom: to “camp out” among us. We believers speak casually about “going to heaven” when we die, but in technical terms, we’ll actually find that “heaven” has come to us. That’s the scene being acted out. Although the Israelites in the Promised Land

had perfectly good homes to live in, they were instructed to go to “the place where Yahweh had caused His name to abide” (Jerusalem, in literal terms, but in fact, our own souls) and build temporary shelters for this one week during the year. **“And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Yahweh your God seven days....”** The instruction to build their shelters on the first day of the Feast must have driven later rabbis nuts, since that day was, by definition, a Sabbath. When Yahshua told us that the Sabbath was made for man (and not the other way around) this is the kind of thing He was talking about. At the same time, the Israelites were *commanded* to rejoice. This is even more remarkable than it might seem, in light of the holiday’s juxtaposition (only five days prior to this) with the Day of Atonement—whose primary directive was to “afflict their souls” (Hebrew *anah*, also properly translated “to answer, respond, or testify as a witness.”) **“You shall celebrate it as a feast to Yahweh for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your God.”** (Leviticus 23:40-43)

Since it is our primary purpose here to examine the palm trees of scripture, let us go back and take a closer look at these four orders of “building materials” Yahweh specified for the Israelites’ temporary booths. Listed first is **“the fruit of splendid [or beautiful] trees.”** The adjective splendid (or beautiful) is from the Hebrew verb *hadar*, meaning to honor, adorn, or make glorious. Not surprisingly, this is a word used to describe the return of Yahweh (in the persona of Yahshua) to the earth a few days before the Feast of Tabernacles: **“Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this One who is glorious (*hadar*) in His apparel, traveling in the greatness of His strength?—‘I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save.’”** (Isaiah 63:1) And consider this: **“His glory is great in your salvation [that’s *Yâshuw`ah* (יְשׁוּעָה)]—phonetically equivalent to the Messiah’s given name]; honor and majesty (*hadar*) you have placed upon Him.”** (Psalm 21:5) The first “tree,” then, represents King Yahshua, and its “fruit” (Hebrew *pariy*, meaning fruit, produce, offspring, children, or progeny) is *us*—we who are privileged through grace to be called “children of God” (see I John 3:1-2). Thus we have been given our first hint: the “trees” from which the booths were to be constructed would seem to represent (if the metaphor pans out) the citizens of the Millennial kingdom, beginning with the King.

Next on the list is the **“branches of palm trees.”** As we have already deduced from Psalm 92:12, palm trees are symbolic of the righteous—a group that (since righteousness before Yahweh is a gift given to those who trust Him, who are then called by His name) is coterminous with the “offspring” of the “splendid tree” (i.e., us believers in Yahshua). So far, we’re in perfect agreement.

The third “building material” is **“the boughs of leafy trees.”** The adjective *abot* means thick with leaves, dense with foliage. The word is derived from *abat*, a verb that means “to weave together, to conspire, to wrap up, to intertwine something.” Who are these who conspire together, who are woven or intertwined into one in the context of the Millennium? None other than Israel and the *ekklesia*—the called out assembly of Christ, a.k.a. the church. Remember, the final “seven” of the Daniel 9 prophecy (commonly known as the Tribulation) will be concluded with the inauguration of Christ’s Millennial kingdom. That is, at this point Yahweh is no longer dealing exclusively with Israel. But He’s not dealing exclusively with the church, either, as He has for the better part of two thousand years now. No, as the Millennium gets underway, *both* Israel and the raptured (now-immortal) church are seen side by side, united but distinct, working shoulder to shoulder. The *ekklesia* has not absorbed—or replaced—Israel, nor has the church become part of Israel in any literal sense. Rather, we are entwined like branches grafted into the same divine tree (see Romans 11), or woven together like the warp and woof of one magnificent tapestry, created by and for the glory of Yahweh.

If that seems like a stretch, read on. The fourth and final specified booth building material, **“willows of the brook,”** fits perfectly with that characterization. The Hebrew noun *ereb* denotes a willow or poplar tree. (“Of the brook” leans the meaning toward the “willow” designation, because willow trees thrive in damp-root environments: they love “wet feet.”) A virtually identical noun, however (with the same consonant root), means “a mixture, a mixed company, interwoven. The primary meaning is a grouping of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It was used of the heterogeneous band associated with the nation of Israel as it departed from Egypt...” (*Baker and Carpenter*) The word also means “woof,” as in the threads that cross and interweave with the warp in a fabric. This explains why *ereb* is used in Exodus 12:38 to describe the “mixed” gentile multitude that believed in Yahweh and left Egypt along with the Israelites in the exodus. The two groups were interwoven, interdependent, and symbiotic. Though their identities and heritage were different, their destinies were henceforth inextricable.

Together, then, the four trees listed in Leviticus 23:40 signify the populace of the Millennial Kingdom of our Messiah, beginning with the glorious King, Yahshua himself, and including His “children,” the righteous who will flourish in His courts: those of Israel and every other nation who have “conspired” together to love and honor Yahweh in truth and trust—every believer from every age, from Adam until the last child born during the Millennium.

It is with mixed feelings that we read this notice: **“On the second day the heads of fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra**

the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.” The people here are the exiles returning from captivity in Babylon. It is good, of course, that they wished to study the Torah; but heartbreaking that they had never done so before, not for many generations. But while life lasts, it’s not too late to reconnect with Yahweh. **“And they found it written in the Law that Yahweh had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, ‘Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written....”** I, for one, am willing to cut them some slack for being a little “loose” in their interpretation of the Leviticus 23 specifications. They were using what they could find, in the spirit of obedience. Remember, after centuries of rebellion, the Land of Promise was no longer what you’d call “the land of milk and honey.” It had been ravaged by drought and invasion. In particular, I’d imagine “willows of the brook” would be practically nonexistent by this time. But desert-thriving date palms were still around, as were olive trees and myrtles—which we’ll discuss later in this chapter: they introduce a revised symbology all their own, appropriate to the repentant ex-exiles.

Anyway, they did the best they could to perform the Torah’s mandate, even though they couldn’t possibly have known what it meant. The lesson there is that we too should obey the voice of Yahweh, even if we can’t figure out what it might do for us. It’s a trust issue, once again. Yahweh sees the whole picture, but we perceive only a small part of it: trust Him to know what’s best. **“So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim....”** Here we’re given some insight on where the booths were to be erected—*anywhere* in Jerusalem but in their normal homes: this was a campout. The temple had been rebuilt by this time, albeit modestly indeed when compared to Solomon’s magnificent edifice. Jerusalem had been established in the time of David as “the place where Yahweh your God chooses to make His name abide,” the place the Torah commanded every Israelite male in the Land to visit three times a year—this being one of those occasions.

“And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.” (Nehemiah 8:13-17) The bad news was that the Israelites—the whole nation—had neglected to observe the Law of Moses, and in particular the Feast of Tabernacles, since their very first generation had settled in the Land. That’s a rather depressing statistic: it means that even during Israel’s national spiritual awakening under King David, the glory days of temple worship under Solomon, and the reforms of such good kings as Hezekiah and Josiah, the Feasts of Yahweh (or at least this one—arguably the most far-reaching) were never celebrated as the Torah prescribed. The good news

was that now, under Nehemiah, they purposed to right the wrongs. Once again, we see the transition from the Day of Atonement, the “affliction of the soul” over their past sins, being supplanted by the rejoicing of the Feast of Tabernacles. And that story was facilitated, in part, by the palm tree—a symbol of righteousness.

There is one location in the Promised Land that has been associated from earliest antiquity with palm trees. That place is the city of Jericho. In case you’re geographically challenged, this city is situated eight or ten miles due north of the Dead Sea, overlooking the plain of the Jordan River, in the West Bank. It is only about fifteen miles from Jerusalem, but there is a three thousand foot elevation drop from Jerusalem to Jericho. In fact, Jericho (at 853 feet below sea level) is the lowest city on earth. It is also one of the oldest. (The surface of the Dead Sea, for reference, is 1,388 feet below sea level—which explains why it’s “dead.”)

Although Moses wasn’t allowed to lead his people into the promised land because of his gaffe at Kadesh (see Numbers 20:9-13), he was allowed to see it before he died—from a mountaintop on the eastern side of the Jordan River. **“Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And Yahweh showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar.”** That’s quite a view. But Yahweh may have been providing some “visionary” assistance, because Mount Nebo, at an elevation of 2,680 feet above sea level, is about the same height as Jerusalem (ranging from 2,133 to 2,756 feet), theoretically blocking the view to the “western sea,” the Mediterranean. (*Pisgah*, by the way, simply means “high place.”) At any rate, probably the closest feature Moses saw was the city of Jericho, identified here as “the city of palm trees.” There are still lots of date palms in the vicinity. **“And Yahweh said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, ‘I will give it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.”** (Deuteronomy 34:1-4) At a hundred and twenty years of age, I’m guessing Moses wasn’t too terribly disappointed that his battles in this world were almost over. And he was doubtless saddened to know (having delivered the prophecies himself—see Deuteronomy 30-31) that this nation would eventually be driven out of this glorious land because of their refusal to heed Yahweh’s word.

But he reiterates here that God had *promised* the land to Israel’s forefathers. It belonged to Israel, even though there would be times when they would not be allowed (because of their rebellion) to live in it. The point I want to make is that

Jericho today is in what is known as the West Bank—that is, it was *Jordanian* territory before they lost it to Israel in the 1967 Six Day War, the direct result of their own illegal aggression. If there were any justice in the world, there would be no question of Israel’s legal suzerainty over these lands. But the indigenous Arab Muslims (who call themselves Palestinians, though there is no such thing as a separate and distinct “Palestinian” people) insist that the land belongs to them, even though they lost it due to their own belligerence. It’s kind of like the Germans coming back and saying that Paris should rightfully belong to them, just because they held it for a while in the 1940s. It’s a ludicrous position to take. Israel, however, in a futile effort to pacify world opinion, is bending over backward to mollify their Arab subjects. And so to this day, Jericho is under the control of Muslim warlords who run the place like their own private fiefdom.

As I observed in our discussion of “salt” a few hundred pages back, Jericho, the “city of palms,” shares a lot of imagery in common with the rapture of the church. (1) The “blowing and shouting” that brought its walls down (Joshua 6) is the same picture drawn by the fifth (and next) holy convocation of Yahweh—the Feast of Trumpets, or *Yom Teruah*—echoed again in the prophecies describing the rapture. (2) Elijah’s fiery transformation, the rapture dress-rehearsal witnessed by Elisha, took place near the city of palms. (3) Jericho’s destruction was sealed with a curse upon the *children* of whomever would rebuild the city (compare Joshua 6:26 to I Kings 16:34)—just as surely as the rapture will signal Yahweh’s impending wrath upon the world: life will *not* go on as usual in the world in the wake of the translation of the saints. And he who ignores the ramifications of the rapture will be cursing his own children. (4) While Elijah’s “rapture” is prophetic of the church of Philadelphia, the next-to-last church on Yahshua’s mailing list in Revelation 2 and 3, Elisha’s role (as witness of the event and receiver of Elijah’s mantle) will prove to be analogous to the final church, that of Laodicea, who will come to faith only after the rapture, left behind to face the music in a world all but bereft of faith.

If we cross reference all of that with the fact that Jericho is known as the city of palms, and that palm trees represent righteousness, the truth emerges that the world will be a very different place after the rapture: even the *pretense* of righteousness will be a thing of the past. Whether we understand it or not, this cryptic passage from Isaiah describes the times: **“The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart. Merciful men are taken away, while no one considers that the righteous is taken away from evil. He shall enter into peace; they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness.”** (Isaiah 57:1-2) Amplified to reveal their full meaning, these verses declare the stunning truth: “The one who is just (*tsadiq*), lawful, righteous, and vindicated before God [these would be the belatedly repentant neo-Laodicean Christians] perishes (*abad*), dies, is put to death and exterminated, and nobody places this fact upon his heart (*leb*), mind, understanding or knowledge.”

And *why* are evil men allowed such latitude during these evil times? It's because Yahweh has *already* gathered His "Philadelphian" saints to Himself, meaning in turn that the restraining power of the Holy Spirit is no longer in evidence in the world (see II Thessalonians 2:7) as the Tribulation begins. "Men of mercy (*cheched*), goodness, kindness, faithfulness, and unfailing devotion are taken away (*'asaph*), gathered, brought together, assembled, withdrawn, or assembled as a rear guard, while no one considers (*biyn*), understands, discerns or perceives that these righteous people (*tsadiq*) have been taken away (*'asaph*), gathered or withdrawn from evil (*raah*), wickedness, adversity, misfortune, affliction, calamity, disaster, distress, and trouble."

That, in case you missed it, is a picture of the rapture, first of those saints who have perished and then of those still alive. The world will have no idea what happened to the millions of living believers who suddenly disappeared on *Yom Teruah*—the Feast of Trumpets—in some future year. They will presume that we have all died (though we left no corpses behind), but the fact is that we will have been gathered together by God, *rescued* from the calamity to come, because we have *already* "kept Yahshua's command to persevere" (as it's put in Revelation 3:10). "He [the raptured saint] shall enter into (*bow*), come to, attain, be brought or introduced to peace (*shalowm*), safety, prosperity, and contentment; they shall rest (*nuach*), repose, and be quiet on their beds, each one walking (*halak*), going, following, or behaving in his uprightness (*nakoah*), straightness, or rightness." So, as subtle as it is, the concept of the rapture is paralleled from beginning to end by symbol of the palm tree—from the imagery of the city of Jericho to the uprightness in which we will walk as raptured saints.

Let us then take a glance at a few other places where Jericho is described in scripture as "the city of palms." We should bear in mind that when Joshua's army breached Jericho's walls, killed its inhabitants and burned the city, they didn't make it uninhabitable. The date palm trees—according to Yahweh's general directive—were left standing, and the wells (as far as we know) continued to provide water. What they had done, basically, was to transform Jericho from a defensible (and defiant) walled city into an open oasis. The area fell to Benjamin as a tribal inheritance (as did Jerusalem). So, perhaps forty years after the Israelites entered the Land, we see this scene: **"And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah, which lies in the Negeb near Arad, and they went and settled with the people."** (Judges 1:16) Moses' father-in-law, of course, was a gentile—Jethro, the priest of Midian. But as with the mighty Caleb (whose father was a Kennezite—of Edomite descent) Jethro's descendants had joined themselves to Israel as part of the "mixed multitude" during the wilderness wanderings. Both families (Caleb's and Jethro's) had become part of the tribe of Judah. So as the Land was settled, it became appropriate for them to settle not near Benjamin's Jericho, but forty miles

south, in the Negev—Judah’s tribal territory. Interestingly, the king of Arad had gone out of his way to harass the wilderness generation, and Yahweh had granted His people total victory over these Canaanites—utterly destroying their cities (see Numbers 21:1-3). It was a preview of the sort of victory that could always be Israel’s if only they would honor Yahweh and keep His instructions.

But alas, it was not to be: **“And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done what was evil in the sight of Yahweh. He gathered to himself the Ammonites and the Amalekites, and went and defeated Israel. And they took possession of the city of palms. And the people of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.”** (Judges 3:12-14) Caleb’s nephew Othniel had judged Israel for forty years, but when he died, the people quickly reverted to their evil ways. It is grimly poetic that Jericho, the city of palms—or, in our symbolic parlance, *the oasis of righteousness*—was removed from Israel’s control when they ceased striving to be righteous. While it’s true that none of us can achieve perfect righteousness in our own strength, it is still up to us to try. It’s a matter of free will. The sacrifices of the Torah (all of which were fulfilled in the life of Christ) are of no use to us if we don’t *want to walk with Yahweh*.

Fast forward six hundred years or so. Judah under King Ahaz has become so corrupt, Yahweh uses both Aram (Syria) and Israel’s northern kingdom (a.k.a. Ephraim) to knock him down a peg or two. The soldiers of Ephraim captured two hundred thousand Judean men, women, and children, intending to use (or sell) them as slaves. But when they got back to Samaria with their prize, a prophet of Yahweh, Oded by name, informed them that they had overstepped their mandate: they had been authorized by Yahweh to sting Judah, not bludgeon it into oblivion. And the leading men of Ephraim, to their credit, repented. **“Certain chiefs also of the men of Ephraim...stood up against those who were coming from the war and said to them, ‘You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against Yahweh in addition to our present sins and guilt. For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel.’ So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the princes and all the assembly. And the men...rose and took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.”** (II Chronicles 28:12-15) The whole thing is an elaborate object lesson: Yahweh’s rod of correction is designed to humble us, not crush or enslave us. In the end, our well deserved affliction is intended to return us in mercy to the city of palm trees—the place of *righteousness*.

As described by the prophet Joel (whose name means “Yahweh is God”), the afflictions to be suffered by Israel blend seamlessly from “natural” disasters to

foreign invaders to the ultimate “Day of Yahweh.” Each plague seems to be a dress rehearsal for what can be expected next if they (that is, *we*) don’t repent and return to Yahweh. So he says, **“Be ashamed, you farmers. Wail, you vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine has dried up, and the fig tree has withered. The pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree—all the trees of the field are withered. Surely joy has withered away from the sons of men.”** (Joel 1:11-12) In the near term, droughts and swarms of locusts would be sent to get Israel’s attention—as had been *promised* in Deuteronomy 28:38-42. In the long run, the lessons will apply throughout man’s history—right up until the end of the Great Tribulation. Many of the fruit-bearing plants mentioned here hold prominent places in The Torah Code, as we shall see. Our current subject, the palm tree—symbolic of righteousness—tells us that our very *ability* to pursue righteousness will be compromised by our refusal to repent. As the Pharaoh of the exodus discovered, Yahweh has been known to “harden people’s hearts,” to set in stone those bad attitudes that we ourselves have chosen to embrace. We may imagine we have a handle on truth, but “good without God” is a dangerous myth. Without deference to the word of Yahweh, our best intentions are nothing but withered palm trees.

In all of the excruciating detail concerning the design and construction of the original wilderness tabernacle, no mention is made of using palm trees as an ornamental motif. But this isn’t true of Solomon’s temple. There are five scriptural mentions of palm trees being used as decorative elements by Solomon. One example: **“Then Solomon began to build the house of Yahweh in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where Yahweh had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.... He overlaid it on the inside with pure gold. The nave he lined with cypress and covered it with fine gold and made palms [Hebrew: *timorah*, based on the ordinary word for a literal palm tree, *tamar*, but denoting architectural ornamentation] and chains on it.”** The word for “chains” is derived from a verb meaning “to take root.” **“He adorned the house with settings of precious stones. The gold was gold of Parvaim [literally, “oriental regions”]. So he lined the house with gold—its beams, its thresholds, its walls, and its doors—and he carved cherubim on the walls.”** (II Chronicles 3:1, 4-7) Perhaps it’s a stretch, but we could be seeing a symbolic indication that whereas the wilderness tabernacle was designed to be movable—broken down and carried from place to place as the Holy Spirit led—the temple was, like the palm tree, something that wouldn’t move about. Yahweh had chosen this place atop Mount Moriah to be the place where He would, symbolically anyway, “put down roots,” where He’d picture

Himself as being “chained” to one location (which would explain why Satan so obviously covets Jerusalem). In literal, geographical terms, this was the place He had spoken of so often in the Torah, the “place where Yahweh your God will choose to make His name abide.”

More detail is provided in I Kings. We should pay attention to the symbolic elements: the passage is peppered with them. **“Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms...”** Cherubim remind us of Yahweh’s constant angelic care over His people. Palm trees, as usual, speak of righteousness (but with the added twist, as we have seen, of having put down roots in God’s chosen place). And open flowers speak eloquently of the continuation of life, of fertility and fruitfulness. **“For the entrance to the inner sanctuary he made doors of olivewood.”** The olive motif is symbolic of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. **“The lintel and the doorposts were five-sided.”** Since four-sided would have been “normal,” we must ask ourselves *why*. Five is the number of grace. **“He covered the two doors of olivewood with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers. He overlaid them with gold and spread gold on the cherubim and on the palm trees.”** Gold speaks of immutable purity. **“So also he made for the entrance to the nave doorposts of olivewood, in the form of a square, and two doors of cypress wood.”** Maybe I’m “off my game,” but I can’t discern any consistent symbolic scriptural usage for the word translated “cypress,” the Hebrew *beros*—a fir, cypress, juniper, or pine tree, a generic conifer. But for what it’s worth, they’re often mentioned in parallel with cedars (signifying strength). **“The two leaves of the one door were folding, and the two leaves of the other door were folding. On them he carved cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, and he overlaid them with gold evenly applied on the carved work.”** (I Kings 6:29, 31-35)

We might be tempted to “write off” the symbolic use of palm trees in Solomon’s temple as mere architectural whimsy, but for one thing: they are also mentioned—eleven times—in the prophetic specifications for the Millennial temple, revealed to the prophet Ezekiel. Chapter 40 describes the outer and inner court—the exterior areas of the temple environs. **“And the gateway had windows all around, narrowing inwards toward the side rooms and toward their jambs, and likewise the vestibule had windows all around inside, and on the jambs were palm trees.... And its windows, its vestibule, and its palm trees were of the same size as those of the gate that faced toward the east.... And there were seven steps leading up to it, and its vestibule was before them, and it had palm trees on its jambs, one on either side.... Its vestibule faced the outer court, and palm trees were on its jambs, and its stairway had eight steps.”** (Ezekiel 40:16, 22, 26, 31) If our observation (that palm trees signify righteousness) has merit, then it is clear that you won’t be able to get anywhere near the ultimate temple without being confronted with the need for righteousness at every turn. The palm tree motif is everywhere you look.

The same is true, not surprisingly, for the temple structure itself, described in chapter 41. **“And on all the walls all around, inside and outside, was a measured pattern. It was carved of cherubim and palm trees, a palm tree between cherub and cherub. Every cherub had two faces: a human face [reminding us of Yahshua’s first advent] toward the palm tree on the one side, and the face of a young lion [read: authority—a symbol of the Messiah’s second advent] toward the palm tree on the other side.”** The message here seems to be that both in humility or in glory, Yahshua is He who provides and guards our righteousness. **“They were carved on the whole temple all around. From the floor to above the door, cherubim and palm trees were carved; similarly the wall of the nave.... And on the doors of the nave were carved cherubim and palm trees, such as were carved on the walls. And there was a canopy of wood in front of the vestibule outside. And there were narrow windows and palm trees on either side, on the sidewalls of the vestibule, the side chambers of the temple, and the canopies.”** (Ezekiel 41:17-20, 25-26) It’s interesting to see cherubim and palm trees appearing together so frequently. Yahweh is apparently trying to teach us about the connection between our righteousness and His own personal involvement in securing it for us. We can’t become righteous without His help.

One final “palm tree sighting” needs to be addressed. The Song of Solomon is either a Millennial allegory explaining the depth of Yahshua’s love for His called-out church (and how this visceral relationship corresponds to Yahshua’s bond with Israel), or it’s one of the oddest pieces of literature ever penned. I think you can guess where I stand on that question. Here too the palm tree is recruited as a symbolic element. In steamy purple prose, Solomon (representing the Messiah-King) whispers to his beloved Shulamite maiden (i.e., the church): **“How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine.”** (Song of Solomon 7:6-9) Christ doesn’t just tolerate His church. We are not a duty, a burden, or an afterthought to Him. He loves us, rather, with a passion, a physical desire, that only young lovers could possibly understand.

And what does the palm tree metaphor tell us? It reveals that He sees us as desirable, upright, righteous, fruitful and sweet. Apparently, love is blind.

ALOES

❧ 3.3.4 ❧

The Fragrance of Love

Perhaps the reason romance is dead (or at least very quiet) in our world is that we no longer talk to our lovers as Solomon spoke to his beloved: **“Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon. Awake, O north wind, and come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, let its spices flow.”** Of course, you’d better know your beloved *really well* if you’re going to tell her things like this. Use this as a pick-up line in a singles bar, and you’ll probably get yourself arrested. Solomon’s beloved Shulamite maiden, however, knew just how to respond, saying **“Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits.”** (Song of Solomon 4:13-16) Since the Song of Solomon is a prophetic allegory revealing Christ’s intense love for His church (and vice versa), the interchange is actually between Yahshua and His bride—*us*. We’re on the same wave-length; we speak the same language—even if it’s one the world finds maudlin and sappy. It’s their loss: *we’re* the ones who’ll be sleeping in the King’s bed tonight.

I was a bit surprised to discover that “aloes” in scriptural parlance have nothing to do with the healing balm (e.g., aloe vera) so familiar to most of us, derived from the flowering succulent plants of the genus *Aloe*. The Hebrew word translated “aloes” is *’ahalawt*, (or *’ahalim*) meaning (according to the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains*), “an aromatic wood, a tree that can grow 120 feet high, and native to northern India, the decaying wood used for perfumes, fragrances, incense, and fumigation *Aquilaria agallocha* commonly called eaglewood.... Other suggest *Aloexyllon agallochum* (aloewood), and *Santalum album* (white sandalwood).” Indeed, every scripture reference to “aloes” (and there aren’t many) relates to fragrance, not to healing.

The “prophet for hire” Balaam referred to Israel as fragrant aloes that Yahweh had planted in the earth, revealing His love for His chosen people—a sentiment that didn’t exactly sit well with his pagan employer. **“How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel! Like palm groves that stretch afar, like gardens beside a river, like aloes that Yahweh has planted, like cedar trees beside the waters.”** (Numbers 24:5-6) We’ve seen many of these symbolic images already: the palm *groves* speak of righteousness, but this time *en masse*, as a nation—something that won’t be reality until the definitive Day of Atonement, when Israel at last recognizes and receives her Messiah, Yahshua. A river, if you’ll recall, is a picture of truth flowing from God to man, its waters bringing restoration and cleansing first to all

along the river's path—identified here as Israel—and eventually flowing into the sea, the whole gentile world. The cedar trees denote the strength that the river's truth fosters and enables.

And what about the “**aloes that Yahweh has planted,**” the fragrant wood so pleasing to the senses? What is it about Israel's *fragrance* that the prophet found so wonderful? It may help to remember that the Hebrew words for spirit (*ruach*) and aroma (*reyach*) are closely related: they're both tied to the concept of “air in motion,” and what might be borne on the breath of the wind. We can “perceive” a breeze only by the evidence it creates—the movement of the leaves—just as we can recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit only by the witness of a changed life (see John 3:8). In the same way (sort of) we can identify aloes-wood, the evidence of God's love, by its fragrance, its distinctive aroma. In our world, that “fragrance” is borne by Israel, a people chosen and set apart by Yahweh to alert the olfactory senses of the rest of mankind (so to speak) to the concept that there is a God—revealed through Israel—a people who “smell” like Yahweh, even if the rest of us have head colds.

You may protest, “Are you insane? Israel ‘smells’ very little like Yahweh, since they rejected His Messiah and got themselves thrown out of her ‘encampments’ two thousand years ago.” True enough, but still, it is only through Israel's pitifully anemic efforts to keep the Torah alive that we perceive God's plan at all. I for one am thankful for Israel, even though they admittedly could have done a better job of it.

But in the end, only the fragrance of *one* Jew really counts. He is spoken of in this Psalm: “**Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.**” He sits on the throne of David, but in reality, the King is God Himself. “**The scepter of Your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.**” The idea of “God anointing God” must have been confusing, at least until Yahshua taught us how it works. “**Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments make You glad. Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; at Your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.**” (Psalm 45:6-9) Who is Yahweh talking about? Who has been “**anointed with the oil of gladness?**” It's the Messiah—Christ—a title that literally *means* “anointed.” And His queen, standing at His right hand, is His called-out assembly—the church.

And these other symbols? Myrrh (bitterness) and cassia (the fragrant oil used to prepare corpse for burial), you'll recall, were two key ingredients in the making of the exclusive anointing oil for Levitical worship (see Exodus 30:23-33). The addition of aloes in this description informs us that the Messiah fairly *reeks* of Yahweh's love. The “daughters of kings,” it seems to me, are the same people described as the “daughters of Jerusalem” (i.e., Israel) seen in the Song of

Solomon rejoicing at the love between the King and His bride. And that would define “the queen” adorned in gold (read: immutable purity) as the bride of Christ, the *ekklesia*, Yahshua’s called-out assembly, the church. The “ivory palaces,” I believe, are the *color* of ivory—which, not coincidentally, is the color of Jerusalem limestone. And as a lifelong guitarist, you can’t *imagine* how big a smile the line “**stringed instruments make You glad**” puts on my face. How utterly *cool* it would be to play in the heavenly “praise band.”

The inclusion of the scents of myrrh and cassia in the description of the Messiah reminds us that it wasn’t all “glory, honor, and praise” for Him. The path to the throne ran straight through Golgotha. In order to be qualified to reign, the Messiah had to demonstrate His love by dying to atone for our sins. **“After these things [i.e., the trials and crucifixion of Yahshua] Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.”** John doesn’t mention the “cassia” (the “fragrant oil” of Psalm 45 and Exodus 30) but both Matthew (in 26:12) and Luke (23:56) do. **“So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews....”**

The “custom” was to anoint the corpse with spices and oils to mask the stench of decomposition, place the corpse in a sealed above-ground tomb, and wait for the flesh to rot off the bones. When the process was complete, the bones would be retrieved and buried permanently in an ossuary—a small box, just wide enough to accommodate the skull and long enough for the femurs. But Yahweh had promised that He wouldn’t “allow His holy one to see corruption” (see Psalm 16:10). **“Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.”** As the old joke goes, the wife of Joseph of Arimathea was upset that their new family tomb was being used by Yahshua, until Joseph told her, “Not to worry, my love. He’s only going to need it for the weekend.” **“So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.”** (John 19:38-42) The “day of Preparation” is a euphemism for Passover, the day the lambs were to be sacrificed and prepared for the paschal meal, which would take place the next day (that is, sometime after sunset—which *defined it* as “the next day”), on the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The thing to keep in mind (in our present context) is that the aromatic aloes with which the body of Christ had been anointed were still fresh, still exuding the pungent fragrance of God’s love, on the third day (the Feast of Firstfruits), when Yahshua rose from the dead. Yahweh *did not* allow His Holy One to see corruption. Yahshua’s sacrifice proved that He loved us; His resurrection proved that His love was not an empty gesture, not merely a noble but futile stand against

the tyranny of our sinful nature. It was, rather, the *only* thing that a God who had manifested Himself in mortal flesh could do to prove His deity. The self-sacrifice of a man might be inspirational; it might arouse within us renewed determination to “do better.” But only the self-sacrifice of God Himself could fundamentally transform our core natures from rebels into allies—nay, into His blessed and beloved children. To avail ourselves of this transformation, we need only believe in the efficacy of this resurrection—to rely upon its potential. But the choice to do so—or not—is entirely up to us. This transformation has absolutely nothing to do with religion—which is, in a way, the converse or antithesis of what I’m talking about. Religions are man’s attempts to reach God (whatever they define him to be). But spiritual transformation is our acceptance of God’s effort to reach out to us. Granted, the two things can look quite similar, since one is a purposeful counterfeit of the other.

Solomon used sex (of all things) to illustrate the difference. Sex with one’s spouse is right and good—it’s even commanded by God (“Go forth and multiply...”). But adultery is forbidden, because sex with someone *not* your spouse is a picture of religion, not relationship, the attempt to enjoy the benefit without the commitment, the pleasure without the promise. But a relationship with God—reverence for Him exclusively—is the beginning of wisdom. So Solomon says, **“Say to wisdom, ‘You are my sister,’ and call insight your intimate friend, to keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words....”** The forbidden woman, the adulteress, is analogous to following religion instead of embracing Yahweh.

“And behold, the woman meets [the young man lacking sense], dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart. She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay at home. Now in the street, now in the market, and at every corner she lies in wait...” It’s not that religion can’t be attractive, in its own way. After all, the whole idea is to seduce you, to draw you in. So she says, **“I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you. I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love till morning. Let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home. He has gone on a long journey.”** (Proverbs 7:4-5, 10-12, 15-19) There’s the counterfeit—myrrh, aloes and all—concluding with an invitation to **“take our fill of love.”** But note something important here: the husband, the one being betrayed, is Christ—which makes the purveyors of religion (as opposed to those they try to seduce) the ones guilty of adultery. She is elsewhere characterized as “the whore of Babylon.” But the “aloe-wood” of our lives—the fragrance of love—is to be enjoyed with Yahweh alone. Any religious institution that carries on an affair with the world is courting disaster.

OLIVE TREE

❧ 3.3.5 ❧

The Source of the Spirit

We have already established (in chapter 1 of this volume) that olive oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit in scripture. Our key passage was this: **“The angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, ‘What do you see?’ I said, ‘I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.’ And I said to the angel who talked with me, ‘What are these, my lord?’ Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ I said, ‘No, my lord.’ Then he said to me, ‘This is the word of Yahweh to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says Yahweh of hosts.”** (Zechariah 4:1-6) It is not my purpose here to plow over old ground, but to concentrate on the *source* of the oil (and thereby the Spirit symbol)—the olive tree itself.

The first mention of olive plants in the Bible occurs in the flood narrative. The rain had long since stopped, and the waters had receded a great deal. Forty days after Noah could see the tops of the mountains in the distance, he sent out a raven and a dove from the ark. The raven (a carrion bird) didn’t return, having found plenty of corpses floating in the mud to snack on. The dove, on the other hand, was a “clean” bird, and thus more fastidious about what she would eat. So we’re told, **“But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth.”** I should reiterate that the word translated “earth” here is *eretz*, so it doesn’t necessarily mean “the whole planet,” but could just as legitimately denote the area Noah could see outside the ark, which was evidently no longer floating freely, but was hung up like a barge on a sandbar. **“So he put out his hand and took her and brought her into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.”** (Genesis 8:9-11)

This, of course, is where we get the odd idea that the “olive branch” signifies “peace.” It means nothing of the sort, except by a long and tortured reasoning process. Yes, the flood was “over.” But the “earth” that had witnessed it was a disaster area. Nothing had survived, except for those sheltered in the ark. Even the vegetation was buried under a sea of mud. It must have looked like another planet altogether, alien and forbidding, to Noah and his family. Peace? It was the kind of “peace” you feel when you stop hitting your thumb with a hammer. The olive branch was actually the first glimmer of *hope* that Noah received. It was his first

clue that life—one of the most fundamental attributes of the God he served—would return to the earth. Yes, he had breeding pairs of all the animals Yahweh had sent to him aboard the ark, but if the plant life didn't return, those animals wouldn't last long. Olive trees, as it turns out, are not only hardy, they germinate quickly in less-than-hospitable environments. Feral olive trees grow like weeds in such hostile climes as South Australia.

So if we're looking for a symbolic identity for the olive tree in scripture, we should look beyond a "peace" defined only by the absence of imminent, terrifying danger. Since olive oil—obtained from the fruit of this tree by crushing pressure—is so obviously indicative of the Holy Spirit (the manifestation of Yahweh made available to us through the passion of Yahshua the Messiah) then the tree itself must logically have something to do with the *source* of that Spirit. In John 3, you'll recall, Yahshua taught Nicodemus that being born from above, born anew in Yahweh's Holy Spirit, was what defined someone as "being alive" in the spiritual, eternal sense. So when the dove brought back the olive twig to Noah, the symbolic meaning (at least in hindsight) became clear. Remember first that birds represent the consequences of our choices; so the dove, as a clean bird, is analogous to our "good" choices, those made in alignment with Yahweh's will. The dove brought nothing back to the ark until she could bring something that would be a blessing to the man who "walked with God." What she brought back was "proof of life," evidence that the Spirit of Yahweh still walked the earth, even if man did not.

The same fundamental contrast demonstrated by the raven and the dove—the evil choices of an unclean life vs. the good choices of a clean one—is mirrored a thousand times over in scripture. And not infrequently, we see the olive tree metaphor—the dove's evidence of renewed life—being used to characterize the righteous. **"The righteous shall see and fear, and shall laugh at him [that is, in context, the mighty man who is evil, proud, and deceptive], saying, 'See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!'"** You can only "laugh at" someone (Hebrew *sachaq*—to mock, scoff, or make fun of someone, showing lack of concern, anger, or disrespect for him) if he is no longer threatening you. So this is a prophecy, something that will become reality only when Christ reigns upon the earth. That being said, our security against such people is spoken of in the *present tense*: **"But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. I will thank You forever, because You have done it. I will wait for Your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly."** (Psalm 52:6-9) If we dwell "in the house of God," we will exhibit the characteristics of young olive trees: we will take root there, produce abundant fruit, and convey the Spirit who dwells within us to whomever we meet.

Whatever blessings we enjoy in this life are directly attributable to our relationship with Yahweh. **“Blessed is everyone who fears Yahweh, who walks in His ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.”** He’s not necessarily promising material prosperity here, you understand, only “blessing.” There is a difference, although the two things can and often do coexist. As usual, delving into the Hebrew helps us to understand. The word for “blessed” here is *’esher*, a word meaning “happy,” derived from the verb *’ashar*, meaning to walk straight, to make progress, to advance. (Blessings *bestowed from God* are always expressed with a different term—*barak*.) In other words, this “blessing” is not a boon received from Yahweh, but the natural result of one’s reverential walk before Him. The passage goes on to describe it: **“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears Yahweh.”** (Psalm 128:1-4) Comparing this to our previous passage, it appears that the “olive” doesn’t fall too far from the tree. Not only is the one who honors Yahweh “a green olive tree in the house of God,” but his children are apt to follow suit, at least as long as they gather at his table.

Literal olive trees were an important component of the blessing of the Promised Land. The Land to which Moses led Israel wasn’t a blank slate. It was already developed, planted, and cultivated (never mind the moral pollution of its inhabitants). So Moses admonished the people, **“When Yahweh your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget Yahweh, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....”** Israel was supposed to go into Canaan, eliminate its idolatrous population, and take it over as a going concern. This whole scenario is viewed with horror by the unbelieving world today: had God not said, “You shall not steal?” Does this mean that it’s okay for *any* nation to attack any other if they figure they’re strong enough to hold onto their winnings?

No, it doesn’t. Allow me to point out a few salient facts: (1) Yahweh created the earth, and everything in it; therefore, it is His to give to whomever He wants. (2) This particular piece of ground had been *promised* to Israel’s patriarch, Abraham, by God Himself (see Genesis 13:14-15) half a millennium before its current inhabitants were even born. (3) It is not “stealing” to evict people who are squatting on your land, even if they didn’t realize it was yours. (4) Since “the earth is Yahweh’s, and the fullness thereof,” we are *all* squatting on land that doesn’t belong to us, no matter how much we might have paid for it. God reserves the right to evict any of us, whenever He chooses. If you don’t believe me, try taking your house with you when you die. (5) The mandate to conquer Canaan

through military means was a limited-time offer. Restrictions applied. For instance, there were seven distinct people groups who were to be evicted: the Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perrizites, Hivites, and the Jebusites (see Deuteronomy 7:1). There were a few others (e.g., the Kenites, Kadmonites, and Kennezeitites—see Genesis 15:19) whose land had been promised to Abraham, but who had become extinct as national entities by the time Joshua entered the land. Note that Israel had no mandate to exterminate such groups as the Philistines, the Midianites, or the Phoenicians (even if they were occupying land that had been bequeathed to Abraham). And they were under specific instructions not to touch the lands of the Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites. Furthermore, the boundaries of Israel's tribal lands were laid out in excruciating detail in Numbers 34. So this wasn't an open ended call for Jewish world conquest. Israel must leave that sort of thing to their Muslim neighbors, who are instructed by their scriptures to wage jihad on *everybody*, beginning with Jews and Christians.

But I digress. We were talking about olive trees, and how they were part of the gift of the Promised Land. Because the Land was Yahweh's to bequeath to whomever He chose, Moses warned the nation: **"It is Yahweh your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by His name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you, for Yahweh your God in your midst is a jealous God, lest the anger of Yahweh your God be kindled against you, and He destroy you from off the face of the earth."** (Deuteronomy 6:10-15) As Job noted, what God gives, He can also take away, insofar as doing so doesn't violate His own promises. The world would do well to remember that *ownership* of the Land has been Israel's for the past four thousand years, though its *occupancy* always depended on their obedience, not to mention Yahweh's patience.

Thus if Israel's olive trees are symbolically indicative of the source of Yahweh's Spirit in their midst, it becomes clear that His Spirit has been largely unavailable to them (in any national sense) during all those long years when they were exiled from their Land. And now that they're back, it behooves Israel to seek out Yahweh with fresh eyes and open hearts. The "olive trees" are still there. When God's Spirit finally falls upon the nation of Israel, it will be *here*, within the Promised Land (see Ezekiel 37:12, 38:8, 39:22).

Bearing in mind that Israel is a symbolic microcosm of the whole human race, note that their instructions never changed: **"So you shall keep the commandments of Yahweh your God by walking in His ways and by fearing Him. For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless Yahweh your God for**

the good land He has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:6-10) The blessings available to Israel (not to mention the potential cursings) were national in character. If they—as a nation—would honor Yahweh and perform the ordinances prescribed in the Torah, they would enjoy temporal blessings: abundant food, water, and mineral resources.

Did Yahweh keep His promise? Yes. A generation later, we read of the state of the nation, now settled in the Land: **"I gave you [past tense] a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat [present tense] the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant. Now therefore fear Yahweh and serve Him in sincerity and in faithfulness."** (Joshua 24:13-14) The admonition accompanying the announcement was virtually the same as before. First, God had said, "Honor Me by keeping My commandments and I will give you this good Land." Now He was saying, "I've delivered this Land to you, so honor Me by keeping My commandments."

I should reiterate that these ordinances were invariably symbolic (one way or another) of the life and mission of Yahshua the Messiah: it was Israel's job to "act out" on the world's stage what Yahweh was doing to reconcile the human race to Himself. So although gentiles living outside the Land weren't required to *perform* the same precepts as Jews within its borders, they were supposed to *observe* the commandments of Yahweh. For instance, if the Jews were instructed to remove the yeast from their homes for a week every spring, the gentiles were supposed to recognize and embrace the fact that this was a picture of the complete removal of sin from their lives. Similar examples could be multiplied a thousand times over, of course. And just as Israel would enjoy literal, physical blessings if they performed the rites of the Torah, we gentiles would reap the corresponding symbolic rewards—no less real because of their metaphorical nature. So as Israel was promised "a land of olive trees," we, by honoring their God and walking in His ways, would receive the analogous spiritual blessing—in this case, access to the source of the Holy Spirit: Yahweh Himself.

Let's explore one specific example of how this works, one that encompasses our present subject, olive trees. Israelites were required by Torah law to make provision for the poor and disenfranchised—not by throwing money at them as they sat back doing nothing, but by providing an opportunity for gainful, honorable employment. Though they wouldn't get rich, the poor would survive if they showed some initiative. Here's the precept: **"For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard."** (Exodus 23:10-11) The emphasis here is on the "Sabbath" aspect of loving your neighbor, but the core principle is that some of what might ordinarily have been considered the property

of the landowner—specifically, the olives from his orchard—are to be left unharvested (by *him*, anyway) during the Sabbatical year, one year out of every seven. In a stunning repudiation of the hard-nosed views of later rabbis, it is suggested here that although the *landowner* wasn't to do any harvesting during the Sabbatical year, the poor were to be invited in with open arms to gather for themselves what God had provided. Apparently, it's not "work" to gather God's bounty if the land upon which it grew belongs not to you, but to God or His servant.

Were the poor, then, supposed to starve for six years out of every seven? No. The principle of leaving something for the poor is repeated in Deuteronomy, but this time it's stripped of its Sabbatical-year ramifications. **"When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that Yahweh your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this."** (Deuteronomy 24:19-22) Get the picture? Israel's landowners were *not* to run "lean and mean" agribusiness operations, even during the years between Sabbaths. They were *not* to "watch the bottom line." Efficiency at the expense of altruism was forbidden. Rather, they were to *purposely* leave something out there for the poor to collect.

The benefit for the widows and orphans was obvious: they could glean what had been missed, earning a living without shame and without being "forced" by desperate straits to steal. But the landowner, and even his employees, got something out of the deal as well: peace of mind, freedom from the stress and pressure of feeling you had to squeeze every last penny out of one's farm or orchard. It was Yahweh, after all, who had caused the olives to grow in the first place. So when they were ripe, you could go out and give your tree a good once over: whatever fell off was a blessing to you; and whatever didn't was to be considered a blessing for the poor in your midst, those who were, according to God's law, encouraged to come along later and gather the gleanings. Note that they weren't given what the landowner or his workers had gathered. *That* would have been theft (no matter what the liberals say). But they were allowed, even encouraged, to take what the rightful owner had left behind—that is, what Yahweh had *instructed* him to leave behind.

Meanwhile, the gentiles were supposed to be able to look at God's Torah precept and apply its driving principle to their own situations. Okay, so in Greece or Finland or Kansas, the poor didn't know the "system," that it was okay to go in and "follow the reapers." But that didn't mean that the farmers and business

owners couldn't apply the same mindset—inventing ways to provide gracious opportunities for the poor without robbing them of their dignity. It could be donating to local charities—such institutions as Goodwill and the Salvation Army are great examples of the principle. It could take the form of hiring more people than you really needed, giving work experience and a paycheck to those just starting out. It could be outsourcing certain parts of your manufacturing process to handicapped workshops (something by which several of my less-than-whole adopted children have benefitted in years past). Use your imagination. Just because we aren't Jews living in Israel, it doesn't mean we can't follow the *spirit* of the Torah's precept. The core truth of the whole thing is that we are to trust Yahweh to meet our needs, whether we're rich or poor. And a peripheral principle we should glean from this is that “enough is enough.” That which is more than sufficient for our own needs ought to be given away—invested in God's kingdom.

And what about the symbolic ramifications of being told not to continue “beating your trees” until you've harvested every last olive? If olive trees signify “the source of the Spirit,” then this might be taken as an admonition to relax and allow the Holy Spirit to work in whatever way, and at whatever pace, Yahweh deems appropriate. It's not that we aren't to “shake the tree” at all. Recourse to the Spirit's leading through prayer should be our standard strategy, the first thing we do. But God is neither deaf nor stupid. Once we have made our request known, we need to trust Him to work His will in the situation. Paul, you'll recall, asked three times for his “thorn in the flesh” to be taken away before God gently reminded him that His grace was perfectly sufficient for him. Yes, we are to be persistent and consistent, but we're also to be patient and trusting. There's plenty of Spirit to go around. Relax and trust God to do His job. He's really good at it.

Whether literal olive trees or figurative reminders of where the Spirit of God comes from, Yahweh makes it abundantly clear that access to this gift is contingent upon our reverence for Him and for His word. The scriptural record is peppered with prophetic “olive tree” references warning Israel (and through them, us) what would happen to our “olive trees” if we turned our backs on Yahweh. Even before they entered the Land, the olive trees they had yet to inherit were employed as an object lesson in the infamous “blessings and cursings” passage of Deuteronomy 28: **“But if you will not obey the voice of Yahweh your God or be careful to do all his commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.... You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off.”** (Deuteronomy 28:15, 40) It's not like the olive trees would all be cut down or

anything, but if Israel failed to keep Yahweh's commandments, they would—by their fruitlessness—mock Israel's plight. And if they rejected Yahweh's Spirit, the Spirit would in turn become unavailable to them. It's kind of like the law of supply and demand *in reverse*. The more the Spirit of God is “in demand” in a nation, the more readily available it will become; but if no one values the Spirit anymore, it will become as rare as buggy whips at a NASCAR race.

The frustration latent in Moses' admonition is echoed by the prophet Micah, writing at a time when Assyria was being prepared to chastise Israel for her sins. **“The voice of Yahweh cries to the city—and it is sound wisdom to fear Your name: ‘Hear of the rod and of Him who appointed it....’ Therefore I strike you with a grievous blow, making you desolate because of your sins. You shall eat, but not be satisfied, and there shall be hunger within you. You shall put away, but not preserve, and what you preserve I will give to the sword. You shall sow, but not reap. You shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil. You shall tread grapes, but not drink wine.”** (Micah 6:9, 13-15) Without Yahweh's blessing—the direct result of His people's obedience—Israel's plans for prosperity would come to nothing. Their potential would be unrealized and their labor unrewarded.

A century later, Judah faced the same stark choice: repent or perish. (And don't look now, but that's the decision America is facing right now as well.) After seeing what had happened to their northern brothers, it should have been obvious that Yahweh was displeased with the sort of things they were doing. Their apostasy had become a foul stench in the nostrils of God, so He told His prophet, **“Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to Me in the time of their trouble.”** It's an old story: slam the door in Yahweh's face once too often, and He's apt to lock it from His side. **“What right has My beloved in My house, when she has done many vile deeds? Can even sacrificial flesh avert your doom? Can you then exult?...”** The Torah provided a broad range of animal sacrifices designed to demonstrate what Yahweh (through Yahshua) would do to remove from us the penalty of our sins, cover our trespasses, and atone for our lapses in judgment, behavior, or performance. But these sacrifices availed them nothing if they were performed as mere dead ritual, with no genuine contrition—which is precisely what Judah was doing.

“Yahweh once called you ‘a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit.’ But with the roar of a great tempest He will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed. Yahweh of hosts, who planted you, has decreed disaster against you, because of the evil that the house of Israel and the house of Judah have done, provoking Me to anger by making offerings to Baal.” (Jeremiah 11:14-17) Here Israel is seen not as the *possessor* of Yahweh's gift of olive trees, but as the trees themselves—that is, *they* were the ones whose job it was to be the conduit of Yahweh's Spirit to the rest of the world. Yes,

Yahshua was indeed sent “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (see Matthew 15:24) but it is now clear that He was mostly sent *through* them—to us.

God’s discipline is always designed to encourage us to repent, to turn around and go in a direction that’s different from our present, disastrous course. And God’s prophets said as much—over and over again. **“I struck you with blight and mildew. Your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured. Yet you did not return to Me, declares Yahweh.”** (Amos 4:9) It would be tempting to castigate Israel for being so tone deaf to Yahweh’s propensity to withhold His blessings in times of widespread apostasy. But if we look at our own society—even within the church—we see the same sort of moral inertia. We look at the disasters that plague our world—fires, floods, droughts, recording breaking heat or cold, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, ever more virulent pestilence upon man, beast, and crops, and even man-caused disasters—and we all-too-often forget that *it doesn’t have to be this way*. Yahweh would much prefer to be pouring out His blessing on mankind, and sheltering us from harm. I realize it’s politically incorrect to say so, but when such disasters happen to us, we must not assume that there is no element of divine judgment involved—calculated to awaken us and lead us to repentance. Remember: in Israel’s case, Yahweh flatly declared: **“I struck you.”** Christ’s coming Millennial kingdom will demonstrate what kind of benign world we could have lived in if we—and I mean *all of us*—had honored Yahweh all along.

Don’t get me wrong: I’m not saying we should “blame God” for all of the bad stuff that happens to us. Yahweh may *allow* such things, to encourage our repentance, but the blame is never His—it’s ours. Sure, there are guilty parties to blame for some of the disaster we see happening about us. But bad weather? The fault is not as the secular humanist elite would have you believe: weather anomalies are *not* the result of “global warming” or “climate change” brought about by overconsumption on the part of folks who have achieved a certain “unhealthy” level of prosperity. If you follow the money, you’ll soon discover that there is a hidden financial objective among those who are pushing the “green agenda.” There will be vast fortunes to be made if they can just get the world to buy into the idea that carbon emissions are the root of all evil. (Meanwhile, sunspot cycles—a phenomenon that has been going on for millions of years—are ignored because the global elite haven’t figured out how to make a profit on them.)

And what about “man-caused disasters” like wars, terrorist attacks, moral decay, and civil disorder? These same elite overlords would have you believe that (1) fundamentalist Muslims should be given what they want because they’re so “peace loving;” that (2) productive (or merely *blessed*) people should not be allowed to keep their wealth, but it should be “redistributed” equally among the

masses, deserving or not; that (3) democracy should be imposed on everyone, no matter how many people have to be killed in order to achieve it; and that (4) a “woman’s right to choose” outweighs a child’s right to life. And the list could go on *ad infinitum*—excuse my soapbox rant. My point is that all of these theories are *wrong*: the evils that befall us in this world are the direct result of mankind’s own sinful nature, our enmity with God, and our unwillingness to repent. Things would be radically different if the whole world honored Yahweh. Or, should I say, things *will* be radically different *when* the whole world bows before Yahweh’s Anointed One—the Messiah, King Yahshua. Alas, the atheistic secular humanists won’t survive to see it.

That’s the question the “olive tree” places before us: what is the source of our spirit? What is the nature of the “anointing” of whoever (or whatever) it is that we follow in this world? In case you haven’t noticed, most people in this world choose to serve “kings” other than Yahshua. Their “anointed rulers” are—by definition—lesser creatures, not *bad* (necessarily), but inferior to Yahweh’s Messiah nevertheless. Some people see “salvation” in one political candidate or another. Some bow before their lifestyles, their pleasures, their toys, or even their perversions. Some revere their socio-political mindset, presuming that if everyone agreed with them, the world would straighten itself out (and note that I didn’t specify any particular philosophy or political stance, right *or* left, conservative *or* liberal: even the best of human schemes are incapable of overcoming the negative forces imposed upon us by our own fallen natures).

This psychological need for a “king” to rule over us is nothing new. It is the inevitable result of the fall of man, a condition that left Adam—and all of us since then—with the capacity for the indwelling of God’s Spirit, but bereft of it—until we choose to be “born from above.” Scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal nailed it in 1670 in his book *Pensées (Thoughts)*: “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” If we ignore Yahweh’s Messiah, we will inevitably seek out something else—something inferior—to “anoint” as the king of our lives.

At the end of the age of the Judges, Israel (having *de facto* rejected Yahweh as their king) fell into this very trap, demanding of their judge and prophet, Samuel, that he appoint a king over them. He did so (under Yahweh’s disgusted direction) but not before he warned them what it would cost them: **“So Samuel told all the words of Yahweh to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, ‘These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of**

his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants...." From the symbolic point of view, this entails more than the obvious—that the king will rob you blind in the interests of "the greater good" or "national security," defined in the end as "whatever benefits *him*." Beyond that, "your olive orchards being taken from you and given to his servants" speaks of the source of anointing oil being removed from your control and put into his. That is, a king—anyone or anything you put in charge of your life—will rob you, to some extent, of your ability to determine your own spiritual destiny. False gods and politicians are alike: all they want is *more*—more of your authority, your wealth, and your liberty. They apparently can't help themselves. Samuel's point was well taken: it's foolish to willingly give up control over your own olive orchard.

He continues with the bad news: **"He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but Yahweh will not answer you in that day."** (I Samuel 8:10-18) A tenth? Most later generations living under "kings" of any description would *kill* to get off that easily. Yes, we have become the "slaves" of our governments, whether we know it or not. I don't want to rub salt in the wound, but I must draw attention to the *contrast* Samuel was presenting. Under Yahweh's direct rule, they had no king. They were personally—as well as nationally—responsible to observe God's instructions, the Torah. No man ruled over them. Yes, there were Levites and a priesthood, but they held no civil power. The Torah had no enforcement provision other than the people's responsibility to obey Yahweh. There was no governmental infrastructure, no standing army, no police force, no prisons, no bureaucracy, no state-supported palaces, and no diplomatic corps. Whatever "leaders" arose did so by virtue of their demonstrable wisdom, ability, and experience: "leadership" was defined as service rendered, not status attained.

And what about a welfare system? It did exist under the Torah, for people did occasionally fall upon hard times. It was a three part system: (1) The poor could, as we have seen, follow behind the reapers, gleaning what they left behind. (2) The tithe not only supported the landless Levites, but also went (under Levitical administration) toward the relief of the disadvantaged in Israel. And (3) there was a system of "contract labor" in which a person could sell his services to the highest bidder for up to seven years in order to pay his debts. Such a "bondservant" was protected from abuse under Torah law. He was not a slave: his servitude lasted only until the sabbatical year release, or until Jubilee, and his wages—paid in advance—were based on how much time was left until the end of the Sabbatical cycle. And after his "time" was up, his master was required to stake

him—providing whatever was necessary to give him a fresh start in freedom and honor (thereby breaking the cycle of dependency and malaise that perpetual slavery would have fostered). Nobody in Israel sat around watching TV drinking beer waiting for the welfare check and food stamps to arrive.

But I'm digressing again. Sorry. We were talking about olive trees, and how they serve as a metaphor for the source of the oil of anointing—whether spiritual or temporal. A few dozen pages back, we studied a parable told by one of the sons of Gideon using trees to illustrate the concept of leadership in Israel. One by one, the trees passed on the job (since sovereignty belonged to Yahweh alone) until the worthless bramble stepped up and seized the scepter. The first tree on the list was the olive tree: **"The trees once went out to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' But the olive tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my abundance, by which gods [*elohim*] and men are honored, and go hold sway over the trees?'"** (Judges 9:8-9) The olive tree readily admitted that he had an important job to do, but it wasn't to rule over the other trees—it was to provide the oil with which men are anointed for service. Note: the ESV's rendering of "gods" should be "God" (with a capital G). The word used is indeed plural (the *-im* ending), but in Hebrew this also indicates an emphatic form. *Elohim* is the generic term for God or true deity—Yahweh's "job description." The point is that not only are human kings and priests anointed with oil, but such anointing is also the very definition of the coming king, who was to be both God and man (Isaiah 9:6)—the promised Messiah, *the Anointed One*.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Messiah is *Yahweh's* Anointed One, it is, in a sense, up to *us* to anoint Him (or not) to be king of our individual lives. That is, if we consider Yahshua to be our Sovereign Lord, it is our responsibility to obey Him. Of course, the choice of whether or not to do so is entirely up to us, but we can't logically presume to reap the benefits of being a citizen in the kingdom of God if we refuse to do what God says. It may seem odd in the extreme to picture *people* as the source of God's Spirit in this world, but in a way, that's precisely what happens. It's an artifact of the Great Commission: folks typically won't meet Yahweh unless His followers introduce them to Him. Their souls will likely never have an opportunity to be indwelt with Yahweh's life-giving Spirit if we haven't let His light shine in our own lives.

Doubtless the ultimate example of "olive trees" providing evidence of the Spirit through the testimony of men is hinted at in this passage from Zechariah—the continuation of the very first scripture I quoted in this subject, where we

learned of the symbolic connection between olive oil and the Spirit of Yahweh. We find Zechariah chatting with an angel: **“Then I said to him, ‘What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?’ And a second time I answered and said to him, ‘What are these two branches of the olive trees, which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out?’ He said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ I said, ‘No, my lord.’ Then he said, ‘These are the two anointed ones who stand by the lord of the whole earth.”** (Zechariah 4:11-14)

I’m sure Zechariah was thinking, “Well, I’m certainly glad we got *that* cleared up.” This esoteric prophecy still wouldn’t make much sense until John fleshed it out in the Book of Revelation—but even then, you have to stay on your toes. As an angel was showing John a vision of the rebuilt Tribulation temple (the one in which the Antichrist will declare himself to be god—II Thessalonians 2:4), he suddenly switched gears: **“And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.”** That’s three and a half prophetic years (or “times”), coinciding for the most part with the second half of the Tribulation—the *Great* Tribulation. The angel then identifies them: **“These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the lord of the earth....”**

First, who is “the lord of the (whole) earth,” a phrase used in both Zechariah and Revelation? In the Hebrew, it’s *adon*, a noun meaning lord, master, or owner—one who exercises control. (When Yahweh is called “Lord” in the original Hebrew texts, however, the word used is invariably *adonay*—the emphatic form—not *adon*.) In John’s Greek, the word is *theos*, which denotes anyone who’s in charge, up to and including God. In the ultimate sense, of course, the two witnesses “stand by” or “stand before” Yahweh—we all do that. But the word “before,” describing where the witnesses stand, is the Greek *enopion*, meaning “in the presence of, over against, or opposite.” It would not be incorrect to translate this as “standing *against* the ruler of the whole earth.” And who is that? At this particular point in time, it’s the Antichrist, the Beast, the son of perdition. These two witnesses (who I’m convinced are Elijah and Enoch—the only two men who ever passed from history without suffering physical death—*yet*) will be the ants at the Antichrist’s picnic, the ones who personally call down the plagues of the Great Tribulation that are then carried out by the angels of the seven bowl judgments upon the earth.

The Beast would stop them if he could, but he can’t: they’re sealed by God for the task at hand. **“And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.”** (Revelation 11:3-6) It is not my purpose here to explore what they’ll do, or how. But let us consider *why*.

These two men are characterized as the two olive trees whose oil feeds golden seven-branched lampstand in Zechariah's vision. Or to be more precise, they are the two *branches* of olive trees. Yahweh is the ultimate source of His Spirit, of course, but these two branches are seen as conduits through which that Spirit flows, illuminating the whole earth in these, the darkest of mankind's days. John reports that the whole world will rejoice when they're finally murdered by the Beast (i.e., when Yahweh has determined that their task has been accomplished, 1,260 days after they began). So it is apparent—even obvious—that these same people are aware of what they've been doing for the past three and a half years. The angel characterizes it as “prophesying.” There is a message attached to their pronouncement of plagues upon the earth: *repent*—or else. This is what the conduit of Yahweh's Spirit to man will look like in the day of judgment.

Some will listen, but many will not. As always, it'll boil down to a choice of whom you believe—whom you *trust*—Yahweh or our adversary. Satan and the Beast, like pitiful politicians running for office, will try to persuade people to ignore or discount what the two witnesses are saying, since they can't prevent their message from being broadcast. Of course, when the plagues come about just as they predicted, the Antichrist's lies will become increasingly hard to sell. But it has always been that way, ever since Adam and Eve's debacle in the garden: we're given a choice of whom to believe—Yahweh or Satan—and subsequent events reveal whether we chose well or poorly.

An example from history: at the height of Assyria's power, having already hauled Israel's northern kingdom off in chains, they attacked Judah and besieged Jerusalem, though God had promised to deliver the city. So the Assyrian commander/negotiator told them, **“Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria: ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live, and not die. And do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, Yahweh will deliver us.”** (II Kings 18:31-32) That was a rather convincing sound bite, if you didn't know the Living God. But you know the story: Yahweh slew the entire 185,000 man Assyrian siege force in a single night, in response to King Hezekiah's unshakable faith.

But in the present context, let us more closely examine one of the Assyrians' promises: **“I [will] come and take you away to a land like your own land...a land of olive trees.”** Symbolically, what Sennacherib's *Rabshekeh* was saying to Hezekiah (though he doubtless didn't realize it) was that “one spirit is as good as any other. You've got your olive trees here in Judea, but you can have *other* olive trees in the lands where we'll resettle you. In other words, you have Yahweh to worship

here, but where we'll send you, you'll have your pick of gods that are just as good—Bel, Marduk, Sin, Ishtar, Tiamat, Ashur, or any of a dozen more; take your pick. So you may as well give up.” There was just one slight problem: the Assyrians, so familiar with religion based on the worship of false gods, didn't comprehend that the Jews were following (however imperfectly) the Real Thing, the genuine Creator of the Universe, Yahweh.

Alas, Judah would, as Ephraim had, eventually succumb to their own apostasy and idolatry. Good, faithful kings like Hezekiah were too few and far between to turn the nation around. But after the Babylonian captivity, the Jews were once again allowed (by the Persians, who had inherited the exiles) to return to Judea to rebuild their city and their temple. Centuries later, the advent of Yahshua the Messiah once again gave them a golden opportunity to choose wisely—and once again, they didn't. Their exile this time wouldn't be any measly seventy years: it would last from 135 AD (or count from the 70 AD sack of Jerusalem if you like) until 1948. Now that they're back in the Land (albeit as spiritually dead corpses, not quite alive yet, as portrayed in Ezekiel 37:1-14) what is in Israel's future?

It's a bad news-good news story, with the bad news coming first. First, we read: **“And in that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean. And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain and his arm harvests the ears, and as when one gleans the ears of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten—two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, declares Yahweh God of Israel.”** (Isaiah 17:4-6) Israel is going to be knocked back to “remnant” mode—again. When will this happen? After all, it sounds a lot like the sort of thing that has happened to Jacob several times in the past. But the contextual key of the passage (verse 1) is the complete and utter destruction of *Damascus*—arguably the oldest continuously occupied city on the face of the earth: in other words, this hasn't happened yet. The previous verse ties the bleak fate of Syria's capital to the Tribulation of Israel: **“The fortified cities of Israel will also be destroyed, and the power of Damascus will end. The few left in Aram [Syria] will share the fate of Israel's departed glory,” says Yahweh Almighty.**” (Isaiah 17:3 NLT)

Actually, it won't just be Israel who'll be reduced to the “gleanings” of its former population during the Last Days. Isaiah 24 speaks of Yahweh's devastating wrath upon the entire earth. It predicts the indiscriminant destruction of its populace, without regard to class or privilege (vs. 1-2), the fact that the earth's inhabitants have defiled it, so they are going to be “burned, with few men left” (vs. 2-6), and the total breakdown of civilization, with all of its blandishments and amusements (vs. 7-12). Then the prophet uses the same image we saw before, that of an olive tree being beaten to harvest its fruit: **“For thus it shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at**

the gleaning when the grape harvest is done....” Remember what we saw previously concerning the privilege of the poor in Israel to come through the olive orchards after the initial harvest, gathering what was left over? Perhaps I’m seeing something that isn’t really there, but could it be that the severity of the Tribulation’s trials will depend on how much this last generation left behind for the poor? It may be a scriptural stretch, but it seems to me to be a reasonable assumption that the resources available to those left behind to face the Tribulation’s music will be inversely proportional to the greed with which they “beat their olive trees” in the days before God’s wrath descended upon them. I believe we should all “harvest our crops” in this world as if we knew we’d have to live not on what we gathered, but on what we left over for the poor.

And symbolically? What can we glean from this? If the olive tree is the source of the oil—that is, the Spirit—then we (Yahweh’s children) should do what we can to leave a legacy of spiritual truth behind us, easily accessible to those “poor” people who will be left to fend for themselves in our raptured absence. Will the memory of what we did, who we loved, or how we walked in the world lead them toward God or away from Him after we’re gone?

Having delivered the bad news, Isaiah now abruptly shifts gears and proclaims the good news: **“They lift up their voices, they sing for joy. Over the majesty of Yahweh they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to Yahweh. In the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel.”** (Isaiah 24:13-15) Who are “they?” They’re the remnant—of both Israel and the nations—those relatively few “olives” who were left in the tree after the beating of the Tribulation had removed those ripe for judgment. Why are they singing for joy? It’s because they, having given glory to Yahweh (albeit belatedly), have now witnessed His victory, His vindication: King Yahshua reigns! Once again, the survivors of the Tribulation—the first generation of mortal citizens of Christ’s earthly kingdom—are compared to what was left behind to feed the poor. Truly did Yahshua say, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:3)

Because this remnant will not have been schooled in the scriptures (but rather had to discover their faith “in the saddle,” much as Abraham did), they might be compared to Nehemiah’s generation of returning exiles, discovering anew what their parents had forgotten about God’s word. **“And they found it written in the Law that Yahweh had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, ‘Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.’”** (Nehemiah 8:14-15) For Nehemiah’s generation, this rediscovery of the Feast of Tabernacles was a dress rehearsal (whether they knew it or not) for the Millennial kingdom of Christ. But for the Tribulation survivors, it will be the actual performance. The booths

that Yahweh had asked everyone to live in for the week were symbolic of the central fact of the Kingdom: Yahweh, in the form of King Yahshua, was coming to “camp out” among men on the earth.

The branches of olive trees weren’t specified in the original Instructions, as we saw in our study of palm trees. But Nehemiah’s inclusion of olive branches (in place of “the boughs of leafy trees” and “willows of the brook,” both of which spoke of the mixed multitude that would populate the Kingdom) may get us to the same conclusion, using different imagery. That is, *both* Israel and the church are in view, separate in a way but at the same time unified, woven together into one, as the warp and woof of a tapestry are separate but inextricable—together forming something greater, stronger, and more beautiful than the sum of its parts.

The key to our understanding is Nehemiah’s mention of *both* cultivated and wild olive branches. If the Instructions concerning the Feast of Tabernacles meant nothing beyond simply obeying God’s orders, then Nehemiah’s propensity for playing fast and loose with Yahweh’s Law based on what he found practical or expedient might be considered, shall we say, *ill advised*. Sure, olive trees and myrtles would probably fall under the broad category “leafy trees,” but there are those today who would take him to task for not merely repeating Moses’ directive verbatim. I am not among them. I believe, rather, that Yahweh was, through His servant, giving us another chance to discover something important about His plan—by using different imagery. In truth, He does this all the time, presenting the same doctrine or prophetic principles different ways, using different symbols, through different prophets. I believe that’s what He’s doing here.

Granted, specifying both cultivated and wild olive branches for the booths of the festival is about as “inside” as it gets. But we have Paul to sort it out for us. He’s speaking here of how the gentiles relate to Israel in the kingdom of God. **“Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.”** Paul, as a former Pharisee, was the unlikeliest possible choice for an “apostle to the gentiles,” which no doubt explains why Yahweh chose him for the task. Never let it be said that God doesn’t have a flair for irony. **“For if their [that is, Israel’s] rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?”** Paul (after his conversion, anyway) was heartsick that his beloved Israel had chosen to largely reject Yahshua’s Messianic credentials. The silver lining to that cloud was that the message could now be brought to the whole world. **“If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches....”** You can’t understand half of what Paul said without factoring in that he was a Torah scholar. His imagery depends, as often as not, on thorough familiarity with the Law of Moses. His point here is that there is natural continuity from the source to the end result, from the cause to the effect.

So he enlists olive trees as exemplars: **“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you....”** The olive tree, the source of Yahweh’s Spirit, is a living organism—or should I say, *the* living organism, the source of all life, Yahweh Himself. The “natural branches” growing from the trunk, deriving their nourishment from their roots in Yahweh, are, of course, Israel. But it doesn’t take a horticultural savant to recognize that the natural branches had dried up and stopped producing fruit. I see this sort of thing all the time in the woods surrounding my home: a living, solidly rooted tree with a dead branch or two. When the storms come along, guess which branches are most apt to break off.

If you were tending a grove of commercial olive trees, you’d do the same thing nature does in my woods: you’d examine the trees for unproductive limbs, and cut them off so they wouldn’t sap the strength of the whole tree. Then (if you were trying to improve the breed) you might graft in branches from different varieties of olive trees. These branches can’t survive on their own, of course, but if grafted in to the healthy trunk, they bear the potential for improved strains of olives—hopefully more pest resistant and productive than the natural branches had been. That, in a manner of speaking, is what God did with His kingdom: He cut off Israel and grafted in the gentiles—that is, the largely gentile church.

So Paul says, **“Then you will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe.”** We gentiles need to keep several factors in mind. (1) Israel is the “natural” match for the trunk and roots; we may be compatible, but that’s not really the same thing. (2) We’re here in the Kingdom by invitation only: we didn’t grow here, but were artificially grafted in. (3) The whole process is somewhat experimental on the orchard-Master’s part. By being grafted in, we are not being given possession of the trunk, only an opportunity to become a conduit for its blessings. We may “take,” and we may not. It’s up to us. (4) Whether or not we are deemed compatible with the trunk and roots will be determined by one thing: the fruit we bear. In the end, we may turn out to be crabapple limbs instead of wild olive branches—in which case, we’ll bear no olives, no matter how skillfully the grafting was done.

Paul then rightly admonishes the gentile believers against pride: **“For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you [if we fall into the same sort of apostasy Israel did]. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in His kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off....”** We in the church are offered the same sort of “blessing or cursing” choice that Israel was in Deuteronomy 28—not as a single

nation this time, since we are drawn from every tribe and people on earth—but as individual believers choosing a spiritual path. If we wish to experience His kindness, we should endeavor to bear the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But God is under no illusions. Some of us will invite His severity upon our heads instead. It's a prophetic *fait accompli*. I am reminded of the sweeping differences between the seven churches to whom the epistles of Revelation 2 and 3 were addressed. Some (like Smyrna and Philadelphia) were given nothing but encouragement, but others (like Thyatira and Sardis) were pronounced terminally ill—as dead as a dry branch on an olive tree, ready to be snapped off and tossed into the fire.

Is Israel done, then? Having been broken off for their sins (providing an opportunity for the gentiles to prosper in their stead), are they beyond redemption? A thousand unmistakable prophecies make it clear that this is not the case. They *will* return to Yahweh—and embrace Yahshua His Messiah. Remember, Daniel's chapter 9 prophecy for Israel still has one "week" yet to run, in which everlasting righteousness will be brought in, vision and prophecy will be sealed up, and the Most Holy will be anointed. So Paul's analogy continues: **"And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again."** This re-grafting is essentially what is predicted for the definitive Day of Atonement: Israel will afflict their souls, respond to Yahweh, and receive their returning Messiah. **"For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree."** (Romans 11:13-14) From that day forward, and throughout Christ's Millennial kingdom, the Spirit of Yahweh will flow through Israel to the entire world. The olive tree of humanity will have been restored to its intended state.

Or as Hosea puts it, **"I will be like the dew to Israel. He shall blossom like the lily. He shall take root like the trees of Lebanon. His shoots shall spread out. His beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath My shadow."** (Hosea 14:5-7) That day is not far off. Today, they don't know what they've been missing. Israel is yet a valley of dry bones. But they will soon stand on their feet, an exceedingly great army quickened by the breath—the Spirit—of Yahweh.

WILLOW

❧ 3.3.6 ❧

Mixed or Interwoven

I'll admit it right up front: if the willow tree hadn't been mentioned in the incredibly significant instructions for the Feast of Tabernacles, I probably wouldn't have recognized any symbolic significance in association with this tree. After all, there's no rule that says "every noun must have some hidden meaning," even though Yahweh really loves His parables. Is it not possible that a tree is just a tree? The last thing I'd want to do is discover "hidden truths" in scripture that would come as a surprise even to God.

That being said, willows came up in our conversation back when we were studying palm trees, for both species were specified as building materials for the "booths" in which the Israelites were to camp out for a week each fall—the Feast of Tabernacles. That practically guarantees that there is more to them than meets the eye. After covering the first six holy convocations, Moses writes, **"These are the appointed feasts of Yahweh, which you shall proclaim as times of holy convocation, for presenting to Yahweh offerings by fire, burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings, each on its proper day, besides Yahweh's Sabbaths and besides your gifts and besides all your vow offerings and besides all your freewill offerings, which you give to Yahweh...."** We shouldn't brush over the concept that the "proper days" of celebration are important to Yahweh. These holidays were appointments we had with God. Observing them on the right days of the year was critical, because they were all prophecies of significant milestones in His plan for our redemption. The ones that have been fulfilled in history so far—the first four—all took place on the very days of their Levitical mandates—including falling on the natural Sabbath where required. There are three more to go—the so-called "fall feasts"—and I expect them to be fulfilled on their "proper days" as well.

The last one of the series, the seventh convocation, is the Feast of Tabernacles (or booths), so called because the Israelites were instructed to build temporary shelters "in the place where Yahweh would choose to make His name abide" and live in them for a week each autumn. It was a harvest festival, a concept that implies all sorts of symbolic possibilities. **"On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of Yahweh seven days."** The Hebrew calendar began in the spring, at the new moon nearest the vernal equinox—in our March or April. That would make the "seventh month" fall in September or October (depending on where we were in the lunar intercalary cycle). **"On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest...."** Not to belabor the point, but a subtle confirmation of my theory

that Yahweh’s plan will unfold over *precisely* seven thousand years—each segment marked by a spiritually earthshaking sign (a detail admittedly not spelled out in prophetic scripture)—is bolstered by the fact that in the year 2033 (exactly two thousand years since the Passion of the Messiah) the Feast of Tabernacles will begin on a natural Sabbath, October 8—the Gregorian equivalent of Tishri 15 that year. In other words, I’m not making this stuff up. By the way, the fifteenth day of any lunar month marks the full moon, the time of maximum sunlight being reflected from the moon. Feel free to ponder the significance of *that*.

We now come to the part of the instructions germane to our present topic, willow trees. **“And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Yahweh your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to Yahweh for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your God.’ Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed feasts of Yahweh.”** (Leviticus 23:37-43) Back when we were discussing palm trees, I noted that “The Hebrew noun *‘ereb* [alternately pronounced *‘arab* or *‘arabah*—the paleo-Hebrew script is consonants-only; the variant being determined by the context] denotes a willow or poplar tree.... A virtually identical noun, however (with the same consonant root), means ‘a mixture, a mixed company, interwoven.’ (*Baker and Carpenter*).” This supported the previous imagery of “leafy trees” (*abot* or *aboth*) as having densely interwoven foliage—a picture of the symbiotic and inextricable relationship between the two groups who will populate the Kingdom of God: Israel and the gentile believers. The “building materials” of the booths of the seventh convocation identify the citizens of the Kingdom, beginning with the Messiah/King Himself.

It turns out, however, that *‘ereb* *‘arab*, or *‘arabah* (the willow tree) is one of those words that carries a plethora of varying connotations in Hebrew—many of which might (or might not) shed light on the significance of “willow trees” as booth material. I’ll use the *Strong’s* numbers to distinguish them, but be aware that they’re all spelled the same way in the original Hebrew. The definitions are condensed from *Baker & Carpenter’s* lexicon. As it turns out, this symbol is a wee bit more complicated than it appeared at first glance.

H6148: “A verb meaning to exchange, to take or give as a pledge or guarantee; the action of taking possession of exchanged material; in Jeremiah 30:21, it conveyed the idea of purposing or engaging to meet with the Lord.” This definition smells a lot like the process of redemption, does it not? Only the redeemed—those bought back from slavery and death—will inhabit the Kingdom.

H6149: “A verb meaning to be sweet, to be pleasant. It asserts that something is acceptable, desired by someone, satisfying. *Pleasing* offerings to God were given by those with pure hearts toward Him (Malachi 3:4).” Will God not populate His kingdom exclusively with those He finds sweet and pleasant?

H6150: “A verb meaning to become evening, to grow dark. It refers to the close of the day, sunset.” I am reminded that in the Daniel 9 prophecy, Israel’s program is finished with the last “seven.” that is, their job will be complete by the end of the Tribulation: the Messiah will at last be physically reigning upon the earth—in their midst. And the church as well is brought to a close with the seventh and last assembly on the Revelation 2 and 3 mailing list—Laodicea, the church comprised of those belatedly repentant souls who had to endure the trial of which Philadelphia was spared (in the rapture). So the sun will have set, so to speak, on the need for symbolic precepts and assemblies called-out of the world: we will at last know as we are known.

H6151: “An Aramaic verb meaning to mix, to mingle, to join together. The word implies an amalgamation of two uncomplementary materials.” Like, for instance, Israel and the church?

H6152: “A proper noun designating Arabia. This refers to caravans traveling through Israelite territory (I Kings 10:15).” Interesting. As a gentile Christian, that’s precisely how I see myself: a traveler, sojourner, or pilgrim, carrying something of great value to and through Israel.

H6153: “A masculine noun referring to evening, dusk, the close of the day.” This is the noun that relates to the verb form of H6150, which we’ve already addressed.

H6154: “A masculine noun meaning a mixture, a mixed company, interwoven. The primary meaning is a grouping of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It was used of the heterogeneous band associated with the nation of Israel as it departed from Egypt. By extension, the word was also used of interwoven material of varying fibers.” Related to the verb form of H6151, this definition reinforces the idea that the populace of Yahshua’s Millennium Kingdom will be mixed or interwoven—with a warp and woof of different materials (Jew and gentile), but combined, as in a tapestry, to make something much stronger, more useful, and more beautiful than the separate components could ever be on their own.

H6155: “A masculine noun referring to a willow tree or a poplar tree.” This variant of *‘ereb*, of course, is how we got into this mess in the first place.

H6156: “A adjective meaning sweet. It describes something tasting like sugar or honey, sweet and invigorating, but is used figuratively of things obtained and enjoyed falsely (Proverbs 20:17).” (See also H6149) Neither Israel nor the church

obtained the sweetness of our salvation through our own efforts. Our redemption was attained through Yahweh's grace—or not at all. But our reconciliation with God is no less sweet—to Him or to us—because it was unearned.

H6157: “A masculine noun (*'arob*) referring to a swarm of flies. It is used exclusively of the insects involved in the fourth plague against Egypt (Exodus 8:21).” Could there be a bright side to this ugly picture? Perhaps, in a left-handed sort of way. The flies were the first plague to cause real concern on the part of Pharaoh, eliciting his first sincere pledge to acquiesce to Moses' demand—that is, something beyond a politician's empty promises. This was also the first sign that Pharaoh couldn't chalk up to magicians' sleight of hand or mere bad luck. He had no choice but to admit that the God of the Hebrews was more powerful than anything in His pitiful pantheon. And yet, he *did* renege on his promise, choosing to rebel against Yahweh when he thought the coast was clear. The flies, then, represent the same turning point that will be faced by the Antichrist and his billions of followers. They too will fail to repent, and they too will be destroyed—allowing Yahweh's newly enlightened “mixed multitude” (Israel's remnant and the Church of Repentant Laodicea) to escape from their bonds and move toward the Promised Land.

H6158: “A masculine noun (*'oreb*) designating a raven, several species of large crows, unclean birds with voracious appetites. Paradoxically, ravens fed Elijah, the man of God (I Kings 17:4-6) rather than eating the food themselves. It had both admirable and detestable characteristics.” Again, it's a good news, bad news story. We believers are, like the raven, unclean; and yet, when we choose to allow ourselves to be used of God, we are functioning like patriotic citizens of the Kingdom. It is one more defining characteristic of the Millennial multitudes.

Are all of these iterations of this one Hebrew word valid launching pads for spiritual insight, or am I seeing something that just isn't there? I honestly don't know. I'll let you weigh the evidence and decide for yourself. For me, truth is where you find it. I've found *so many* of these Hebrew words suggesting multileveled spiritual truths that I've become naturally reluctant to close my mind to whatever else might be there. But maybe I'm wrong—maybe a willow is just a tree, and God had no particular reason for specifying it. But I kind of doubt it.

Back when we were exploring the eagle as a symbol, and again when discussing the cedar tree, we encountered the complex parable of Ezekiel 17. I mention it again here because the willow is employed in it as a simile. **“The word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, propound a riddle, and speak a parable to the house of**

Israel. Say, 'Thus says the Lord Yahweh: A great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. He broke off the topmost of its young twigs and carried it to a land of trade and set it in a city of merchants. Then he took of the seed of the land and planted it in fertile soil. He placed it beside abundant waters. He set it like a willow twig, and it sprouted and became a low spreading vine, and its branches turned toward him, and its roots remained where it stood. So it became a vine and produced branches and put out boughs.'" (Ezekiel 17:1-6) I don't intend to rehash the whole parable, but merely point out something interesting about the word translated "willow" here. It's *Tsaphtsaphah*, and it's used only this once in scripture. What's revealing is its origin: it's from a verb (*tsuwph*) meaning to flow or flood. Willow trees, as I said, love damp environments—"wet feet," so to speak.

This reminds us that as often as not in scripture, willow trees are called "willows of the brook." Actually, in every single scriptural instance of 'arab/'ereb (as the willow tree) water—symbolic of restoration and cleansing—is in the picture somewhere. (By the way, the willow tree is mentioned only in the Hebrew scriptures, never in the Greek.) It is not unheard of, in fact, for watercourses to be named after the willows that populate their banks: **"Therefore the abundance they [Moab] have gained and what they have laid up they carry away over the Brook of the Willows."** (Isaiah 15:7)

A "brook" in Hebrew is not necessarily the sort of babbling year-round stream so familiar to us in eastern North America. The word is *nahal*, meaning a river, stream, torrent, valley, wadi (i.e., a seasonal stream bed), gorge, or ravine. The idea is that its volume or flow varies from season to season, changing it from a dry river bed to a surging torrent, depending upon how much rain God has provided. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes, "Because the *nahal* suddenly emerges and/or disappears as raging torrents it symbolizes many things, e.g. the pride of nations (Isaiah 66:12), the strength of the invader (Jeremiah 47:2), and the power of the foe (Psalm 18:4; 124:4). Even torrents of oil do not please God if unaccompanied by justice, kindness, and humility (Micah 6:7). The godly, however, will be sated by the overflowing torrents of God's pleasure (Psalm 36:8)."

If we put all of this imagery together, "willows of the brook" signify the mixed multitude comprising the Kingdom of God, a group of people who seek out and sink their roots into Yahweh's torrents of restoration and cleansing. Interwoven like threads in a tapestry, they (*we*) live in symbiosis with one another, gaining strength, beauty, and relevance through mutual support, defined as love. We are not all alike—far from it—but we have become woven together by God in one common purpose: to honor Yahweh and to work His will in the earth. But the willows' "brook" of refreshing can be seasonal and sporadic,

flowing with life giving waters only when Yahweh sends them—something He Himself has linked to our all-too inconsistent willingness to observe His precepts. So we are sometimes subjected to “dry periods” in which the whole world seems bent on our destruction. But if we cry out to Yahweh in repentance, He is faithful to send the floods of mercy for which we thirst. We “willows” long for the blessed day when the Psalmist’s prayer will be answered: **“Restore our fortunes, Yahweh, as streams renew the desert.”** (Psalm 126:4 NLT)

These dry spells were never really part of God’s plan. They only come upon us because of our own iniquity. They’re designed to wake us up to the reality of our estrangement from Yahweh’s blessing. In a fascinating and revealing description of His own achievements, Yahweh told Job to consider the world as He made it: **“Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you....”** No one really knows what a Behemoth is. Perhaps it was a hippopotamus or a crocodile, but we can’t be dogmatic. (The name is apparently derived from a verb meaning to be mute.) **“Under the lotus plants he lies, in the shelter of the reeds and in the marsh. For his shade the lotus trees cover him; the willows of the brook surround him. Behold, if the river is turbulent he is not frightened; he is confident though Jordan rushes against his mouth. Can one take him by his eyes [i.e., catch him off guard], or pierce his nose with a snare?”** (Job 40:15, 21-24) The point is that Yahweh created him (as He created us) to be perfectly suited to his environment—safe and secure where God put him. We humans were the same way when Yahweh placed our parents in the Garden of Eden. As long as Adam and Eve went only where Yahweh had told them was safe (i.e., anywhere in Eden other than trying to get to the fruit of the no-no tree), they were protected from Satan’s wiles. It was only when Eve strayed from the shelter of the “willows of the brook” (so to speak) that she was caught off guard and got snared in Satan’s fruit-baited trap.

One could say that the definitive “dry spell” for Israel was their Babylonian captivity—imposed upon Jacob to “encourage” the nation to pay attention to the role Yahweh had assigned to them: being the conduit of Yahweh’s salvation to the whole world. As apostate and rebellious as they had become, Judah (Israel’s southern kingdom) wasn’t so far gone that they had no frame of reference, no national memory of Yahweh’s revealed word. The temple still stood for fifteen years after Babylon’s suzerainty had been imposed upon them. When the final blow came, in 586 BC—when Jerusalem was besieged and Solomon’s temple was destroyed—they were under no illusions as to *why* Yahweh had allowed this to happen. God’s prophets had been warning them for centuries.

So the Psalmist laments: **“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”** Talk about “rubbing salt into the wound.” Was it not enough to have been

removed bodily from their homes, stripped of their possessions, and forced to labor for the king of Babylon? Were they also supposed to pretend they *liked it*, to act as though the God they had abandoned was just another dumb local deity, no better or worse than Babylon's Bel or Marduk? No, now that it was all over, the captives of Judah *knew* what they had thrown away. **"How shall we sing Yahweh's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!"** (Psalm 137:1-6) I think I can imagine how they felt. As a lifelong guitarist, if I woke up one day and found myself prevented from playing and singing praises to my God, restricted rather to merely providing amusements for the world, I too would feel like "hanging it up." So the Israelites "hung their harps on the willows." They had become "mixed and interwoven" alright, but not as Yahweh had intended—with people of other nations and cultures who also honored the true and living God (as the church would one day be). No, they had been thrown into to the melting pot of Babylon—woven together with idolatrous pagans. Becoming unraveled from *that* would take some doing.

Fast forward two and a half millennia and we find Israel just now coming out of *Dispersion II*—their scattering at the hands of Rome in the wake of their national rejection of Yahshua the Messiah. This iteration of Yahweh's judgment made the Babylonian captivity look like an ill-fated vacation. This time, they were "interwoven" into the whole world—and still Yahweh kept them separate from it, though only as oil is separate from vinegar in a salad dressing—they were in the same bottle, constantly being shaken. Can Israel recover? Yes, and she will! **"But now hear, O Jacob My servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says Yahweh who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob My servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground. I will pour My Spirit upon your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, 'I am Yahweh's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'Yahweh's,' and name himself by the name of Israel."** (Isaiah 44:1-5) What's predicted for Israel is not only physical restoration—which is a present (though ever-endangered) reality. What awaits Israel today is a *spiritual* reawakening: they *will* reconnect with Yahweh their God; they *will* receive Yahshua their Messiah; and they *will* be filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. Yahweh has spoken.

MYRTLE

❧ 3.3.7 ❧

Rest and Restoration

With the myrtle tree, we once again find ourselves in unsure territory. Our problem here is a dearth of data: this tree is mentioned in only four passages in scripture (all of them in the Old Testament), and several of those are pretty esoteric. But within those passages, this tree certainly *seems* to be used as a symbol. It is usually found listed in the company of other trees which have solid symbolic pedigrees—several of which we’ve already covered: the cedar, the palm, and the olive. If we’re going to determine what the symbolic significance of the myrtle tree is, we’re going to have to stay on our toes, because God hasn’t exactly made this one obvious.

On the theory that God never does or says anything by chance, notice that in the only passage in the Bible where the myrtle tree is mentioned in isolation from other tree-symbols, it is referred to *three times*, as if to say, “This is important, folks: pay attention.” **“On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of Yahweh came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, ‘I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse!...’** Our first problem is that the vision wasn’t really *about* the myrtle trees—it was about the horses and the men riding them, or more correctly, what they symbolized (something we covered in our study of horses, if you’ll recall). I don’t know how significant it is, but note *when* Zechariah was given the vision (actually *visions*, plural—he saw eight of them this night, recorded between 1:1 and 6:8), it was only about a week before “New Year’s Day” (so to speak), the first day of Nisan. The picture (if there is one) is that Zechariah’s visions all looked forward to the renewal and restoration of Israel. Ryrie notes concerning this first one, “The meaning of the vision is this: though Israel is oppressed, God is still greatly concerned for His people and will restore them.” I would add that although the restoration of Judah after the Babylonian captivity is in the near view, Israel’s ultimate regathering and restoration during the Messiah’s Millennial Kingdom is also—and perhaps primarily—being prophesied.

So where do the myrtle trees come into this? **“He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses.’ Then I said, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel who talked with me said to me, ‘I will show you what they are.’ So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, ‘These are they whom Yahweh has sent to patrol the earth.’ And they answered the angel of Yahweh who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, ‘We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest...’”** For what it’s worth, this is where I’m gleaning the

meaning of the myrtle tree symbol. The angel, standing amid the myrtle trees in the glen, had sent the riders on a reconnaissance mission, to determine the status of the nations. They found them “at rest,” a phrase derived from two Hebrew verbs: *yashab* means “to sit, dwell, or abide,” and *shaqat* denotes “to be quiet, tranquil, at peace, or undisturbed.”

In particular, no one was, at the moment, attacking Israel or Judah, delivering Yahweh’s judgment to their doorstep. Why? Because they’d *already* been subdued, sacked and sent off to live in exile. So Zechariah’s angel asks Yahweh a question designed to help the prophet figure out what’s going on: **“Then the angel of Yahweh said, ‘O Yahweh of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?...”** In other words, “Why are those nations who wreaked havoc so excessively among Your people still enjoying their peace and prosperity?” That thought, though relevant during the Babylonian captivity, is even more so today: the whole world is busy aligning itself against its two perceived “enemies”—Israel and the church.

Historically, Jeremiah (in 25:11) had prophesied that Judah would become a wasteland and would serve the king of Babylon for seventy years, allowing the Land to enjoy its Sabbath rests. (Also see II Chronicles 36:21.) Funny thing, though. Any way you calculate it, Judah’s captivity was over and done with—that is, they were allowed by the Persians (who had conquered the Chaldeans in 539 BC) to return to the Land—*before* the seventy years were up. But quite a few of the “seventy years” references, if you study them, actually refer to *Babylon’s* ascendancy, not Israel’s (i.e., Judah’s) bondage, though the two things were roughly coterminous. It’s as if Babylon had been raised up by Yahweh for the specific purpose of chastising Judah.

But there is one metric that shines a very bright light on the whole matter—from Yahweh’s point of view. It’s the temple: it was destroyed by Babylon’s Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 BC, but it was rebuilt under the auspices of the Persian King Darius precisely seventy years later, finished in 516 BC. Yahweh’s anger, it transpires, was demonstrated most pointedly by removing His temple from Israel’s midst. Since the temple is a comprehensive metaphor for God’s plan for the redemption of mankind, taking it away from Israel is about as stinging a rebuke as it would be possible to make. Oh, and need I remind anyone that the *second* temple (Herod’s magnificent remodel of Ezra’s modest structure) was again removed from Israel in the wake of their rejection of Yahshua, in 70 AD? They *still* haven’t been allowed to rebuild it. Yahweh has instead allowed the festering ulcer of Islam to maintain its “third holiest shrine” (the Dome of the Rock) there, polluting the temple mount and dominating Jerusalem’s skyline since the late seventh century.

This state of affairs will not be allowed to remain indefinitely, though Israel herself is impotent to right the wrongs. Zechariah reports: **“And Yahweh answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, ‘Cry out, Thus says Yahweh of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease [i.e., those who had been described as being ‘at rest’].”** Note that it’s not just Babylon now, but the nations—plural—to whom the three horsemen had been sent by the angel of the myrtle trees—those peoples who were now “sitting quietly,” secure (in their own imaginations) in their opposition to Yahweh and His people. **“For while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says Yahweh, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built in it, declares Yahweh of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says Yahweh of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and Yahweh will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.”** (Zechariah 1:7-17) What we see today bears no resemblance to the Jerusalem of prophetic scripture. I am looking forward to the day when Yahweh will restore Jerusalem and bring rest to Israel, but a whole lot of water must flow beneath the bridge of history before He’ll bring it to pass.

Anyway, it was in a grove of myrtle trees that the long-term intentions of Yahweh toward Israel were revealed: He would wipe the self-satisfied smirk off the faces of the nations that stood against His people, and restore His people under the reign of His Messiah. That reign is prophesied in the seventh and last holy convocation that was to be celebrated every year in Israel—the Feast of Tabernacles. We’ve already visited this passage describing its celebration by the returning exiles under Ezra, noting that some of the “building materials” for the booths were described a bit differently than they had been in Leviticus 23. To recap: **“On the second day the heads of fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. And they found it written in the Law that Yahweh had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, ‘Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written....”** Whereas the Leviticus 23 instructions defined (in metaphorical terms, anyway) *who* would populate the Millennial Kingdom, here in Nehemiah, the description seems to stress the *characteristics* of the age.

The two constants are the palm trees (signifying righteousness) and the “leafy trees (‘*aboth* ‘*es*), a description characterizing the population as being interwoven together—like the warp and woof of a fabric—a process that multiplies the beauty, utility, and strength of its component parts: Israel and the ekklesia. We’ve already discussed how olive trees symbolize the source of God’s Spirit in (and to) the world. The domesticated olive represents Israel, of course, and the wild olive

trees are the church—we who have been “grafted in” to the same life-giving trunk and root system. That leaves only the myrtle to identify. If our observations from Zechariah are valid, I’d take the myrtle here to indicate that a state of rest and restoration will prevail during the Millennium. This, of course, is a perfect match for the *position* of the Feast of Tabernacles on Yahweh’s calendar: it’s the seventh, the Sabbath of the group, the one that celebrates the rest from our labors in the field of humanity.

Comparing it functionally to the previous two appointments on the calendar (neither of which has been fulfilled in history as yet), we can begin to see how it all fits together. The church will have been called in from the field on the fifth convocation, the Feast of Trumpets (a.k.a. *Yom Teruah*). Paul’s description of the “catching up” or “rapture” of the ekklesia is a perfect fit for the imagery of the Feast of Trumpets. But our impending escape from “the trial which is to come upon the whole world” (i.e., the Tribulation) is the least of it, a happy coincidence. The real function of *Yom Teruah* is to transform the saints from mortal beings (whether alive or deceased) into immortals—or, if you will, to “translate” us from a clumsy and inadequate “language” (so to speak)—our present mortality—into a robust, beautiful, and expressive tongue capable of conversation with Yahweh Himself.

And the sixth *miqra* or appointment, the Day of Atonement or *Yom Kippurim*, predicts the inevitable response of Israel to their returning Messiah: affliction of their national collective soul in the grim realization that their fathers crucified their Anointed Savior. Zechariah (in 12:10) reports that they will look on Yahweh, whom they pierced, and mourn as one grieves for a firstborn son. No kidding, Zack. It will be the great *oy vey!* Both of these monumental prophetic events will *precede* the Feast of Tabernacles, for the Feasts of Leviticus 23 are celebrated in the order of their fulfillment (or at least, they have been so far). The fact that the Day of Atonement *follows* the Feast of Trumpets makes it clear that during the Millennium, *two* races of humans—mortals and immortals—will populate the earth. I realize that this makes the whole scenario about as counterintuitive as it gets, but don’t blame me: I didn’t write Leviticus.

It seems clear that the definitive Day of Atonement will occur in the same year (2033, if I’m not mistaken) as the commencement of the Millennial Kingdom on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, though the Feast of Trumpets will precede these by *at least* seven years, and perhaps much longer. (Based on the prophetic requirements, I’ve got a date in mind, but since Yahweh didn’t tell us when it would occur, I won’t make my guess a matter of public record.) The date of the rapture is beside the point for today’s believers anyway, for our instructions remain constant as the time approaches: we are to love God, show that love by

loving our neighbors, spread the Good News, and remain watchful. We still have the same job first-century Christians did. We just have better tools.

Back in our text, Nehemiah describes the dress rehearsal of the Feast of Tabernacles as performed by the returning Babylonian exiles. **“So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so.”** This means, sadly, that even during the glory days of Israel, under the reigns of David and Solomon, the Feast of Tabernacles (and presumably a whole lot more of the Torah) had not been celebrated in Israel—at least not as God had prescribed. The dedication of Solomon’s temple coincided with the Feast (compare II Chronicles 5:3 with 7:8). But although they had a big national party, it was not in accord with, nor for the purpose of, that which was specified in the Torah—a preview of God coming to dwell with man. This should come as a sobering lesson to all of us: we must remain vigilant against doing the right thing for the wrong reason, doing the wrong thing for the right reason, or doing anything to compromise God’s word to further our own agenda. Yahweh is not stupid: He knows the difference.

“And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God.” If only our presidents, CEOs, professors and pundits would do that, we might have a fighting chance against the world. **“They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.”** (Nehemiah 8:13-18) A seven-day feast would have indicated completion and perfection, and the Millennium will certainly be all of that. But this is an *eight*-day appointment with God. The solemn assembly required on the eighth day indicates what will follow on the heels of the Messiah’s perfect thousand year earthly reign: the eternal state, with new heavens, a new earth, a new Jerusalem, and a whole new spiritual paradigm.

But for the time being, there are only seven days in the week. That is, until the Feast of Trumpets, we are all mortals, living—and dying—on the earth. It is here that we “grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man”—or not. It is here that we make our choices: what path to walk, whose song to sing, whose drumbeat we’ll march to. So it is here on this earth that Yahweh reveals Himself to us. Bearing in mind that Israel is a symbolic microcosm of the whole human race, He says, **“Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares Yahweh. Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel....”** And how will Yahweh demonstrate this “help” during the Millennium? Through evidence germane to man’s mortal existence. Bear in mind that the church will *already* have been made immortal at this point. These signs are not for us, for we will already have “kept

His command to persevere.” They are, rather, for (1) Israel (whose life-changing spiritual epiphany will come *after* the rapture), (2) the belatedly repentant gentile survivors of the Tribulation (those who took Christ’s advice to Laodicea in Revelation 3:18-20), and (3) their billions of descendants born over the next thousand years. **“I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar [strength], the acacia [life], the myrtle [rest and restoration], and the olive [His Holy Spirit]. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of Yahweh has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.”** (Isaiah 41:14, 18-20) The skeptical scribes and Pharisees of Yahshua’s day demanded a sign, but they were given one only the spiritually enlightened could comprehend. But the Millennial multitudes—who feel fortunate merely to be alive after the carnage and devastation of the time of Jacob’s trouble—will be shown an unexpected miracle: the healing and restoration of planet earth. The myrtle will sprout in the wilderness, figuratively *and* literally.

The contrast—the “before and after pictures”—will be obvious and undeniable. The source of the earth’s restoration is the word of God: **“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”** And what is that purpose? That we might rejoice in Yahweh’s presence—blessed children of the king dancing and singing in unrestrained joy before His throne. **“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for Yahweh, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”** (Isaiah 55:10-13) The restoration is now complete; the curse is reversed. We had begun with: **“Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground.”** (Genesis 3:17-18) But now, instead of “thorns and thistles,” those “briers” of which Isaiah spoke, the redeemed are to receive the “everlasting sign” of the myrtle tree.

ACACIA

❧ 3.3.8 ❧

Mortal Life

While studying the acacia tree, I was transported back to my Baptist youth, in a way. It's sort of like sitting in church singing "Just As I Am"—seven verses, and they're all pretty much the same. Almost all of the Biblical mentions of the acacia tree have to do with the wilderness tabernacle—either its structure or its furniture. In this case, it's the wood itself—that which is made from the tree's "body" after it's cut down—that forms the basis of the symbol. The acacia's significance is revealed not through its stature, nor its fruit, but only through the sacrifice of the living tree.

Immediately after the exodus, Yahweh told Moses that He wanted the people to contribute a wide range of materials that they either had with them or could get on their travels. **"Yahweh said to Moses, 'Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for Me.'**" First, the contribution toward the tabernacle's construction was entirely voluntary: this was not a tax, or even a tithe. Second, everything that Yahweh asked for was something that He, one way or another, had already provided: **"And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats' hair, rams' skins dyed red, goatskins [or more correctly, porpoise hides], acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece...."** I can't be dogmatic, but the acacia wood seems to be the only thing on the list that wouldn't have been carried out of Egypt in any great quantity, but was rather available in the wilderness.

"And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst." The sanctuary wasn't for Yahweh at all, of course. It was for *us*—a means by which we could come to understand the relationship that exists between God and man. The specific room said to be the "dwelling place" of Yahweh was a cube ten cubits (about fifteen feet) on each side. Needless to say, you can't "contain" the Creator of the universe in a place like that—but you *can* meet Him there if He ordains it. **"Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it."** (Exodus 25:1-9) The Israelites had been "hired" as the contractors on this job, but Yahweh was the Architect: this was His design. The "foreman," Moses, was shown God's blueprint on Mount Horeb, and he was charged with requisitioning materials, recruiting and supervising the crew, and overseeing the operation of the complex when its construction was complete. God's design (the Torah) encompassed more than just the physical tabernacle,

more than just its furnishings, more than the physical accoutrements the priests would use and wear in the performance of their duties. It included the directions for what was to go on here—the sacrifices, offerings, rituals, and schedule that Israel was to observe from this point forward, throughout their generations.

To an outside observer, it might have all looked suspiciously like any other man-made religion, but it was nothing of the sort. It was, rather, a complex, multi-layered pantomime—complete with its own dedicated theater and props—designed to teach us all, Jews and gentiles alike, what Yahweh was doing in our world to reconcile lost humanity to Himself. That’s why the pattern had to be followed *exactly*. Israel was the intended “cast and crew” of this production, and the gentile nations were the intended audience. Of course, if Israel didn’t follow the Plan, it would be incredibly difficult for anyone else to understand the plot.

But here at the beginning, all of that was opaque and mysterious, even to Moses. No problem: he knew the Architect and knew how to follow instructions, so **“Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, ‘This is the thing that Yahweh has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to Yahweh. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring Yahweh’s contribution: gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, goats’ hair, rams’ skins dyed red, and porpoise skins, acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece....”** Having received their assignments, the exodus generation got busy. **“Then all the congregation of the people of Israel departed from the presence of Moses. And they came, everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him, and brought Yahweh’s contribution to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the holy garments....”** At this point, they didn’t know they were going to wander in the wilderness for forty years. So it’s ironic that those who were “moved by the spirit” *of greed* instead of gratitude for Yahweh, whose hearts were “stirred” to hoard their wealth instead of contributing it to Yahweh’s sanctuary project, were thereby doomed to lugging their treasures around with them through the desert until they dropped dead from sheer exhaustion. But we get the impression that most of the Israelites were—as they should have been—enthusiastic participants: **“Everyone who could make a contribution of silver or bronze brought it as Yahweh’s contribution. And every one who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work brought it.”** (Exodus 35:4-9, 20-21, 24)

The wood exclusively specified for use in the tabernacle, the acacia, is also known as Umbrella Thorn or Israeli Babool. It’s the familiar canopy-shaped tree indigenous from the savannahs of Eastern Africa to Egypt and throughout the Middle East. The Hebrew designation is *shittah*, the plural of which is *shittim*, as the acacia is called in the KJV (much to the amusement of generations of pre-adolescent Bible students). Given enough water, these trees can grow as high as

sixty feet, though in extremely arid regions they reach only a third of that height. The acacia tree yielded a beautiful, dense, close grained wood with an orange color that darkened with age. It was prized for its insect resistance, making it a popular choice for mummy cases in Egypt, and of course, the carpenters among the Israelite expatriates would have been very familiar with it.

The name of the tree also identified a place—Shittim, alternately rendered “Acacia Grove”—directly across from Jericho on the east bank of the Jordan, in the land of Moab. The Israelites were encamped there for some time. This was where the scheme of Balaam to compromise the Israelites’ ties to Yahweh by having the Moabite women seduce them over to the “dark side” (as it were) took place. **“While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of Yahweh was kindled against Israel.”** (Numbers 25:1-3) A bit later, Acacia Grove served as the base of operations as Israel prepared to invade Canaan as Yahweh had directed: **“And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho.’”** (Joshua 2:1)

But this was forty years and two hundred miles from where the tabernacle had first been built. The acacia wood instructions begin with the ark of the covenant. **“They shall make an ark of acacia wood.”** An “ark” (Hebrew *’arown*) was simply a box, a chest, or even a coffin. **“Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height.”** A cubit was about eighteen inches, so the ark measured 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches deep. **“You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it....”** This is where the symbology really starts to get interesting. The ark of the covenant—among several pieces that were to reside in the tabernacle—was made of wood, but it was to be entirely covered with pure gold. Something living had been cut down—slain to meet the needs of men—but it was then enveloped in precious metal, incorruptible and immutable.

It’s all a picture of our Redeemer, our Life, Yahshua the Messiah. First, He took on human flesh—in itself an unimaginable act of humility for the Creator of the universe to make. Then He “planted Himself” in a dry and thirsty land—the wilderness of lost humanity. In so doing, He made himself available for our use—or abuse. What we “make of” Christ is the measure of our faith: having “cut Him down” at Calvary, we could (conceivably) leave Him to rot on the ground, use Him as firewood, fashion a weapon, a tool, or even a dead idol out of Him—*or*

we could do with Him as Yahweh instructed: make a box in which He would contain all of our iniquity within Himself. But this box, this ark, couldn't be left in its "natural" state, for our Messiah is no longer confined to a mortal human paradigm, living *or* dead. No, the gold overlay indicates that for those of us who follow Yahweh's Instructions, our Savior will henceforth be seen only in glory: the gold indicates His immutable purity. And the ironic fact is that if we are "in Christ," we too become covered—in our case, *atoned*—with the same gold overlay, the same unassailable goodness that defines His true nature. In other words, we can become sinless in God's eyes by virtue of Yahshua's sinlessness.

From this point, the design continues to exude symbolic imagery, though it's a little hard to see in the English. **"You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet [i.e., bases or pedestals], two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it...."** First, note that the golden rings were to be attached to the "feet" of the ark. "Feet" is the Hebrew *pa'am*, correctly translated here in the ESV, but often mistranslated "corners." The word choice is significant: while the idea of attaching the rings to the supporting legs of the ark is literally intended, we should note that *pa'am*—feet—*primarily* means "the conduct of one's life, formally, a footstep, i.e., the patterns of behavior as a figurative extension of a stepping of a foot forward." (*Dictionary of Biblical Languages*) So the ark of humanity's atonement can be carried through the world only by using golden rings, implements that are intimately associated with the "walk" or conduct of Yahweh's people. No pressure or anything, guys.

The acacia wood "poles" or "staves" that are placed through the gold rings also bear a closer look. **"You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold."** Once again, it's a picture of mortal life encased in Christ's incorruptible purity. **"And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you."** (Exodus 25:10-16) The Hebrew term translated "pole" is *bad*, which actually means "alone, by oneself, isolated—the only entity in a class." The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes: "Positively, the word is used of the Lord's incomparability and uniqueness in His exclusive claim to deity as seen in His extraordinary works....The word also has a negative connotation when a man is abandoned by his community or by God. Thus the unclean leper must suffer alone, apart from human fellowship." So the word translated "pole" is a concept at its heart akin to the familiar *qodesh*—holy, or set apart—but it also points out the loneliness associated with being abandoned. Does Yahshua's quote, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" ring any bells? In the humanity of his sacrifice, Yahshua found Himself *bad*—utterly alone.

So how do we get “poles” out of that? The plural of the word, *baddim*, picks up the connotation of *being extended* from something that stands alone, so it’s properly used of members, limbs, branches, or poles. The reason the poles are left attached, then, is that they are *extensions* of that which is unique and alone—i.e., Yahweh’s Messiah. And who are these “extensions” who are not to be separated from Him? The poles refer to *us*. We believers are the means by which Yahshua the Messiah is “carried” to the world. We are never to be removed from His presence. (In point of fact, we *can’t* be, for the Holy Spirit dwells within us.) This reinforces the concept we saw above that our walk through the world—our righteous conduct—is how we are “attached,” so to speak, to that which contains, covers, and conceals our sins, that is, the ark.

And what about the golden rings themselves? As in English, the Hebrew word for “ring” (*tabba’ath*) can mean both a round implement used for fastening or carrying things (as it’s used here), or a finger-ring—specifically, a signet ring used by a monarch to seal and authenticate a document or decree. It wouldn’t be much of a stretch to see the four “rings”—attached to the four “feet” of the ark, through which were placed the gold-covered acacia-wood staves—as that which made the promise of our redemption “official.” It’s like Yahweh told Zerubbabel: **“On that day, declares Yahweh of hosts, I will take you... and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares Yahweh of hosts.”** (Haggai 2:23) It is significant, perhaps, that a signet ring functions by making an impression on a wax seal. If Yahweh’s Holy Spirit is what “seals” us for His purpose, then the impression made by God’s signet ring is what authenticates, verifies, and validates us as we carry Yahweh’s offer of redemption to the world. The bad news for our adversaries is that breaking the King’s seal without His authorization is a capital offense.

So Moses was instructed to make a chest out of acacia wood and cover it with gold. The lid resting atop the ark (called the “mercy seat”) is of immense significance, but alas, beyond the scope of our present topic. However, since he once again mentioned acacia wood in the account, Moses’ summary of what was to be placed *into* the ark can be considered germane. **“At that time Yahweh said to me, ‘Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain and make an ark of wood. And I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets that you broke, and you shall put them in the ark.’”** The first set of tablets upon which Yahweh had personally inscribed the Ten Commandments had, if you’ll recall, been thrown down in anger by Moses when he saw the people worshipping the golden calf. It was probably the only time Yahweh ever supported “breaking the Law.” Graciously, He gave Moses a do-over: **“So I made an ark of acacia wood, and cut two tablets of stone like the first, and went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hand. And He wrote on the tablets, in the same writing as before, the Ten Commandments that Yahweh had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. And Yahweh gave them to me. Then I turned and came**

down from the mountain and put the tablets in the ark that I had made. And there they are, as Yahweh commanded me." (Deuteronomy 10:1-5) According to Hebrews 9:4, the ark also contained Aaron's rod that budded (Numbers 17:10) and a pot of manna (Exodus 16:33-34).

If we look at this from a strictly symbolic point of view, a clearer view of God's truth may begin to emerge. The ark, as we have seen, is a metaphor for Christ (the Living One who was cut down on our behalf in order to contain our sins and reign in pure, immutable glory). If we are "in Him," our sins are atoned—covered—with the same golden overlay that defines Yahshua as our Lord and King. But three other things have been placed in the ark with us. (1) Aaron's rod that budded indicates Yahweh's role as the source of life—a role that was brought to bear in confirming the anointing of His servant Moses, and conversely, in denying the authority of men over men, no matter how reasonable or logical their arguments might sound. (See Numbers 16 and 17.) It seems to me that we ought to get out Aaron's rod and parade it around every election year, just to remind us that God, not men, are in charge; but alas, I fear that nobody would get it.

(2) The manna placed in the ark should be a poignant reminder of Yahweh's constant provision. If you'll recall, we discussed manna at length in Volume 1, in the chapter exploring Bread as one of Yahweh's self-revealing symbols. Having designed us, Yahweh knows that we have physical needs, and obtaining those needs is an exercise in trust—either of God or something inferior to Him: ourselves, other people, or blind chance. That being said, **"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."** (Matthew 4:4, Deuteronomy 8:3)

That brings us to ark-stuffer (3), the Instructions—the Torah (or at least the heart and summary of it, the Ten Commandments). If the ark represents Christ, then we must come to terms with the idea that Yahweh's commandments are "in Him." Somewhere along the road, Christianity (as a religion) somehow picked up the odd notion that the Torah was obsolete. It's probably a misreading of Paul, who merely pointed out that the Torah was never designed to save anybody—which is perfectly true. That doesn't mean it's obsolete or of no value, however. Its function is the same as it always was: to point the way to Christ, Yahweh's Anointed Redeemer. So the tablets with the Ten Commandments were placed in the ark to demonstrate that God's Law rests in our Messiah. If we want to be in compliance with them (as we should), we must be "in Christ" as well.

The ark of the covenant wasn't the only thing made of acacia wood and covered with gold to be found in the tabernacle. We see much of the same imagery in the construction of the table of showbread, also known as the table of the bread of the presence. **"You shall make a table of acacia wood. Two cubits shall be**

its length, a cubit its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height.” In other words, a table surface of 36 by 18 inches, standing 27 inches tall. These pieces aren’t very big, considering their massive symbolic significance. **“You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a molding of gold around it.... You shall make the poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold, and the table shall be carried with these.”** (Exodus 25:23-24, 28) It’s a table this time, not a box, but the symbology is virtually identical: living wood, cut down and fashioned into something that is used to honor Yahweh, covered with immutable gold, affixed with rings (v. 26), and carried about with staves made of acacia wood overlaid with gold.

I would direct your attention to Volume 1 for a detailed discussion of what the “bread of the presence” signified. Suffice it to say that here, the object isn’t *in* the tabernacle furniture (as it was in the ark of the covenant) but rests *upon* it. Why? Because this time, we’re not talking about individual believers being “in Christ,” but rather on two parallel institutions or “corporate entities”—Israel and the church—both of whom rest on, and are supported by, Yahshua the Messiah (even if Israel doesn’t know it yet). The key is the mandated arrangement of the unleavened “loaves” (think of pita bread, round and rather flat—not the sliced rectangular “blocks” of bread we’re used to). These loaves were to be arranged in two rows or piles of six loaves each, side by side. The two rows were each to be sprinkled *separately* with frankincense—indicative (you’ll recall) of purity through sacrifice. Why separately? Because the church and Israel would attain their imputed purity at different times, and in different ways, even though it’s the same purity, derived from the same source—Yahweh’s Messiah.

In terms of Yahweh’s annual calendar, the requisite purity was provided for *all of us* on the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which must be considered in the context of both Passover and the Feast of Firstfruits). But the church received it almost two thousand years ago, on Pentecost (a.k.a. the Feast of Weeks) that same year, and our functional tenure upon the earth will expire with the very next convocation on the schedule, the definitive Feast of Trumpets. The nation of Israel, on the other hand, hasn’t yet been “sprinkled with frankincense.” Remember that Israel’s mission in the earth, as defined in Daniel 9:24-27, still has seven prophetic “years” (of 360 days each) yet to run: the “time of Jacob’s trouble,” as it’s called. Israel *as a nation* won’t become pure until the definitive Day of Atonement—a date that will fall within those final seven years, something still (obviously) in the future. However, once that happens, both groups will enter the Millennial Kingdom of Christ, walking side by side in fellowship, purity, and reverence for Yahweh. Functionally, our respective jobs will be completed.

Same song, third verse: the altar of incense. **“You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height.”** This one is 18 inches

square, and three feet tall—about the size of a bedside nightstand. **“Its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns....”** These are horn-shaped protrusions at the four corners of the altar, upon which sacrificial blood was to be applied on occasion. **“And you shall make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its molding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold....”**

With the ark of the covenant, you’ll recall, the poles were never to be removed from the rings, but this was not the case with either the altar of incense or the table of showbread. The reason, apparently, is that these last two pieces didn’t *directly* represent the fact that we were to be “in Christ,” inseparable from Him. The table of showbread speaks of God’s provision of life and purity to both Israel and the church, where (unfortunately) it *is* possible to separate ourselves from God by ignoring or denying His word and His Spirit. And the altar of incense is a picture of how we (as individuals or as a congregation) may approach Yahweh through prayer: **“And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it.”** (Exodus 30:1-7) Here too, we note with chagrin that our prayers can be hindered through our own faithlessness. But these clouds of incense, filling the tabernacle, were symbolic of our faithful prayers—which are, after all, the *only* way that we may approach the dwelling place of God. Where? Figuratively, it was beyond the veil in the Most Holy Place, between the two cherubim atop the mercy seat covering the ark of the covenant. As I said, you can’t *contain* God in a fifteen square foot room—but you can *meet* Him there.

It’s worth noting that *only* the acacia-wood articles used in the tabernacle service were to be carried with poles. Neither the solid gold lampstand nor the bronze laver were equipped with rings and poles, removable or not. This fact compels us to revisit the imagery of the poles and their relationship to what they were used to carry. If you’ll recall, the etymology of the word translated “poles” (*baddim*) led us (well, *me*) to the conclusion that they’re “extended from something that stands alone.” That “something” is Christ—of whom we believers are extensions or representatives in this world: *we* are the staves. Add to that the fact that they’re made of acacia wood—something once alive that was cut down and covered in gold or bronze for the service of the sanctuary—and our function as believers is confirmed: we are to be the means by which the Messiah, through the Good News of the salvation He provided for us, is to be carried to the world. In other words, God isn’t going to speak to the lost directly, nor is He going to send angelic messengers (until we’re long gone, that is: see Revelation 14:6). He used Israel for fifteen hundred years, and for the last two thousand or so He’s been employing the church, Christ’s “called-out assembly” (which includes both

gentile and Jewish saints). God’s “reliance” on either group to present His Messiah to the world would seem to be, at the very least, less than efficient (and at the worst, a recipe for disaster). But that’s kind of the point: the benefit of being “used” by God falls not only on the lost, but on the saved as well. It’s like us letting our four-year-olds “help” in the kitchen baking a birthday cake. It would be easier (and decidedly less messy) without them, but we’d find the final product missing a crucial ingredient: love.

But why, then, aren’t the lampstand and laver carried about with poles? It’s because what they represent doesn’t picture the work of the Messiah, *per se*, but rather another of Yahweh’s manifestations among us, the Holy Spirit. In the case of the laver (which follows the altar), the cleansing of our works and walk is *subsequent* to our salvation—it’s the work of Yahweh’s Spirit in our lives, not our own efforts. And the golden lampstand is there to shed light on God’s provision (the table of showbread)—again, the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is living, but it’s not mortal, nor was the Spirit “cut down” as part of Yahweh’s plan for our salvation. Only those articles *directly* representing Yahshua are equipped with rings and poles—signifying that He is to be presented to the world by His saints. Remember what I observed a thousand pages back: form follows function.

And there is one more wrinkle to this that bears mention: with two staves each for the altar, the table of showbread, the altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant, it becomes clear that *teamwork* is required in bringing the Gospel to the lost. No one person, not Paul, not Augustine, Wycliffe, Jonathan Edwards, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, *or even me* is able (or expected) to carry the whole load. All of us are but team members—runners, if you will, in the great relay race of life. If one of us falls, we all suffer, as do those in the stands (the world) watching us. We all need to uphold and strengthen each other.

The tabernacle was commonly characterized as a “tent,” because of the fabric and leather strips that comprised its covering. But it was actually a solid-walled pre-fab acacia-wood structure, designed to be taken apart and put back together as the need arose: *some assembly required*. The Instructions state: **“You shall make upright frames for the tabernacle of acacia wood. Ten cubits shall be the length of a frame, and a cubit and a half the breadth of each frame. There shall be two tenons in each frame, for fitting together. So shall you do for all the frames of the tabernacle. You shall make the frames for the tabernacle: twenty frames for the south side....”** Although relatively abundant, acacia trees didn’t grow remotely big enough to mill single planks of the size required for the Tabernacle walls—ten cubits by one and a half, or about

fifteen feet long by twenty-seven inches wide. The boards would have had to be assembled from smaller pieces, planed smooth and glued together. In other words, a great deal of labor and skill went into making these boards. I can't help but reflect that these wall plank sections (called "upright frames" in the ESV) are a bit like those of us who assemble to worship our God. None of us stands alone, and no one starts out perfect; rather, we must all have our crooked places planed down if we hope to stand upright and united with our fellow believers in God's service. Even if you're the best board in the lumber yard, you're not nearly big enough or straight enough to do the job by yourself. Yahweh requires us to work together for the common good—as defined by His master plan.

How did these boards stand upright to form walls? **"And forty bases of silver you shall make under the twenty frames, two bases under one frame for its two tenons, and two bases under the next frame for its two tenons."** At the bottom of each plank, two protrusions, or tenons, extended. These would fit into receptacles in solid silver bases or foundations—each with two of these holes (or mortises). The left "leg" from each plank would share a base with the right tenon of the plank next to it, forming an interlocking structure around the perimeter of the tabernacle. **"And for the second side of the tabernacle, on the north side twenty frames, and their forty bases of silver, two bases under one frame, and two bases under the next frame. And for the rear of the tabernacle westward you shall make six frames. And you shall make two frames for corners of the tabernacle in the rear. They shall be separate beneath, but joined at the top, at the first ring. Thus shall it be with both of them. They shall form the two corners. And there shall be eight frames, with their bases of silver, sixteen bases; two bases under one frame, and two bases under another frame."** (Exodus 26:15-25)

This is more than mere architectural minutiae. The whole thing is peppered with symbolic significance. (1) Yahweh's "agenda" is to enable us fallen humans to stand upright in His presence, like the acacia-wood planks forming the walls of the tabernacle. Note that like the other acacia furnishings in the tabernacle, the wall planks were to be covered in pure gold (v. 29)—reinforcing the image of our transformation from dead wood into something useful, upright, and pure.

(2) We, like the planks, are to stand side by side, shoulder to shoulder, as we perform our assigned function in God's sanctuary—which in this case is separating—*isolating*—what is within the tabernacle from that which is outside. There is only one door, the one God provided. It's all a picture of attaining holiness—being set apart *from* the world, set apart *for* Yahweh's purpose. It is *our* job to keep the world from compromising, contaminating or encroaching upon Yahweh's plan of redemption.

(3) Silver is the Torah symbol for ransom, the payment that makes redemption possible. The bases holding the acacia wood planks were to be cast of solid silver (see Exodus 38:27), leading us to the inescapable conclusion that that which holds

us in place, standing upright before God, is the ransom He paid on our behalf—the blood of Christ.

(4) The word translated “base,” indicating these solid silver chunks weighing up to 90 pounds apiece, is the Hebrew *'eden*. As you probably know, paleo Hebrew (the language in which the Torah was recorded and transmitted) has no vowels: the pronunciation and connotation is determined by the context. So in this case, it is perfectly logical to translate *'dn* as “base” or “foundation” or even “socket” (as in the NKJV). But I’ve noticed that the alternate definitions of Hebrew consonant roots can often shed new and revealing light on the *symbolic* import of these ordinary literal things. In this case, *'dn* is also the root of the Hebrew noun *'adon*, meaning lord, master, owner, strong one, or husband. And indeed, these foundation bases are what make the acacia wood “walls” of the tabernacle strong, firm, and immovable. Moreover, they reinforce the symbolic concept that Yahshua, the one who paid our ransom, is our Lord, Master, Owner, and even (since we are the Bride of Christ) our Husband. As with the symbol of the Rock, we are to be both *on* Him and *in* Him.

And looking at this from the other direction, we note that Yahweh is occasionally called *'adon* in scripture (the emphatic form *'adonay* is used). Could it be that calling Yahweh “Lord” (*'adonay*) is actually a reference to the fact that He—through Christ—is our Foundation, our Basis? Just a thought.

(5) If these silver bases, then, are indicative of Christ, and the upright acacia planks are symbolic of us as believers, then the imagery of the ark of the covenant—in which we are to be “in Christ”—has been revisited. In fact, considering the way we “planks” are built, none of us can stand upright *unless* our “tenons” have been inserted into Yahshua’s “mortises.” More to the point, we—Christ and His congregation—are a matched set: we’re made for each other; we’re incomplete without each other. It may come as something of a shock to us, but the Messiah is as incomplete without us as we are without Him, as a husband is incomplete without His beloved wife. It’s no wonder God said He hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).

If you’re an engineer, you’ve no doubt noticed that the foundation bases, though necessary, are not in themselves sufficient to hold the tabernacle structure together. Sure, they’d be nice and solid at the footings, but they’d need more support further up, right? Not surprisingly, the Instructions covered this too. **“You shall make bars of acacia wood, five for the frames of the one side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the other side of the tabernacle, and five bars for the frames of the side of the tabernacle at the rear westward. The middle bar, halfway up the frames, shall run from end to end. You shall overlay the frames with gold and shall make their rings of gold for holders for the bars, and you shall overlay the bars with gold. Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain.”**

(Exodus 26:26-30) As usual, the Torah's instruction concerning the tabernacle's horizontal wall bracing is fraught with symbolic significance.

(1) The fact that more "support" is provided higher up on the planks is a reminder that there is more to our faith than just the foundation (the ransom paid by Christ), though that is certainly its basis. God provided an entire support system to assist us as we live our lives day by day. Expressing it in military terms, Christianity isn't like an artillery shell—"fire and forget." It's more like a smart bomb—guided toward the target every moment along its journey.

(2) There were to be five horizontal bars (made of acacia wood and covered with gold, as usual) supporting each assembled wall section, north, south, and west. (The tabernacle's entrance was on the east, so no solid wall was erected on this side.) Four of them were partial, but one was to run the entire length of the wall. If I had to venture a guess as to what the five bars signify, I'd have to consider the things God instituted or provided to hold His "assembly" (whether Israel or the church) together. They would include the fellowship of the saints (*koinonia*), the privilege of prayer, the written scriptures, and the joyful anticipation of Messiah's coming. These four things, however, have only sporadically been enjoyed by the Yahweh's people: whether through our own error or the world's animosity, there have been gaps in our experience of these factors—hence the four "short" bars attached to each wall. But the fifth bar, the one in the center, surely represents the Holy Spirit—our constant companion and indwelling life-source over the last two thousand years, from the Day of Pentecost until the Feast of Trumpets.

(3) Or, looking at this another way, five is the number symbolizing grace. So perhaps the five crossbars on each wall indicate that grace—the unmerited favor we receive through trust in Christ's sacrifice—is that which enables us to stand upright before Yahweh.

(4) Following a bit more esoteric line of inquiry, many (including myself) have noticed that the *dimensions* of the tabernacle's rooms echo the timeline God has ordained to follow the Messiah's redemptive act (which is symbolized by what's *outside* the tabernacle—the altar of sacrifice and the laver of cleansing). That is, the Holy Place, measuring 10 x 20 x 10 cubits, or two thousand cubic cubits, indicates the length of the church age on God's schedule—two thousand years. And this is followed by the dimensions of the Most Holy Place, 10 x 10 x 10 cubits or one thousand cubic cubits, indicating the length of the Millennial reign of Christ—one thousand years (see Revelation 20:4), the "Sabbath" of the series. You may protest that the church age wasn't specifically predicted to run for two thousand years, but actually, between the lines, it was. The prophet Hosea adjures Israel, **"Come, let us return to Yahweh, for He has torn us, that He may heal us; He has struck us down, and He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us. On the third day**

He will raise us up, that we may live before Him." (Hosea 6:1-2) If Moses (in Psalm 90:4) and Peter (in II Peter 3:8) are to be believed, then Hosea is saying that Israel will be "torn" in God's anger for *only* two thousand years (presumably after their national rejection of the Messiah, in 33 A.D.) after which they will be lifted up (subsequent to their repentance—see II Chronicles 7:14) for another thousand years—coterminous with the Messiah's earthly reign. Thus the era of Israel's "tearing" and "striking" is, by definition and default, the church age.

(5) If any of these observations have merit, then the three separate but interlocking wall assemblies of the tabernacle must have symbolic significance. Both the south wall and the north wall run the entire length of the timeline—from the passion through the Millennium. I'd take this to mean that God is telling us that both the church and Israel will exist, separately but side by side, throughout this entire time. I've found several equally esoteric scriptural hints (some of which I've already mentioned) leading me to this very conclusion. It doesn't guarantee that either branch of Yahweh's family will remain in the center of His will, unfortunately, for four out of the five support bars in each section come up short in the length department. But it does mean (as we can surmise from history) that we'll both *be here*—preserved in spite of our shortcomings for Yahweh's ultimate glory.

What, then, does the west wall signify? The ten-cubit section at the "back" of the Most Holy Place can signify only one thing: the saints of the Millennial age—those born to the Tribulation survivors who have lived under Christ's direct rule, and (since they're still mortals living under Adam's curse) have chosen to receive God's redemption, offered in grace through faith—just like the rest of us believers. And what happens after that? Since the acacia wall sections seem to symbolize mortal believers—once living, then cut down in sin and death, only to be covered and preserved in Yahweh's immutable purity—it would seem to indicate the same thing we've seen elsewhere in scripture: at the conclusion of Christ's Millennial reign, the eternal state will commence. No more mortal humans will be born, for every believer of every age will have received His immortal spiritual body (as described in I Corinthians 15:35-58). Yahweh will introduce His new heaven and new earth, and we shall dwell in the house of Yahweh—in His undiminished presence—forever.

That accounts for three sides of the tabernacle structure. What about the fourth, the east-facing portal? Acacia wood played a part here as well: **"You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework. And you shall make for the screen five pillars of acacia, and overlay them with gold. Their hooks shall be of gold, and you shall cast five bases of bronze for them."** (Exodus 26:36-37) Once again, the "structural element" is acacia wood, symbolic of mortal life—cut down, fashioned with skill and

purpose, and covered with pure gold. But this time, the acacia isn't used to restrict access to the tabernacle, but to facilitate it. The point is that there is but one way to enter the sanctuary of reconciliation—God's way.

That's not to say anybody could just stroll in. There were still conditions to be met, indicated by Yahweh's Instructions. First, the seeker had to approach the tabernacle from the east. This means that he had to turn his back on the rising sun—itsself a symbol of the best and brightest of created things. Satan would like us to think of him as Lucifer, son of the dawn—the sun god, the great illuminator, the source of earthly light. God is reminding us here (albeit subtly) that even the most magnificent thing He created is not worthy of our worship, but He alone. Second, the seeker had to encounter the bronze-clad altar (which we'll discuss in a moment), and the bronze laver of cleansing, in which he'd wash his hands and feet (metaphorical of the Spirit's cleansing of one's works and walk).

Then, he'd encounter the embroidered linen screen or curtain suspended across the sanctuary's entrance. It, like the acacia planks, formed a barrier, but this time it was symbolic (and instructive) rather than physical. You *could* enter the tabernacle this way, but there were still implications, conditions to meet. Linen represents imputed righteousness, or, as it's put in Revelation 19:8, "the righteous acts of the saints." This is not a contradiction: the *only* righteous acts we have to present before God are attributed to us through grace (something every saint should know). On our own, the best of our works are filthy rags. Note that the linen cloth was "fine-twined." The Revelation description calls it "fine" linen. This isn't loosely woven and full of holes (like the sloppy Christian doctrine practiced by so many). It's tight, dense, and impenetrable—totally opaque to those who are not atoned and cleansed. There are no "loopholes" in it. It doesn't leak like a theological sieve, but rather serves nicely as a sail to catch the wind (read: Spirit) of God.

Note too that this curtain was to be "embroidered with needlework." I get the impression that Yahweh is inviting us to add our own creative "take" to the portal of His sanctuary—not innovations in doctrine, you understand, but rather individual unscripted expressions of our appreciation of His awesome goodness. (The embroidery was to be wrought in "blue, purple, and scarlet yarn," together indicative of the sacrifice of the Messiah/King. If our embellishment of God's linen barrier speaks of anything else—prosperity, prejudice, politics, or pride, for example—then we have *not* followed His Instructions.) The screen of God's portal may seem opaque and impenetrable, but He has left it to us—His people—to make it inviting and attractive by presenting our Savior as He is.

The wall components—the acacia planks on the north, west, and south sides—were held upright, you'll recall, by solid silver 'eden-bases (silver representing the price of redemption). These five columns or pillars at the entrance of the

tabernacle were held upright as well, but this time, the foundations were to be cast of bronze or brass, an alloy that speaks metaphorically of judgment. This concept, in both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, speaks not so much of condemnation as it does judicial decision, the separation of right from wrong, good from evil, or clean from unclean. The point of the bronze column bases, then, is that one may not pass the tabernacle's threshold unless he has been declared to be "not guilty." Since we're *all* guilty, however, this symbol necessitates grace—that which was provided at the altar outside. And since we're *all* unclean in our natural state, it demonstrates why the laver was made available for cleansing right outside the sanctuary entrance.

There were to be five of these acacia pillars, adding another layer of symbolic significance: five is a reminder of God's grace toward us. Assuming the outer two pillars were erected at the corners, that would still leave only about three and a half feet of clear space between them. Compare that to *any* portal in *any* religious edifice in the world, and you'll get some appreciation of how "human friendly," how attuned to our needs, our limitations, and our *scale*, Yahweh was in His design. He wasn't interested in impressing us; He wanted to meet with us.

There was a similar portal, also hung with a veil, between the two inner rooms of the tabernacle—the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (sometimes called the Holy of Holies). This too was to be supported by gold-covered acacia pillars. **"And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. It shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. And you shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, on four bases of silver."** (Exodus 26:31-32) Most of the instructions are exactly the same as for the outer curtain: fine-twined linen, embroidery in blue, purple, and scarlet threads, pillars of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, and hooks of gold with which to hang the veil. So let us focus on the subtle differences, on the theory that Yahweh wasn't commanding all of this on a pointless whim.

First, there were to be four pillars, not five. Four seems to indicate God's design for the earth: there are four sides in a square and four directions on the compass (as in the expression "the four winds," meaning "everywhere"). This design, you'll recall, was called "very good," that is, perfectly suited to Yahweh's will, when He first presented it. (I plan to do an entire chapter on the symbology of numbers, as you may have surmised.) So whereas entering the tabernacle (the Plan of Yahweh) in the first place demanded that grace (*five* pillars) be instituted, the picture is a little different as we stand before the Most Holy Place. This is where Yahweh promised the Israelites He'd meet with them personally (in the form of the Shekinah)—manifesting Himself in smoke and glory in both the wilderness tabernacle and Solomon's temple. Why then, are there *four* pillars dividing the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies? They seem to represent the

same thing the number four represents in the physical world: the complete sufficiency of Yahweh's Plan. Nothing must be (or *can* be, for that matter) added to it in order to render us worthy to stand before a holy God.

It's one thing to enter the Holy Place (having been atoned by the fire of Christ's sacrifice and washed with the water of the Holy Spirit). This is where (revealed by the furnishings within it) we see the light, experience Yahweh's provision, and approach Him in prayer. It's something else entirely to stand in the very presence of God Himself. And yet, that is precisely what Christ enabled us to do—by dying for us. **“And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing Him, saw that in this way He breathed his last, he said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’”** (Mark 15:37-38)

We should pause to consider precisely what was going on here. The Shekinah—the glorious manifestation of Yahweh that had filled the tabernacle and Solomon's temple—had never come back to inhabit Ezra's second temple, or the one that was lavishly remodeled and upgraded by Herod the Great just in time for Yahshua's use. Nor was the ark of the covenant stationed within the Most Holy Place. That had gone missing sometime between the reign of King Josiah (Judah's last godly monarch, under whose reign the ark is last mentioned in scripture—about 621 BC) and Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem, in 586 BC—a mere thirty-five years. I have read compelling evidence that suggests that Jeremiah hid the ark in a cave Solomon had prepared, situated between the city wall and the siege wall the Babylonians had built—positioned directly beneath the site of Yahshua's crucifixion. One thing is certain: neither the ark of the covenant nor the Shekinah were in the Most Holy Place when the veil was torn.

But God had made a specific point of tearing the veil in two. This was no accident, no coincidence. Alfred Edersheim, in his seminal 1880s work *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, states, “The Veils before the Most Holy Place were 40 cubits (60 feet) long, and 20 (30 feet) wide, of the thickness of the palm of the hand, and wrought in 72 squares, which were joined together; and these Veils were so heavy, that, in the exaggerated language of the time, it needed 300 priests to manipulate each. If the Veil was at all such as is described in the Talmud, it could not have been rent in twain by a mere earthquake or the fall of the lintel.” The standard, knee-jerk answer as to why Yahweh rent the veil at the moment of Christ's death is that His sacrifice gave us unrestricted access to God. That's true, of course, but it misses the point: God was no longer *in* the Most Holy Place, even figuratively, when the veil was rent. The horse, so to speak, had already departed *before* the barn door was opened.

The writer to the Hebrews says, **“Brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through**

the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:19-22) Not only is it true that the veil represents the Messiah as the sole portal to the presence of Yahweh, but rending it from top to bottom, as if by the hand of God, demonstrated to all the world that Yahweh was not contained within the inner sanctum. No, He was outside the Most Holy Place, outside the temple, outside of the city walls: He was at this moment hanging on a Roman cross, being torn from top to bottom for our sins, under a sign that read **"This is Jesus [i.e., 'Yahweh is Salvation'], the King of the Jews."** (Matthew 27:37) The rending of the veil didn't give us access to Yahweh. It merely proved that this access had already been provided. In a very real sense, the veil *was* Yahweh.

There is one last piece of tabernacle equipment that was to be made out of acacia wood. It's the largest single item in the sanctuary environs, and first thing the worshipper would encounter as he approached the tabernacle from the eastern entrance to the courtyard. Yahweh told Moses, **"You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square, and its height shall be three cubits. And you shall make horns for it on its four corners; its horns shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze...."** Unlike the furnishings beyond the veil, the altar was *not* to be covered with gold—which would have indicated that immutable purity had already been attained. Rather, it was overlaid with bronze, speaking instead of judgment—i.e., a judicial determination being made concerning one's guilt or innocence. Everyone who approached it was guilty, of course (a side effect of being human), but vindication before Yahweh was possible nevertheless, though the price was unthinkable: innocent life had to be sacrificed in order to pay the penalty one's guilt had brought down upon him. And this big acacia-wood barbecue was where that happened: lambs, bulls, and goats were brought as prescribed in the Book of Leviticus, and atonement was made. One creature died in order than others might live.

It was all symbolic, of course. The blood of bulls and goats didn't *really* atone for anything, but the obedience of the Israelite worshippers who complied in faith with Yahweh's instructions nevertheless found their sins expiated—at least temporarily. In the end, their iniquity was covered the same way Noah's and Abraham's was—the same way yours and mine are: through our faith in Yahweh's solution to our mortal condition. Everything that happened at the bronze-covered acacia altar pointed directly and unequivocally to the sacrifice of Christ. If, by our free will, His blood is applied to our debt of sin, then we are

absolved. I am thoroughly confused by people who insist that grace is purely a New Testament concept, an innovation that's somehow at odds with the Torah. It is no such thing: just ask the guiltless animal whose throat is being cut at the altar. If an innocent lamb giving his life in my stead isn't a picture of grace, then grace doesn't exist. Thus it's not surprising that the dimensions of the altar—five cubits by five—symbolically indicate the same thing: grace multiplied by grace.

The instructions continue: **“And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. And the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles are on the two sides of the altar when it is carried. You shall make it hollow, with boards. As it has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made.”** (Exodus 27:1-2, 6-8) As with every wooden article inside the tabernacle, the altar was to be transported with acacia-wood poles running through rings. But this time the metal covering the staves and forming the rings is bronze, again emphasizing that judgment—judicial separation—is in view at the altar.

Not only was the original acacia altar to be sheathed in bronze, there was an incident a bit later in the wilderness wanderings that reinforced the picture. In Numbers 16, a group of politically ambitious Israelites led by a fellow named Korah challenged Moses' and Aaron's right to lead Israel. The issue of who was “qualified” to stand before Yahweh and lead His people was settled by burning incense—not just the Aaronic priests, as Yahweh had instructed, but everybody involved, the “incumbents” and their challengers. God was to personally indicate whose “prayer,” so to speak, He would honor. Long story short, the rebel leaders got unceremoniously swallowed by the desert, “going down *alive* into the pit,” and their two hundred and fifty wannabe “priests” were then consumed by fire from heaven. God had spoken. Again.

But the story didn't end there. The bronze or brass censers that had been used by the rebels were gathered up, hammered flat, and affixed to the altar. As Moses explained, **“As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered plates as a covering for the altar, for they offered them before Yahweh, and they became holy. Thus they shall be a sign to the people of Israel.’** So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers, which those who were burned had offered, and they were hammered out as a covering for the altar, to be a reminder to the people of Israel, so that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before Yahweh, lest he become like Korah and his company—as Yahweh said to him through Moses.” (Numbers 16:38-40) Apparently, it's not a very good idea to pray in favor of something Yahweh has already condemned, or against something He has blessed. This in turn means that it behooves us to diligently search the scriptures to determine God's revealed will. Ignorance is a lame excuse for folly, since folly can get you killed. More to the point, our opinions are totally irrelevant if Yahweh has spoken His mind on a matter.

You tell me: is it significant that every time we see acacia wood specified in scripture, it's overlaid with either bronze or gold? I think it is. We are living beings, but we're mortal: we *will* be cut down. Worse, we're all subject to judgment (bronze). But judgment can result in either condemnation or vindication. We who have been vicariously exonerated by the sacrifice of Christ—the whole symbolic point of the altar's function—can go on to be fashioned into implements useful in the kingdom of God, honoring Him, but at the same time being honored *by* Him—overlaid with pure, immutable gold.

That being said, it is a great comfort to me to discover scriptural references to acacia trees that have *not* been cut down. This is the state Yahweh always intended for us, the state to which He desires to restore us: it's a picture of life and blessing under King Yahshua, a.k.a. "Yahweh your God, who dwells in Zion." The prophet Joel records Yahweh's description of the Millennial Kingdom: **"So you shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who dwells in Zion, My holy mountain. And Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers [i.e., those who have estranged themselves from Yahweh] shall never again pass through it. And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of Yahweh and water the Valley of Shittim [that is, the Valley of Acacia Trees]."** (Joel 3:17-18) Life, abundant and sweet, will flourish under Christ's rule, and not just during His thousand-year earthly reign on earth, but in the eternal state to follow.

Isaiah concurs. **"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I Yahweh will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar [strength], the acacia [life], the myrtle [rest and restoration], and the olive [the Spirit of God]. I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together [apparently a symbolic description of the nations, set in contrast to the fig tree in the promised land, Israel], that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of Yahweh has done this: the Holy One of Israel has created it."** (Isaiah 41:17-20) The wilderness or desert, you'll recall, is not what it seems—a place of exile or punishment—but rather where we experience inspiration, preparation, and total reliance upon Yahweh. I am eagerly awaiting the day when both Jews and gentiles thrive in unity and harmony under the loving, almighty hand of the Holy One of Israel. The world that exists today won't recognize itself.

GRAPE VINE

❧ 3.3.9 ❧

Mankind

Man was designed to be fruitful. The very first commandment in the entire Bible is **“Be fruitful and multiply—fill the earth.”** (Genesis 1:28) So we should not be surprised to find that a plant upon which delicious fruit grows—the grapevine—should be recruited as a scriptural metaphor for mankind—and what it takes to foster our fruitfulness. It’s a good news, bad news story, I’m afraid. On the one hand, humanity *can* be fruitful—productive, sweet, and enjoyable, producing good results, being beneficial or profitable. I get the feeling that if everything is as it should be, God finds our company downright intoxicating. On the other hand, it takes hard work, nurturing, and wisdom to make it so, and there are any number of things that can conspire to ruin the harvest—blight, drought, poor soil, cross-contamination with bad seed, or the destructive action of enemies or pests.

In His role as the Messiah (that is, in His capacity as the human manifestation of God), Yahshua compared Himself to a grapevine, the trunk and root, of which we are the branches. It’s roughly the same picture we saw above, in which we are the “poles” (*baddim*—branches) used to carry the ark of the covenant forth in the world. He said, **“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of Mine that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...”** There are two kinds of people in this world, He says: those who bear fruit, and those who do not. But actually, this is even more focused than that: He’s talking about *His* branches—those who ostensibly honor Yahweh and His Messiah. Some of us—nominal Christians or biological Jews—don’t bear any fruit at all.

Our Father, Yahweh, is cast in the role of the Vinedresser in this parable. He knows that the trunk and root system is sound, because there is always fruit growing on the vine somewhere. But the branches growing from the vine may or may not be fruitful. God examines each branch to see if it is productive or not. If there is no fruit, He “takes away” that branch. It’s major surgery, but something necessary to protect the fundamental viability of the plant. But even if the branch in question *is* bearing fruit, the Vinedresser carefully prunes it with an eye toward maximizing the yield. Anything that threatens to sap the life of the vine, compromising its ability to produce fruit, is subject to being “pruned back.”

Yahshua’s point is that the branches (us) can’t survive or produce fruit without a vital connection to the vine’s trunk. **“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine;**

you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” It is Christ’s *word* that makes us clean (Greek *katharos*, of which Strong’s notes, “in a similitude, like a vine cleansed by pruning and so fitted to bear fruit”). **“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you....”** There’s sort of a catch-22 here: if we abide in Christ, *what we wish* will automatically be in perfect alignment with God’s will—which probably doesn’t include spending next month’s rent on a new bass boat or Louis Vuitton shoes. It will more likely have something to do with opportunities for service or our words and deeds finding fertile ground.

“By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love.” Easy enough to say, but how can we do this, in practical terms? **“If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”** (John 15:1-11) It’s absurdly simple in principle, but at the same time impossible to do in our own strength: keep Yahweh’s commandments, and we will abide joyfully in the love of God. Allow me to reprise my paraphrase of the Ten Commandments, the heart of the Mosaic covenant—“Yahweh alone is God, so don’t worship or serve anything else. Don’t make visual representations of what you think He may be like, for He will provide His own image for you: Yahshua the Messiah. Revere the name of Yahweh, and don’t associate with it anything that is worthless, empty, or deceptive. Observe the Sabbath, for it explains both God’s redemptive program and the timeline He has ordained to bring it about. Honor your maker. And don’t murder, cheat, steal, lie, or covet what others have, for in doing so, you show disrespect for God and lack of trust in Him.”

This is not a laundry list of do’s and don’ts, but rather a way of life, a mindset of spiritual awareness that reveals our relationship with Yahweh—or lack of it. Keeping these commandments—guarding them, honoring them, and living them—is not so much a *method* for attaining the condition known as “abiding in Christ’s love” as it is an indication that you’re already there. How this ties into the symbol of the vine is revealed by Yahshua’s words at the “last supper.” The “fruit of the vine,” that is, the wine that they were drinking, was said to be a metaphor for the Messiah’s blood that was about to be shed. So He explained to His disciples what was going on. **“And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins....’** Yahshua thereby symbolically equated the “fruit of the vine” with the “blood of the covenant.” Christians who ignore the Torah are immediately at a loss, for they can’t comprehend that second phrase, though the disciples, being Israelites, knew what He meant. The “blood of

the covenant” spoke of all those animal sacrifices that had been instituted in the Law of Moses: innocent blood being shed to atone for the guilty—the Torah’s portrayal of grace. Yahshua was informing His disciples that the blood He was about to shed on their (and our) behalf would fulfill those prophetic Levitical precepts—*all* of them. He was about to discharge His role as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (as John the Baptist had put it).

But He went on to say, **“I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”** (Matthew 26:27-29; cf. Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18) To understand this we need to consider the context. He had just told them that He was the vine and they were the branches who, if they were abiding in Him, would bear fruit in the world. But He was about to submit Himself to the cross: He would no longer be physically present among them, but rather would send the Holy Spirit to abide within them forever (John 14:16-17). The connection between vine and branches would therefore remain intact even in Christ’s physical absence. The remarkable thing here is that in saying He would “drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom,” Yahshua was (again) promising to return to them—physically, corporeally, and in unprecedented glory.

It was no fluke, no theological innovation, when Yahshua symbolically compared Himself to the grapevine in Yahweh’s vineyard. One of the earlier Messianic prophecies—the one pinpointing the tribe of Israel from which the Messiah would come—introduced the theme: **“The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to Him.”** The word translated “tribute” in this version is the Hebrew *shiloh*, used just this once in scripture. *Strong’s* defines it as “he whose it is; that which belongs to him; tranquility.” It is derived (apparently) from the verb *shalah*: to be at rest, prosper, be quiet or at ease. The meaning of this, then, is that Judah would be the tribe from which Israel’s ultimate King would emerge—He to whom rule naturally belongs. **“And to Him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding His foal to the vine and His donkey’s colt to the choice vine, He has washed His garments in wine and His vesture in the blood of grapes. His eyes are darker than wine, and His teeth whiter than milk.”** (Genesis 49:10-12)

Does any of this sound familiar? It should. We read in the Gospel account, **“Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, “The Lord needs them,” and he will send**

them at once.' This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."'" (Matthew 21:1-5, quoting Zechariah 9:9) Don't look now, but when Yahshua took the reins of that borrowed donkey, the Genesis prophecy, "Binding His foal to the vine and His donkey's colt to the choice vine" was literally fulfilled. The scepter and throne of Israel was being claimed by Yahshua, descendant of both King David and the patriarch Judah. (The "washing of His garments in wine and His vesture in blood" speaks of His impending return to this world in furious wrath: see Isaiah 63:1-6.)

Yahshua was not only to be our king—our lord and leader—but also our high priest, the One who would intercede between God and man. So during the post-exilic era (about 520 BC), a high priest named Joshua was recruited as a prophetic stand-in for the coming Messiah—they even shared the same name (the one I'm rendering "Yahshua" in the case of the Messiah, so folks can tell them apart.) **"And the angel of Yahweh solemnly assured Joshua, 'Thus says Yahweh of hosts: If you will walk in My ways and keep My charge, then you shall rule My house and have charge of My courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.'**" "Ruling" and "having charge" are the job of a king, but access to Yahweh is the high priest's function, by definition. In fact, the role of the high priest is prophetic (as are so many Torah symbols) of the Messiah. **"Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring My servant the Branch...."** Sometimes it's hard to tell whether a Bible narrative is prophetic or merely historical, but here we've been told plainly: these things are symbolic of something yet to come—something wonderful.

"For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares Yahweh of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day." The "stone" is prophetic of Yahshua Himself: the stone that the builders rejected had become the cornerstone (see Psalm 118:22). That "single day" of which he speaks will be (if I'm not mistaken) the definitive Day of Atonement—predictive, not coincidentally, of the timing of the second coming of Christ, this time in glory. **"In that day, declares Yahweh of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree."** (Zechariah 3:6-10) The more generalized "day" that will follow shortly thereafter will be the Millennial reign of the Messiah—beginning on (and prophesied by) the Feast of Tabernacles. This "day" will be characterized by peace and fellowship among the inhabitants of the earth.

Needless to say, that is not the *status quo* today, nor is there any chance of it becoming so without some serious cultural transformation. What will have changed? The key is that little phrase we sort of skipped over: **"I (Yahweh) will bring My servant the Branch."** We just saw how Yahshua (in His role as God) was the

vine, and we who abide in Him are the branches. But in a similar way, Yahshua (in his role as the Son of Man) was the “Branch” to Yahweh’s “vine.” That is, even manifested as a mortal man, He drew his life and strength from the Father. Yahshua the Branch, then, is the one who will remove the iniquity of the land and cause mankind to dwell together in perfect peace.

Two other prophecies make that crystal clear. The first is from Isaiah: **“In that day the Branch of Yahweh shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel.”** (Isaiah 4:2) If you’ll recall from our discussion of palm trees, Leviticus 23:40 listed several types of trees whose boughs were to be used to build shelters to dwell in during the Feast of Tabernacles. These turned out to be indicative of the populations inhabiting the Millennial kingdom of Christ—beginning with the King Himself, characterized as a splendid, beautiful, or glorious tree (Hebrew: *hadar*). His “branches” (us, those abiding in the Messiah) were the first “booth covering” mentioned. Isaiah doesn’t use the same word to describe the King, but his descriptions are closely synonymous. “Beautiful” and “glorious” are actually *nouns* personifying the Branch, so perhaps this would be better translated **“The Branch of Yahweh shall be beauty and glory.”** The Hebrew *tsabiy* means beauty, glory, or honor. And *kabowd* denotes glory, honor, glorious abundance, riches, and splendor.

It’s clear to me that no one other than Yahshua the Messiah could possibly fit that description, though the passage is a bit coy in identifying Him. Not so with a parallel passage from Jeremiah, who ties the “Branch” to David’s royal line (of whom Yahshua is history’s only viable candidate for fulfillment). **“Behold, the days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which He will be called: ‘Yahweh is our righteousness.’”** (Jeremiah 23:5-6, cf. Jeremiah 33:14-16) That title (alternately rendered **“Yahweh our righteousness,”** tells us several things. First, the Branch is actually Yahweh Himself—they share a common identity, though the *form* of the Branch is diminished for our benefit. Second, it says that we have no righteousness within ourselves, at least none sufficient to allow us to stand vindicated before Yahweh. So *He is* the righteousness we require. This is one of hundreds of Old Testament confirmations of the principle of grace—imputed righteousness. Nothing changed in the post-resurrection era, just because Paul called a spade a spade.

In all of our examples so far, the grapevine has been used as a symbol of mankind—and specifically, of man in his mortal state. We are designed to bear fruit, but we cannot fulfill that destiny unless we are anchored into and nourished by the source of our life—Yahweh. As we shall soon see, most of the Bible’s references to vines speak either of the judgment mankind will endure for failing to

bear fruit in Yahweh's vineyard, or of the restoration and vindication that can be our destiny if we respond to the Vinedresser's loving attentions. But first, let us address a few miscellaneous mentions of grapevines in scripture, with an eye toward learning more about the man-centric nature of this symbol.

We'll begin with Israel's son Joseph, and a vision he was asked to interpret as he languished, unjustly accused, in an Egyptian prison. **"So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, 'In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.' Then Joseph said to him, 'This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer.'"** (Genesis 40:9-13) We all remember what happened: the dream's interpretation was proved correct, and the incident would eventually lead to the salvation of Israel (not to mention Egypt) through the most unlikely series of events you can think of.

Nobody *ever* thinks beyond the obvious surface meaning of this narrative, for its significance on that level is amazing enough. But given what we now know about the "grapevine" symbol—mortal man—is it possible that there's more here than meets the eye? The heart of the prophecy is, **"The three branches are three days. In three days [the king] will lift you up."** We have already established that "branches" indicate that which is extended from (and dependent upon) the living vine—it's a term that defines believers. In this context, then, what are the "three days?" I believe this may be a prophecy concerning the progression of God's revelation throughout the ages of mankind—from the fall of Adam until the commencement of Christ's Millennial kingdom. The "three days" are three ages: (1) the age of conscience, from Adam to Abraham; (2) the age of covenants, from Abraham to Yahshua; and (3) the age of Christ, which will culminate with His glorious return. At the beginning of each new "day," Yahweh radically altered the *means* by which His believers would interact with Him—though the message itself never changed: "trust Me."

What, then, happens when the "three days" are up? (And don't look now, but any way you slice it, we are very near the end of the third day.) The prophecy says, the King will **"restore you to your office, and you shall place his cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer."** That is, we believers (who must live through the three days in prison) will be brought back to a place of responsibility, service, and honor before the King. The office of cupbearer in the ancient world implied the complete trust of the king, for no one would have been in a better position to influence him (through intimate and prolonged proximity) or, on the other hand, to poison him. The cupbearer (or vizier) was *literally* the king's "right hand man."

If you couldn't trust him, you couldn't trust anyone. But when were we human believers Yahweh's cupbearers? In the Garden of Eden, before the fall. Adam got his whole family thrown into prison for his "mistake," but the King is going to pardon him (us, that is) and restore us to a place of trust and service in His Kingdom. And with what shall we serve Him? With what's in the cup—the "fruit" that mankind was supposed to be producing in our lives all along: love and everything that flows from it—joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Galatians 5:22-23).

Another facet of the symbol of the grapevine can be discerned from the Nazirite vow. The name of the vow (*nazir*) simply means one who is consecrated or devoted, from a root verb (*nazar*) meaning to dedicate, consecrate, or separate. **"When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to Yahweh, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins."** (Numbers 6:2-4) If our interpretation of the "vine" symbol rings true, then the underlying meaning of the Nazirite vow is that the devotee is actually separating himself from the ordinary concerns of mankind—all of them. This is as close to monasticism as you can get in the Bible. But it doesn't imply a retreat from the world, only a conscious deliberation to set its blandishments aside for a time in order to devote oneself wholly to Yahweh's kingdom. The Nazirite didn't cease interacting with man, but he stopped "consuming" what humanity had to offer in the world. The vow was usually temporary (though there are examples of it being a lifelong endeavor). God knows how we're wired. Let's face it, for most of us, being *that* heavenly-minded would mean we were no earthly good. Still, it would have been a life-altering experience to leave the world behind for a time, seeking *only* Yahweh and His truth. You'd come back refreshed, restored, and refocused.

In an interesting twist, under the Torah, even the *grapevines* were to take a Nazirite vow now and then, so to speak. In the law of the Sabbatical year, we read, **"But in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to Yahweh. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed [*nazir*—consecrated] vine."** (Leviticus 25:4-5) Once again, symbolically comparing the vine to mankind reveals an essential truth: in the end, we cannot rely upon the opinions and philosophies of men, but only upon God Himself. Yes, for the time being, God's love is shown to us through the actions of His people, and we are *commanded* to be the conduits of that love to the whole world. But during the Sabbath—the Millennial Kingdom—no one will be relying on the "grapes of the consecrated vine." The fruit of the Spirit will, rather, be "picked" directly from the Messiah. Don't take that the wrong way: it's not that our love won't count

anymore, it's only that the Source of our love will be obvious and apparent to every living soul, in stark contrast to the way things are today.

Job's "friend" Elihu didn't understand any of that. Granted, he didn't have the Torah to consult, but his observations fit neither the truth of Job's predicament nor the reality of the world as he found it. Like so many today, Elihu merely put forth his theory as to how things ought to be, and ignored the way they actually were. Of course, all of us have caught ourselves wishing his philosophy was true, because if it were, justice in the world would fall into our laps like ripe fruit. But life isn't quite as simple as that. He said: **"Let him [the wicked man—presumably his friend Job] not trust in emptiness, deceiving himself, for emptiness will be his payment. It will be paid in full before his time, and his branch will not be green. He will shake off his unripe grape like the vine, and cast off his blossom like the olive tree. For the company of the godless is barren, and fire consumes the tents of bribery."** (Job 15:31-34) Most of us fall into the trap of wanting—even expecting—instant gratification. And wouldn't it be nice (we think) if all wrongdoing (at least when it's being done by other people) were met with swift and sure punishment—instant karma, as it were?

That may actually be the paradigm in operation during the coming kingdom, the Sabbath age. But for now—during the six day work week, during the six years preceding the Sabbatical hiatus, during the six thousand years leading up to the Millennial reign of Christ (all of which mean the same thing in God's symbolic lexicon)—the standard of free will is in play. Not only is God's love invariably dispensed to the world only *indirectly*, through the actions of faithful believers, but God's justice is usually deferred as well—though man's inadequate version does what it can to pick up the slack. Why? Because if God rewarded good and punished evil instantly and unerringly in this life, our moral choices would be meaningless. Mercy and patience would be reduced to mere theoretical constructs. We would find ourselves behaving ourselves only in order to avoid the wrath of God, not because we loved and honored Him.

But Yahweh *is* patient and merciful with us—up to a point. We are "allowed" to make mistakes without the stern fist of God automatically (and immediately) descending upon us in wrath and retribution. As Paul phrased the issue, **"Do you despise the riches of His [Yahweh's] goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?"** (Romans 2:4) Some of us do repent, observing that the sin of our lives (as God defined it) brings us no joy, but only sorrow, guilt, frustration, and a vague sense of unfulfillment. Others, however, noticing that lightning bolts from heaven don't ordinarily strike us down the instant we've committed a crime, conclude that God must be either nonexistent, incompetent, disinterested, or dead. So the rule for them logically becomes "don't get caught" doing something society universally agrees is evil.

But at the same time, they try to shift society's "narrow minded and bigoted mores" toward tolerance for their particular antisocial proclivities. In America, for example, the cultural ideal used to be prosperity through hard work, thoughtful stewardship of our resources, thrift, open expression faith in God, the sanctity of life, and lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage. Nobody gave these things a second thought: they were basic and foundational ideas. But now, after half a century of unrelenting satanic onslaught, half the nation prefers a welfare mentality, the despising of our God-given natural resources, deficit spending on a gargantuan scale, suppression of other people's faith, the practice of abortion as retroactive birth control, unrestrained sexual promiscuity, and the blurring of traditional gender roles.

And since God has not Personally and promptly intervened, imposing His will and standards from the top down, the proponents of these things presume He never will—most likely because He isn't really there. But Yahweh, through His prophet, told us precisely what His *modus operandi* was going to be, twenty-seven hundred years ago. **"Let me sing for my beloved, my love song concerning His vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill."** The vineyard is the habitable earth; it's owner and master is Yahweh; the "very fertile hill" is the good earth in which He planted us (a hill or mountain, symbolically, is a place of strength and security); and the vines are us—mankind—the inhabitants of the vineyard. **"He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it..."** When God created the earth, it was deemed "very good," perfectly suited for its inhabitants. The "watchtower" speaks of God's care and protection of our race (but at the same time indicates the presence of enemies—like Eden's serpent); and the wine vat reminds us that we were designed (and destined) to be fruitful.

Anybody who knows anything about human history knows what happened: it didn't turn out at all as God had wished (though He *knew*, even before He began, what would transpire, and what He would do to fix the problem). **"And He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?..."** Yahweh did everything that could have been done—short of repealing free will—in an effort to encourage us to bring forth the sweet fruit He desired of us: love, joy, peace, and all the rest (or, as it's described a bit later in this passage, justice and righteousness). But we (having been given the freedom to choose) opted to be "cross pollinated," so to speak, with wild vines. The result was a harvest of sour, stunted, and unsuitable fruit. Wine made from such fruit is a bitter and poisonous vintage—a "very bad year," as the critics would note (were it not for the fact that *most* years were equally disgusting). What we're seeing here is Yahweh's lament that we humans have not remained holy—set apart from the

world for His glory and honor. Rather, we have largely corrupted and polluted ourselves through fellowship with counterfeit “gods” of our own manufacture and imagination.

But Yahweh is *omnipotent*. Does He have to sit there and “take it?” No, He doesn’t, even though He has until now, patiently encouraging mankind to repent. But state of affairs won’t last forever: at some point, Yahweh will declare, “This ain’t workin’,” or words to that effect. As Isaiah reports it, **“And now I will tell you what I will do to My vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it...”** Every one of these strategies is specifically predicted to be characteristic of the coming Tribulation period.

(1) “Removing its hedge” is symbolic of taking away its divine protection, something that will happen when the Restrainer (i.e., the Holy Spirit) is taken out of the way at the rapture of the church (compare II Thessalonians 2:7 to I Thessalonians 4:16-17). (2) The Tribulation will indeed “devour” the world’s inhabitants: between the fourth seal and the sixth trumpet judgments, one half of the earth’s seven billion souls will be slain—and there will be a lot of ways to die not included in these two causes. (3) The one-world government under the Antichrist that’s predicted for the second half of the Tribulation means that any “walls” (whether borders, defensive strategies, or standing armies) that had been erected to defend against outside enemies will have been “broken down,” just as Yahweh predicts here. The whole world will be “trampled down” by the forces of satanic darkness, and the entire earth will become a corpse-strewn wasteland. (4) Being neither pruned nor hoed speaks of famine, predicted in both the Olivet discourse and the third seal judgment. And (5) drought is specifically prophesied for the second half of the Tribulation, as part of the plagues administered by the two witnesses (see Revelation 11:6).

In the near term, though, this parable was spoken to the divided kingdoms of Israel—Ephraim and Judah, declaring the coming judgment that both nations had invited upon themselves. **“For the vineyard of Yahweh of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant planting. And He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!”** (Isaiah 5:1-7) But it should be clear that the ramifications and symbolic imagery extend the meaning to include the whole world. As I’ve said before, Israel is often used in scripture as a metaphor for, or a microcosm of, the entire human race.

Bottom line: Yahweh is willing to give the human race every opportunity to receive His love. But this is not a perpetual or open-ended proposition: “every opportunity” is, in reality, a limited time offer—six thousand years, if I’m not mistaken, between man’s first tenuous little rebellion in the Garden of Eden, until

Yahweh says “Enough!” He will at long last rip out the vine of humanity by the roots, starting over with a few shoots of the pure strain. Who? I’m speaking of the mortals of the seventh Millennium, the Sabbath of God’s plan. These are the gentile “sheep” of Matthew 25:34 and the redeemed remnant of Israel—the nations who will repopulate the earth under the watchful eye of the Messiah-King, Yahshua.

He Himself told a parable explaining the process: **“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none....”** Just a thought: could these “years” mean the same thing as the “three days” that Pharaoh’s cupbearer dreamed about? If you’ll recall, I hypothesized that the “three days” of his dream were three ages of man: (1) the age of conscience, before Yahweh had given us much instruction; (2) the age of covenants, dominated by the Torah (3) the age of Christ, the church age, characterized by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people.

Anyway, the fed-up landowner had every right to say, **“Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?”** And he [the vinedresser—who I’d see as Christ in His role as High Priest, the Mediator between God and man] **answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”** (Luke 13:6-9) It may seem funny to say it, but when we find ourselves buried in “manure” in this life, we should look at the experience as an opportunity to repent, to begin bearing fruit for the kingdom of God: love, justice, mercy, and righteousness. It isn’t pleasant—in fact, it stinks—but sometimes it’s just what we need. I should point out that technically, the parable’s “fig tree” is (as we’ll discover in the next section) symbolic of Israel, which we see planted in the midst of the vineyard—humanity in general. But scripture’s lessons are where you find them: don’t brush off the admonition just because you’re not Jewish.

In the Isaiah 5 passage we just reviewed, the vineyard owner (Yahweh) was bemoaning the fact that his purebred vines had been contaminated through interbreeding with “wild grapes.” This is a call for holiness—being called out and set apart from the contamination of the world (which is why He built a wall around us in the first place). This very same picture is in view in a Torah precept: **“You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed, lest the whole yield be forfeited, the crop that you have sown and the yield of the vineyard. You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together. You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together.”** (Deuteronomy 22:9-10) These are all variations on the same theme. The comparison is between godly life and unrighteousness, the clean vs. the unclean, or works-based religion vs. imputed righteousness. In every way, we are to

remain separate from the world, uncorrupted by its influence and immune to both its pleasures and pressures.

You may be asking, “What’s so wrong with wild grapevines? Aren’t they just as good, in their own way?” I don’t know about the literal horticulture of the thing, but Moses clarifies what the difference is, from a spiritual perspective. **“For their [i.e., the rebels’] vine comes from the vine of Sodom and from the fields of Gomorrah; their grapes are grapes of poison; their clusters are bitter; their wine is the poison of serpents and the cruel venom of asps.”** (Deuteronomy 32:32-33) Yahweh’s grapes yield a wine that brings joy, peace, and contentment. Satan’s grapes are poison—offering only pain, madness, and death.

These rebels of whom Moses spoke eventually brought the nation to its knees, first in the north, and later in the south. Just before Judah’s well-deserved destruction at the hands of Babylon, Jeremiah, one last time, contrasted the cultivated vine with the wild, corrupt variant they had become. **“Your evil will chastise you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake Yahweh your God.”** That’s precisely what Moses had said. **“The fear of Me is not in you, declares the Lord Yahweh of hosts. For long ago I broke your yoke and burst your bonds; but you said, ‘I will not serve.’ Yes, on every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down like a whore. Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?”** (Jeremiah 2:19-21) As we are about to see, the “degenerate vine” is a common theme among Yahweh’s prophets. In the end, there is only one thing God can logically do with it: plow the whole vineyard under and start over.

When we were studying the acacia tree, we noted how unusual it was that the wood of the tree was the basis of its symbol. That is, it had to be cut down before it could be useful in Yahweh’s plan. In contrast, the vine (ideally) is symbolically significant because of its fruitfulness: it bears grapes. Like man, the grapevine is useless if it doesn’t bear good fruit. Ezekiel reports Yahweh’s thoughts on the matter: **“The word of Yahweh came to me: Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it?”** No, that would be the acacia—the symbol signifying mortal life. But if the vine—mankind—bears no fruit, it is worthless: **“Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel. When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire**

has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything!..." It's a pretty bleak picture: the fruitless vine doesn't even make very good firewood.

The prophet now ties the metaphor to its immediate object: Judah, and specifically, the city of Jerusalem, at the height of its apostasy. **"Therefore thus says the Lord Yahweh: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will set My face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them, and you will know that I am Yahweh, when I set My face against them. And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord Yahweh."** (Ezekiel 15)

Jeremiah too takes Jerusalem to task for their rebellion against Yahweh. **"Be warned, O Jerusalem, lest I turn from you in disgust, lest I make you a desolation, an uninhabited land."** Alas, the warning went unheeded. **"Thus says Yahweh of hosts: 'They [Babylon] shall glean thoroughly as a vine the remnant of Israel; like a grape-gatherer pass your hand again over its branches.'" The Babylonians weren't operating under Torah rules. The Israelites had been instructed not to harvest every last grape from their vines, but rather to leave something for the poor to collect. But the Chaldeans endeavored to grab every last grape, leaving nothing behind. That was to be the fate of Jerusalem if they didn't heed Yahweh. But they wouldn't hear it: "To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of Yahweh is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it."** (Jeremiah 6:8-10)

Judah had fallen a long, long way from **"I will delight in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word."** (Psalm 119:16) But they aren't alone, are they? Just because we Americans weren't warned—specifically and by name—of a similar fate, don't assume the prophet's warnings aren't for us. As in Judah of old, the word of Yahweh, once revered by our populace from the leadership on down, has become to many in America "an object of scorn." Many of my countrymen "take no pleasure in it." So we shouldn't be shocked to discover that an unnamed nation (but one whose description bears a striking resemblance to the United States) was warned by Isaiah of what would happen to them in the latter days: **"For thus Yahweh said to me: 'I will quietly look from My dwelling like clear heat in sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.' For before the harvest, when the blossom is over, and the flower becomes a ripening grape, He cuts off the shoots with pruning hooks, and the spreading branches He lops off and clears away."** (Isaiah 18:4-5)

The harvest comes at the end of the prophetic year (that is, at the time of the last of Yahweh's seven convocations). It is the conclusion of the growing season, when the bounty of the earth is brought into the storehouse. The harvest of the church is doubtless the rapture, that monumental and transformative event foreseen in the Feast of Trumpets (the fifth of these seven convocations). But notice when Isaiah says the "pruning" will take place: *before* the harvest, when

the vine (humanity) is showing promise, when the efforts of mankind (for good or ill) are already beginning to come to fruition.

We can see this “pruning” process taking place in America before our very eyes. Sometimes it looks like “natural disaster”: forest fires, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and blizzards. Sometimes it’s “man-caused” disaster: terrorist events, gang violence, oil spills, corporate greed, and so forth. Sometimes it’s insanity (or treason) in the halls of power: divisiveness for political gain, the imposition of onerous taxes, profligate spending far beyond our means, crushing regulations, the building of a nanny state in which sloth is rewarded and industry is punished, and the systematic persecution of anything that even resembles traditional Christian values, while pandering to voting blocks openly antagonistic to God. The result of all this is stagnation, depression (in the psychological, not financial, sense), fear, and malaise.

Should we take this as a sign that God has forsaken us? No. (Not yet, anyway.) He’s “pruning the vine” in an effort to make us more fruitful, cutting away some of the dead wood that was distracting us and weighing us down. It matters not that some of the sprouts He’s trimming off had promising buds growing on them already: removing them is for our own good, an opportunity to focus our spiritual energies on what really matters: *Him*. The pruning process is roughly the same thing as what we saw above in Yahshua’s parable: we’re being confronted with crap (that is, fertilized with manure) in the hope that our productivity in God’s vineyard may improve. This should all be taken as a fragrant reminder that the harvest *is* coming. If it were not, there would be no point in God going to all this trouble on our behalf. It also means that He holds out hope for us—something I find very encouraging. And what follows the harvest? The threshing, the winnowing, the grape crushing, the olive pressing—the *violent* parts of the agricultural metaphor, all of which are designed to separate the “food” from its worthless byproducts.

All of Yahweh’s pre-harvest pruning and fertilizing are calculated to deliver the greatest harvest possible. But here and there in scripture, we get hints that our God is in anguish over just how pitiful He knows the harvest will be. For example, **“When I would gather them, declares Yahweh, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.”** (Jeremiah 8:13) Yahweh seems to be in agony that the love and care He has lavished on the human race in general (the grapevine), and Israel in particular (the fig tree), has yielded so little in return. And yet, He persists. I get the feeling He would work just as hard on behalf of mankind, even if He knew there were only going to be two “success stories”—you and me.

We tend to assume that God only cares about “His own” people—Christians and Jews, while remaining ambivalent about those who never pretended to revere

Him. But the following passage should help correct that misperception. **“We have heard of the pride of Moab—how proud he is!—of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; in his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail.”** At first, this sounds like a typical “wrath of God” passage: Yahweh is heard berating the pagans for behaving like pagans. So He says, in effect, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” But then (amazingly, to some of us) Yahweh expresses His own grief over the pagans’ self-imposed fate. **“Mourn, utterly stricken, for the raisin cakes of Kir-hareseth. For the fields of Heshbon languish, and the vine of Sibmah; the lords of the nations have struck down its branches, which reached to Jazer and strayed to the desert; its shoots spread abroad and passed over the sea. Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jazer for the vine of Sibmah. I drench you with My tears, O Heshbon and Elealeh; for over your summer fruit and your harvest the shout has ceased....”**

All of these place names are either Moabite or Amorite strongholds. They’re all located on the east side of the Jordan River, in territory that was never promised to Israel. (See Numbers 34 for God’s detailed description of *eretz* Israel.) You may protest that Moab (whose patriarch was Lot, the nephew of Abraham) might have retained some vicarious favor with Yahweh (see Deuteronomy 2:9). But the evil Amorites were never under the protection of God. In fact, they were among the nations whose territory (west of the Jordan, anyway) was promised to Abraham because of their persistent wickedness (see Genesis 15:16, 21). And yet, Yahweh is in anguish over their impending demise. **“And joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised; no treader treads out wine in the presses; I have put an end to the shouting. Therefore My inner parts moan like a lyre for Moab, and My inmost self for Kir-hareseth.”** (Isaiah 16:6-11; cf. Jeremiah 48:28-33) It’s true: it doesn’t matter whether you’re an Israelite or an Amorite, whether you’re Mother Teresa or Adolph Hitler: Yahweh desires your repentance and fellowship. He wants you to live. **“[God] is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”** (II Peter 3:9) **“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord Yahweh; so turn, and live.”** (Ezekiel 18:32)

Referring to our current symbol, the grapevine, we are able to pinpoint Moab’s problem. **“Joy and gladness are taken away from the fruitful field, and in the vineyards no songs are sung, no cheers are raised; no treader treads out wine in the presses; I have put an end to the shouting.”** Having forsaken Yahweh and treated His people as enemies, Moab ceased bearing fruit. They became proud, self-centered, and insolent. There was, therefore, nothing to harvest, no obvious reason to thank the God they despised for His provision, no shouts of joy that their labors had been rewarded. Once again, it’s beginning to sound like latter day America—increasingly unholy, unfruitful, unthankful, and ultimately unblessed. It’s not too late to repent, my beloved countrymen, but it soon will be.

There are several places in scripture in which Yahweh focuses on women and their unique perspective on what it means to be fruitful. Through the prophet Isaiah, He took Israel's women to task for being smug and self-centered, so focused on their own pleasure and prosperity, they lost sight of the God who had provided it. **"Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear My voice; you complacent daughters, give ear to My speech. In little more than a year you will shudder, you complacent women; for the grape harvest fails, the fruit harvest will not come. Tremble, you women who are at ease, shudder, you complacent ones."** The brutal Assyrians were on their very doorstep, sent by God to scatter and enslave Ephraim for her apostasy and idolatry. Yet they refused to see the peril of their self-imposed situation. **"Strip, and make yourselves bare, and tie sackcloth around your waist..."** When the Assyrians came, these women would no longer prance about without care for God or man, adorning themselves with silks and spices, jewels and elaborately plaited hair. They would be stripped naked and hauled off with fishhooks in their noses, reduced to shame and mourning in a foreign land.

Call me boringly predictable, but I can't help but see a parallel between the complacent pleasure-mad women of pre-conquest Israel and the myriads of women in America today who *define themselves* by their insistence on the "right" to kill their unborn children so they can live their lives unencumbered by the burden of children. (Men aren't guiltless in this regard, of course, but our present passage is focused on women, so I am as well.) Children are expensive to raise and nurture, both in terms of psychological investment and finances. (As the parent of eleven children, I know whereof I speak.) What women are doing when they abort their children is not only murder (something they brush off with questionable semantics and wishful thinking), it is also *theft*: they are stealing from the next generation and taking the loot for themselves. So forget about "a woman's right to choose." If abortion is okay, then so is armed robbery. Do women have the right to kill family members and take their stuff? 'Cause that's what abortion is—no more, no less. Abortion is *not* healthcare, not for the mother, and *certainly* not for her child.

But I digress. It's all a question of whether your life is fruitful or not. So Isaiah says, **"Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine, for the soil of My people growing up in thorns and briers, yes, for all the joyous houses in the exultant city. For the palace is forsaken, the populous city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks."** Up until this point, it's all bad news. But then Yahweh instructs His prophet to offer a ray of hope. **"...until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever."** (Isaiah 32:9-17) In English, it sounds like a contradiction: first the fruitful vines are destroyed *forever*, but then

there will be righteousness and peace *forever*. Can both things be true? “Forever” (in both verses) is the Hebrew phrase *ad ‘owlam*, meaning “until a time of indefinite duration” (from the verb *‘alam*, to conceal, hide, or make secret). The point: though it may take what seems like *forever* to bring about, Yahweh intends to restore Israel—all twelve tribes—to a place of blessing. When? When “the Spirit is poured upon us from on high.” But the Holy Spirit’s anointing is a matter of *our* choice, *our* invitation. The Spirit will descend upon Israel only when she acknowledges her God and her Messiah.

But alas, until that time (marked prophetically by the Day of Atonement), Israel will find herself fruitless and forsaken, though not forgotten, by Yahweh. Ezekiel draws a direct comparison between Israel and the grapevine—once blessed but now (apparently) abandoned. **“Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard planted by the water, fruitful and full of branches by reason of abundant water. Its strong stems became rulers’ scepters. It towered aloft among the thick boughs. It was seen in its height with the mass of its branches....”** The maternal reference reminds us that Israel was characterized metaphorically as Yahweh’s “wife.” It’s a symbolic theme that Hosea (in particular) used to explain the relationship of Yahweh with His people—and their subsequent divorce in light of her unfaithfulness to Him.

“But the vine was plucked up in fury, cast down to the ground. The east wind dried up its fruit; they were stripped off and withered. As for its strong stem, fire consumed it. Now it is planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land. And fire has gone out from the stem of its shoots, has consumed its fruit, so that there remains in it no strong stem, no scepter for ruling. This is a lamentation and has become a lamentation.” (Ezekiel 19:10-14) One result, Ezekiel notes, of Israel’s refusal to bear fruit (love and trust) in Yahweh’s vineyard was that she would no longer even be able to rule over her own affairs as a nation. While that is patently obvious for the “ten lost tribes” of the northern kingdom, scattered by the Assyrians among the nations until this very day (though their identities are not lost to Yahweh), it is no less true of Judah, Israel’s southern kingdom. Even after their Babylonian captivity, after the Persians (who “inherited them” from the Chaldeans) had decreed that they could return to the Land if they wished, the Judeans were, from that point forward, never completely autonomous. There was always a gentile power wielding heavy-handed influence, if not outright suzerainty, over their affairs. And of course, since the Roman one-two punch of 70 AD and 135 AD, the Jews had no “official” home in the Land at all until 1948. From the original destruction of Jerusalem until Israeli independence, that’s 2,534 years of “no scepter for ruling.” And even now, unlike any other nation on the planet, the state of Israel is apparently considered by the United Nations to exist *at their pleasure*—perhaps because they brought it into being by partitioning Palestine. No other nation on earth lives with such a cloud looming over them (not to mention having a billion implacable enemies as next-door neighbors).

As Yahweh's symbolic "wife," Israel had been given everything. There was no logical reason she couldn't have borne fruit in the kingdom of God. But Hosea points out that she didn't have a clue who her Benefactor was: **"And she [Israel] did not know that it was I [Yahweh] who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal."** Israel took what Yahweh had provided, and squandered it on the worship of false gods. Like a broken record, I must once again reiterate that America too has been given unprecedented blessings, and we too have—to a great extent—used that bounty to honor false deities: power, wealth, pleasure, and pride. We should therefore not be surprised if the same thing happens to us that happened to Israel: **"Therefore I will take back My grain in its time, and My wine in its season, and I will take away My wool and My flax, which were to cover her nakedness."** Interesting symbology here: wool indicates work, while flax (the source of linen) speaks of grace. If Israel (or anybody else) would not honor Yahweh, He would remove *both* their undeserved, unearned blessings *and* their ability to solve their own problems as creative human beings, leaving them naked—vulnerable and unprotected. **"Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall rescue her out of My hand...."** Who would attack them in this defenseless state? Their "lovers," the very people who had been honored instead of Yahweh—in our case, socialists and Muslims.

"And I will put an end to all her mirth, her feasts, her new moons, her Sabbaths, and all her appointed feasts...." Wait a minute! Yahweh had *commanded* Israel to keep all of these ordinances. But in response to her faithlessness and fruitlessness, God was prepared to make it impossible to do what He'd told them to do. He had promised them as much in Deuteronomy 4:27-28. The same principle applies to Christians who unthinkingly assume they're honoring God through their man-ordained traditions and feast days, while ignoring what Yahweh actually said through His scriptures. I'm not talking about differences in style or shifts in cultural context; I'm talking about taking God at His word. When Yahshua says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," do we? When He says, "Do not resist an evil person, but turn the other cheek," can we honestly say we agree? Do we *really* love our fellow human beings as we do ourselves?

Remember the principle being taught here: if we do not "yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11), God reserves the right to remove from us the ability to do so. So the prophet concludes, **"And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees, of which she said, 'These are my wages, which my lovers have given me.' I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them."** (Hosea 2:8-12) Hosea harshly (though correctly) characterizes the unfaithful "wife" of Yahweh as a whore, a prostitute, who sold her favors to illicit "lovers" in exchange for what she considered valuable—orchards and vineyards. But the grapevine symbolizes mankind, and the fig tree (as we shall see) indicates Israel. So symbolically, what the whore/wife hoped to gain through her infidelity was (1) autonomy for herself,

and (2) peace and harmony with the surrounding nations. But there is no security outside of a familial relationship with Yahweh. Israel should have known that. Autonomy is the last thing one should wish for. And peace with people who are operating in league with the Adversary is at best an illusion. So by destroying the “wages” of unfaithful Israel, allowing her to be scattered among the nations (who were themselves to be “laid waste”) Yahweh was actually providing mercy (severe though it was) for His people. They would henceforth enjoy no shelter, no safety, no illusory prosperity. The world’s hatred would force them to band together—enforced holiness, as it were—until such a time as their estranged God would regather them into their own Land (a process that has now begun, but is by no means complete).

Although the collective animosity of the world against Israel has served to preserve their national identity through the better part of two millennial in exile, it doesn’t necessarily follow that Yahweh is happy with what the nations have done. When the time is right (and soon, I’m convinced) He will take the earth to task for their shabby treatment of his people, unfaithful though they were. Isaiah writes, **“The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left....”** The word translated “earth” sixteen times in this one chapter is *eretz*, which (as you no doubt know) can mean a lot of things: land, earth, a country or region, ground or soil, *The Land* (i.e., Israel), the surface of this planet (as opposed to heaven above it), or the people living upon it, etc. The definition of *eretz* is so broad, we must rely upon the context to determine the writer’s intended usage. Although it’s remotely possible that Isaiah had the impending Assyrian invasion of Ephraim in mind, it’s clear (to me, anyway) that the primary meaning intended by Yahweh was *the whole world*, planet earth. (For example, in verses 21-23, He speaks about punishing the kings—plural—of the earth, and even the sun and moon will be disgraced.) There is more to this than just Israel.

Beyond that, we can see the fulfillment of this curse beginning to come true before our very eyes. The earth *does* lie defiled under its inhabitants as never before; we *have* broken the covenant of trust with our Creator. True, we’re not “scorched” yet, but for the first time in man’s history, we have the means to make that happen: Pandora’s nuclear box got opened in 1945, and we’ve been fiddling with the contents ever since. More to the point, the first Trumpet judgment (Revelation 8:7) describes a plague that sounds precisely like all-out nuclear war. Just because the principle of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) kept the cold war cold for forty years, don’t assume the nukes will never be used. There are Muslims in the mix now, laboring under the lie that their god will reward them with perpetual sex and low-hanging fruit if they get killed trying to kill other people: all bets are off.

The nukes won't be deployed (in all-out war, anyway) until the Tribulation, the last seven years of Yahweh's program for Israel (see Daniel 9:24). God intends to use this time to right all the wrongs that have been perpetrated during the last age, and to give mankind one final chance to do the right thing. And once again, we see that the symbol of the grapevine has been recruited to inform us what sort of trouble we've gotten ourselves into. **"The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No more do they drink wine with singing. Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it."** (Isaiah 24:5-9) No more wine, women, and song: the time has come to sober up and pay the piper.

You may complain that Isaiah is a little short on specifics, and perhaps you'd be right. But what God lacks in prophetic detail (since after all, only His children are expected to understand what He's talking about), He makes up for with redundancy. Anything we need to know about our future is covered by many different prophets in many different ways. But the symbols are remarkably consistent. You want to know what will happen to mankind? Look at the symbol of the grapevine. John did: **"Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud One like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in His hand."** The one using the clouds as His throne is obviously the glorified Messiah, Yahshua. He's equipped with a sickle: something is about to get whacked. **"And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe....'"** The angel isn't telling Yahshua what to do, of course. He's merely announcing what He *will* do, and why. God's patience with mankind is at an end. The human race is ripe for judgment.

"So He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped." The vine (man) has been subjected to flood, blight, exile (call it "transplantation") and drought in the past, but he has never before been summarily "mowed down" by God. That's all about to change. **"Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle...."** Rarely has Yahweh used His angelic messengers to slay men, no matter how evil they were. The slaying of the 185,000 Assyrians before the gates of Jerusalem stands out as an exception to the rule (see Isaiah 37, II Kings 19). Judging from the scant historical evidence, it seems the only reason Yahweh would ever employ angels as soldiers against men is to protect the remnant of Israel from annihilation.

The remainder of the passage offers us enough clues to verify that this is indeed the case: **"And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the One who had the sharp sickle, 'Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.' So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and**

threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia." (Revelation 14:14-20) He's speaking of a specific climactic event, not a generalized display of divine righteous anger. The clues to what this is (and when) are provided in the details: Judgment is to be dispensed (1) outside the city, i.e., Jerusalem, (2) Yahshua the Messiah-King will be *personally* "treading upon" God's enemies, and (3) their blood will flow in prodigious quantities over the space of 1,600 stadia—about 180 miles, pretty much the entire north-south length of erez Israel. These facts leave us only one possible explanation: John has identified the event as the "battle" of Armageddon, coming at the very end of the Tribulation, in which the armies of the entire earth, under the banner of the Antichrist, have gathered to exterminate the Jews once and for all.

Yahweh, of course, has other ideas. In truth, "Armageddon" won't be much of a battle at all, just a one-sided slaughter. Isaiah prophesied the very same event: **"Who is this who comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, He who is splendid in His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength? 'It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.'"** It's the Savior, the Righteous One, Yahshua the Messiah. In Person. This "battle," then, takes place *after* the "second coming of Christ" but *before* the commencement of His Millennial kingdom. If my observations are correct, that would pin the timeline down to within the five days between the definitive Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles—between Yahshua's return to the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4, Acts 1:11) and His assumption of the throne of planet earth (Daniel 7:9). The prophet asks, **"Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like his who treads in the winepress?"** And the Messiah replies, **"I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me. I trod them in My anger and trampled them in My wrath. Their lifeblood spattered on My garments, and stained all My apparel. For the day of vengeance was in My heart, and My year of redemption had come. I looked, but there was no one to help; I was appalled, but there was no one to uphold. So My own arm brought Me salvation, and My wrath upheld Me. I trampled down the peoples in My anger. I made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth."** (Isaiah 63:1-6)

Alone? He will make war alone, but He won't *be* alone. Back in John's account, we see the introduction of the conquering King, accompanied by armies (plural) of redeemed saints: **"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The One sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war." His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but himself.**" This can be none other than Yahshua the Messiah, a.k.a. Jesus Christ. But He bears little resemblance to the first-advent Savior who offered Himself up as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world, if only we'd receive the gift. The time for exercising our free will has expired. Now is the time for humanity to reap what we have been sowing for the

past six thousand years. **“He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God.”** (See John 1:1 and 14, where that is precisely what He’s called.) The description of His blood-soaked apparel is a perfect match for Isaiah’s squishy narrative. **“And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following Him on white horses....”**

Who are these “armies of heaven”? Their linen garments indicate that their righteousness is imputed to them—it’s a picture of grace. And the white horses (like that upon which their Master rides) indicate that victory is a *fait accompli*, even if the battle hasn’t yet been engaged. These people must, then, be the previously raptured saints, the immortal believers from ages past, who now inhabit their Christ-like spiritual bodies. They are described as “armies” (plural) because they include not only the church age saints, but also those of pre-Christian Israelites (and gentiles) who worshiped the God of Israel—the God of Adam, Noah, Job, and Abraham. But they (*we*) aren’t here to assist the Messiah in fighting the Antichrist’s forces. We are, rather, here to watch, to witness first hand (as no one ever has before) the awesome power of God wielded by Yahweh’s Messiah: **“From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod [or scepter] of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on His thigh He has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”** (Revelation 19:11-16)

Until this moment, we will have necessarily taken a lot of things on faith. None of us (except for a few hundred eyewitnesses right after the resurrection) have ever actually seen the risen Christ. And *no one* has ever seen Him “rule the nations with a rod of iron.” We’re here at the last battle riding white horses because we believed Yahweh’s promises, because we trusted in Him to be as good as His word—not because He’s ever offered us concrete proof of His deity. The world ridiculed us, calling Yahweh “our imaginary friend,” or they claimed suzerainty for some other god, Allah perhaps. My point is that if Yahweh is indeed God, He cannot let things continue as they have for the past age indefinitely: He *must* bring things to the conclusion He has prophesied. Our paradigm of faith cannot persist forever.

But ask yourself this: is it conceivable that a holy and loving God would tell us what He would do, and how, without giving us any indication as to *when*? I think not. Consider this: **“When you come into the land that I give you, the land [*eretz*] shall keep a Sabbath to Yahweh. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to Yahweh. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. The Sabbath of the land shall provide food for you, for yourself and for your male and female slaves and for**

your hired servant and the sojourner who lives with you.” (Leviticus 25:2-6) Each time the “land” is specified here as the beneficiary of the Sabbath rest, the word used is *eretz*—which can also, in addition to the Promised Land of Israel, denote the entire earth. If the law of the Sabbath isn’t a prophecy of Yahweh’s timetable for our world (six thousand years of “working,” followed by one Millennium of “rest”), then I am of all men the most confused. But if I’m right, we’re almost out of time. Any way you calculate it, the sixth millennium of fallen man will draw to a close very, very soon.

At the risk of nitpicking, allow me to draw a subtle distinction between the “vine” in prophetic symbolism (mankind) and the “grapes” that grow upon it—the “fruit” of that vine. First, we saw the returning Christ taking a sharp sickle and hewing down the vine—reaping the earth. This can mean nothing less than the severe depletion of the world’s rebellious population. But then, almost immediately, the focus shifts to dealing with the clusters of grapes that had been growing on the vine, cutting them down, throwing them into the winepress of God’s wrath, and stomping the “lifeblood” out of them. What we’re seeing (perhaps) is that not only are the rebels removed from the earth in the process of God’s judgment, but the “fruit” of their labors is dealt with as well. That is, the mindset that characterized them, the attitudes that drove them, will no longer be found in the earth.

What are these attitudes? Paul lists them, though he himself admits the list is incomplete: **“Now the works of the flesh [set in contrast to the “fruit of the Spirit”] are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** (Galatians 5:19:21) I’d say “things like these” might include greed, a thirst for power, a lack of mercy, laziness, ingratitude, and self absorption—things that are characteristic of our age. Of course, all of these attributes are the result of refusing to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” The point is that when King Yahshua takes the throne of earth, He will purge the planet of its rebels. After the separation of the sheep from the goats (see Matthew 25:31-48), no one will be left alive whose life is characterized by these “works of the flesh.” Not only will the wild vine have been cut down, the grapes of wrath that grew upon it will have been crushed and poured out onto the ground as a drink offering.

And everyone left on earth—the branches growing from Yahshua’s vine—will bear instead the fruit of the Spirit, described by Paul as **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”** (Galatians 5:22-24) But such behavior won’t be forced in Christ’s

kingdom. It will require no effort at all. These attitudes will, rather, be as natural as breathing to the redeemed Millennial mortals. After all, Satan, our adversary and tempter, will be locked up. Neither he, his demonic horde, nor his human accomplices will be able to influence events on earth, as they have been for the past six thousand years. It's true that these citizens of the kingdom will still have their Adamic fallen natures: sin will still be possible, especially for the *offspring* of the initial generation of Millennial mortals (those who, like men today, have yet to choose to honor Yahweh). It will be like Eden—where sin was possible, but by no means inevitable. The good news is that the sort of cultural pressure that characterizes our pitiable world today will never again be brought to bear.

Remember, the Law of the Sabbath stated that **“You shall not...prune your vineyard. You shall not...gather the grapes of your undressed vine.”** In the context of our present symbol, I'd take that to mean that (1) the natural life span will be greatly extended during the Millennium (an idea that's confirmed elsewhere in scripture). That is, mankind—the vine—will not be cut back, for whatever reason. And (2) the “fruit” of the lives of those living under the scepter of Yahshua will no longer have much of an effect on their neighbors. What I mean is, enhancing or detracting from Yahweh's truth will be equally difficult, for everyone will be living under His personal care: we will know as we are known. Man's opinions will be no more effectual in illuminating the situation than a candle outdoors on a bright summer's day. As the prophet said, **“The government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** (Isaiah 9:6)

For all of scripture's use of the grapevine symbol to illustrate the coming judgment, there is an equally large body of prophecy stressing the vine's role in man's restoration. The Psalmist Asaph both looks back upon Israel's history and forward to her glorious destiny, and uses the vine to illustrate the transition. **“Restore us, O God of hosts; let Your face shine, that we may be saved! You brought a vine out of Egypt; You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it. It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea and its shoots to the River. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?... The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it...”** The Psalmist notes all the trouble Yahweh went to in planting Israel in the Land—from the Mediterranean Sea to the mountains, and all the way to the Euphrates River (just as He had promised Abraham), and he laments God's subsequent abandonment of His people. *Why*, he asks. He *knows* why, of course: Israel has

refused to bear fruit: the love, mercy, and justice that Yahweh required of His vineyard.

So Asaph pleads with God for restoration and salvation. **“Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that Your right hand planted, and for the Son whom You made strong for Yourself.”** His plea is based on the prophetic fact that the Messiah—the Son of God—would come from Israel (see Deuteronomy 18:15). **“They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of Your face!”** No doubt without realizing it, Asaph has confirmed that Israel would reject and crucify their Anointed One, which would earn them the well deserved wrath of Yahweh for two thousand years (see Hosea 6:1-2). Their salvation, however, would be found in the very object of their initial rejection: **“But let Your hand be on the man of Your right hand, the Son of man whom You have made strong for Yourself!”** He’s speaking, of course, of Yahshua the Messiah, who is now seated at the right hand of the Father (see Luke 22:69, Colossians 3:1). **“Then we shall not turn back from you. Give us life, and we will call upon Your name! Restore us, O Yahweh, God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!** (Psalm 80:7-19) Notice the order of events: first, “Give us life,” and *then* “we will call upon Your name.” It’s another Old Testament confirmation of the concept of grace. I’m sure Asaph was hoping that Israel would receive their Messiah (**“the Son of man whom You made strong for Yourself”**) when they first saw Him; but it was not to be. As Israel had learned through the Levitical sacrifices, life for the guilty (us) could only be secured through the death of an innocent one—the innocent One—the Messiah. Neither Israel nor anybody else could be restored, saved, or empowered to call upon the name of Yahweh if that didn’t happen.

Zechariah reports fundamentally the same thing. **“Thus says Yahweh of hosts: I am jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I am jealous for her with great wrath.”** “Jealousy” in Hebrew parlance indicates zeal for what belongs to you. Thus the enthusiastic fervor of Yahweh toward Israel is matched only by the depth of His anger at her rebellions. **“Thus says Yahweh: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of Yahweh of hosts, the holy mountain....”** He speaks of His “return” as if it had already happened, for in God’s mind, these prophecies are a *fait accompli*. The form Yahweh will take when He “return to Zion” will be that of the glorified Messiah, Yahshua: this is a second-advent prophecy; it doesn’t apply to Yahshua’s first-century sojourn among us because He never “dwelled” in Jerusalem.

Our “vine” symbol reveals a striking difference between the Israel who rejected Christ and the remnant who will (finally) receive Him as her Messiah: **“For there shall be a sowing of peace. The vine shall give its fruit, and the ground shall give its produce, and the heavens shall give their dew. And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. And as you have been a byword of cursing among the**

nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so will I save you, and you shall be a blessing.” (Zechariah 8:2-3, 12-13) Not only will Israel and Judah be reunited (see Ezekiel 37), but their national character will be transformed from one of cursing, exile, and barrenness to fruitfulness, prosperity, and peace: **“The vine shall give its fruit.”** All’s well that ends well.

The restoration of Israel is not unique, however. The same sort of thing is within the reach of anyone who honors Yahweh. **“Blessed is everyone who fears Yahweh, who walks in His ways! You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands. You shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house. Your children will be like olive shoots around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears Yahweh.”** (Psalm 128:1) Yahweh has defined temporal blessing here: “you shall enjoy the fruit of your labors.” This is set in direct contrast to “cursings” passages such as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, in which a lack of reverence for Yahweh would result in one’s labors being frustrating and fruitless, falling victim to blight, pestilence, and sword. Yahweh then describes the ideal: **“Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house.”** It’s the golden rule all over again: He desires for us the same thing He desires for Himself. That is, God’s “wife” is Israel; Christ’s “bride” is the church. However you state it, Yahweh wants us to be fruitful. If we are, our “offspring” will be like “olive shoots”—the place where the Spirit of God can be found. I can think of no greater blessing.

Potential blessings and cursings are again in view in this admonition from Malachi: **“Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house. And thereby put Me to the test, says Yahweh of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says Yahweh of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says Yahweh of hosts.”** (Malachi 3:10-12) To my knowledge, this is the only time in the Bible where God *instructs* us to put Him to the test. The tithe (Hebrew *’asar*—literally “tenth”) is greatly misunderstood today. It was to be given to the tribe of Levi in exchange for their having received no inheritance in the Land. If you do the math, each of the twelve tribes (including the double portion of Joseph—Ephraim and Manasseh) received their own lands, plus 8.3% of what would have been Levi’s share, to hold in trust for them. (That’s thirteen shares, divided twelve ways.) God instructed that the produce of that 8.3% of the lands they held to be given back to Levi as the tithe, plus 1.7% of what “their own” increase had been, for a total of ten percent. So the Levites were to receive only what was rightfully theirs anyway, plus less than two percent of the *increase* (not the principle) from everybody else. Bear in mind that the Levites were to provide for Israel’s poor from “their share,” and they were also to render a tenth of their tenth to their brothers the priests—one clan (Aaron’s) within one family (Kohath’s) of the tribe of Levi.

So the principle of the tithe is: “give back to God *everything* He has entrusted to you (since it isn’t yours anyway), plus a tiny percentage of whatever increase you’ve enjoyed because of His blessing.” Suddenly the parables of Yahshua concerning the talents (e.g. Matthew 25:14-30) and His statement about rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and unto God that which is God’s, have come to life. It’s another test in the schoolroom of life: we are being asked to identify anything in our lives that belongs to God, anything that we are holding for Him “in trust.”

Think of it this way: if you have a safety deposit box at a bank, what you put into it doesn’t belong to the bank—it’s yours. Say (as long as we’re speaking in hypotheticals) that you’ve got a ten-pound ingot of gold in your box. If it goes up in value, that increase belongs to you—*all of it*. None of it belongs to the bank, even though they’re holding it for safe keeping, at your request. At the same time, let’s say you have a savings account at that same bank. You deposit money with them, with the understanding that they are going to lend it out at interest, and in return, they pay you interest—a rate of return somewhat less than they hope to make on it, of course. In the case of Israel’s tithe, the interest rate you’re getting is 1.7%, by mutual agreement. Now you should have a feel for Yahweh’s principle of the tithe, for “you” have been playing His part. “The bank,” meanwhile, is playing *your* part. How would you feel if the bank broke into your safe deposit box and shaved off a couple of ounces of gold from your ingot every time the price went up, or if they refused to pay you your pitiful little interest rate on your savings account? You wouldn’t be very happy with them, would you? Now you know how Yahweh feels when we withhold His “tithe.”

But if the bank (that’s *you*) does its job properly, everything remains safe and prosperous. The client (that’s Yahweh) will continue to do business with you, deposit more “valuables” with you, and so forth. Or as Malachi put it, **“Your vine in the field shall not fail to bear.”** That is, the people in your care will tend to be fruitful, for Yahweh will provide His protection over you and yours—*if* you honor Him with your tithes as a matter of trust and responsibility. As in the “bank” metaphor, both parties (God and man) benefit from a relationship based on mutual trust. It’s important to remember who’s in charge, however. The client, Yahweh, holds all the cards. He can take His business elsewhere if He chooses to. And He’s got such limitless financial clout, He can precipitate a “run on the bank” if they (i.e., we) have been mishandling His affairs.

All of the accounts will be settled when Yahshua reigns on the throne of planet earth. As we have seen, some of the vines—the unfruitful ones—will be lopped off and thrown into the fire. But the faithful, fruitful remnant, those who respond to Yahweh’s attentions, will thrive under His rule. **“It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of Yahweh shall be established as the**

highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills.” Mountains or hills are symbolic of power, of authority. The “high ground” can be defended against all enemies. **“And peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths....’”** Here we’re given a glimpse of how Israel will relate to the gentile nations during the Millennium. Contrary to one popular myth, redeemed humanity will *not* all be absorbed into Israel. Nor will Israel be a mere euphemism for all of the world’s redeemed. Yahweh will maintain a distinction between Israel and the nations, though both are greatly blessed. As has been the case for thirty-five hundred years now, this distinction is one of function, not of favor—of job description, not of importance in God’s plan.

And for Christians who have misread Paul and have concluded that the Torah is obsolete, God announces, **“For out of Zion shall go forth the law [*torah*], and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off.”** Read that carefully: both the “Torah” and the “word of Yahweh” are, in the very next sentence, referred to by the personal pronoun “He.” Who? Yahshua the Messiah, the Word made flesh, who dwelled among us as God’s servant, and will again dwell among us as King, reigning over the whole earth from Zion. The result of His judgments shall be perfect peace: **“And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”**

What does any of this have to do with grapevines? Read on: **“But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of Yahweh of hosts has spoken.”** (Micah 4:1-4) Because Christ will bring real peace to the world, enemies will be a thing of the past. To “sit under your vine” is to be at peace with all mankind; to “sit under your fig tree” is to joyfully prosper under the Messiah’s Millennial government, whose throne is in Israel. Just because it hasn’t happened yet—just because it looks utterly impossible—don’t assume this won’t happen. The eventual restoration of Israel under the reign of her Messiah is the single most often repeated prophecy in the entire Bible.

FIG TREE

☞ 3.3.10 ☞

Israel

We concluded our last section with a passage (Micah 4:4) comparing the “vine” with the “fig tree,” and I noted that this taught us something about parallel relationships (peace, in this case) with all mankind (the vine) and Israel (the fig tree). Actually, this concept (“every man sitting under his vine and under his fig tree”) is a rather common Hebrew figure of speech. Yahweh often inspires His prophets to juxtapose the vine and the fig tree in their prophecies. It is our job to ferret out any underlying symbolic significance that might be latent in these passages, and apply them to our lives. At this point in our narrative, of course, I have yet to establish that “fig trees” signify Israel. I will do that presently (although I’ll admit right here at the beginning that this particular symbol is never overtly defined in scripture). But first, let us examine a few other scriptural instances in which the vine (representing mankind) is spoken of in parallel with the fig tree, with an eye toward determining if my initial conclusion (the comparison of Israel with the nations) will remain valid. Note that, as is often the case, the symbols are not *only* symbols, but also have a literal component: there were real fig trees and grapevines in Israel’s experience (which is what made the symbol comprehensible, of course).

The first time we see the phrase, the subject is the stability of Solomon’s reign—the result of his father David’s reverence for Yahweh. **“And he [Solomon] had peace on all sides around him. And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.”** (I Kings 4:24-25) The peace and security that characterized his reign were both internal and external. First, peace had been achieved among the nations bordering Israelite lands. They either counted themselves as willing allies in deference to the character of his father David, or they were under Israel’s suzerainty, paying tribute to Israel’s royal dynasty. And internally? Note that Judah and Israel were, even then, spoken of as two different, though allied, political entities—something God never intended. The southern and northern components had been united under David (as they will again be under Christ), and Solomon had enjoyed the fruit of that political inheritance. But upon Solomon’s death (as a result of the spiritual compromises of his old age), Israel split apart from Judah, and they began living separate—sometimes adversarial—lives.

So alas, most of scripture’s mentions of vines and fig trees together are negative in tone—the converse of the characterization of Solomon’s blessed reign. Instead of the gentile nations and Israel dwelling in peace and prosperity

side by side, we far more often see God’s wrath being poured out—on both of them. But there are variations on the theme to consider, nuances that conspire to aid our understanding. For instance, the Psalmist recounts Yahweh’s dealings with Egypt at the time of the exodus. **“He struck down their [Egypt’s] vines and fig trees, and shattered the trees of their country.”** (Psalm 105:33) You may protest, “God didn’t dispense His wrath upon the Israelites, only the Egyptians.” True, but consider this: when Yahweh was through with Pharaoh, the Israelites’ Egyptian experience was a thing of the past. They couldn’t have gone back to their old life of benign bondage even if they had wanted to (as some actually did). Yahweh had burned that bridge behind them. “Striking down Egypt’s fig trees” is thus a euphemism for destroying the “life” that Israel had experienced in Egypt—a life of sustainable hopelessness, of cultural malaise, of miserable normalcy, and of familiar, comfortable slavery. Whatever they would experience in the wilderness and in the Promised Land, it wasn’t *that*.

But Israel’s apostasy and idolatry within the Land would eventually earn *them* Yahweh’s judgment as well. And this is where the vine and fig tree metaphor becomes all too commonplace. **“When I would gather them [Judah], declares Yahweh, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.”** (Jeremiah 8:13) The problem, he says, is fruitlessness. Israel—the fig tree—was bearing no fruit. It was therefore inevitable that the vine of mankind would be found barren as well. It was common practice to plant fig trees within vineyards (see the Luke 13 passage below), presumably for shade and protection against wind. If the fig trees didn’t perform their function, the grapevines would suffer. The lesson: if Israel didn’t present Yahweh’s plan and promise to the world as He had instructed them to do, all of mankind would be diminished by their failure.

So Yahweh was “hard” on Israel, encouraging them (though not *forcing* them) to heed His word, using such tactics as this: **“I struck you with blight and mildew. Your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locust devoured. Yet you did not return to Me,” declares Yahweh.**” (Amos 4:9) Even before they entered the Land, Moses had been careful to inform Israel—notably in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28—that if they suffered adversity, it was because they had failed to keep Yahweh’s commandments. There was a cause-and-effect relationship between disobedience and disaster. So when blight and mildew and locusts struck, the first place they should have looked for answers was into the mirror: their own refusal to heed God’s instructions had brought the nation its “natural” calamities—just as Yahweh had promised them. Prayer and repentance (see II Chronicles 7:14) were in order. But whether out of rebellion, ignorance, or denial, Israel refused to admit their guilt before God. Thus the symbolic aspects of the literal plagues came into play: Israel (the fig tree) was no longer able to bless the

vineyards (mankind). And the fruit of their olive trees (the Spirit of Yahweh) had been made unavailable to them, as a direct result of their apostasy.

Israel eventually forgot that these good things had been a gift to them from Yahweh—something He had told them over and over again. In their delusion, they had gotten the notion that their false Babylonian-derived gods, like Ba'al, Molech, and Asherah, had supplied them and protected them. So Yahweh set the record straight: **“And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees, of which she said, ‘These are my wages, which my lovers have given me.’ I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them.”** (Hosea 2:12) The principle holds true to this day: the gifts of God which we refuse to attribute to Him with thanksgiving can just as easily be taken away. Nor is the lesson germane to Israel alone. America (or any other nation) would do well to heed the same truth.

“Blight, mildew, and locusts” were early steps in Yahweh’s program to get Israel’s attention. Later, and more drastic, steps would involve foreign invaders—attack, followed by exile (see Deuteronomy 28:52, 64). God knew that Israel wasn’t stupid. And moreover, they had the Torah to guide them: they had no excuse for ignorance. So why were they so unresponsive to His more gentle reminders that they weren’t exactly in the center of His will anymore? Could it be that they were *drunk*? **“Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.”** Both grapes and figs were used in the making of intoxicating beverages. **“For a nation has come up against My land, powerful and beyond number. Its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste My vine and splintered My fig tree. It has stripped off their bark and thrown it down. Their branches are made white....”** It matters not whether Joel (whose date is uncertain—probably eighth century B.C.) is referring to Assyria, Babylon, Rome, or even to the coming Antichrist. The lesson is the same: sober up, repent, and seek Yahweh’s truth. **“The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.”** (Joel 1:5-7, 12) When the fig tree and the vine languish (that is, when Israel and the humanity that depends on her are suffering God’s wrath because of their rebellions), nothing is as it should be.

Jeremiah is a bit more specific as he warns Judah about the threat of Babylon—whom God Himself would raise up for the purpose of chastising Israel. **“Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares Yahweh. It is an enduring nation. It is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say.”** According to Genesis 11, the divergence of human language began in Babylon (i.e., Babel) only a few generations after the flood. And it is not without irony that Babylon was subsequently recruited as a universal symbol for systematic false worship, manifesting itself in religious, commercial, and political permutations, all of which will fall before the great day

of Yahweh. **“Their quiver is like an open tomb. They are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food. They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds.”** All symbology aside, this is precisely what Moses had warned them about in Deuteronomy 28. **“They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees. Your fortified cities in which you trust they shall beat down with the sword.”**

(Jeremiah 5:15-17) Babylon’s conquests encompassed much more than just Judah. Their military targets also included Assyria, Aram, Ammon, Moab, Tyre, Anatolia, Philistia, and Egypt—virtually everyone in Judah’s sphere of contact—the shoots of its vine, as it were. And Babylon most certainly “ate up” the fig tree of Judah, taking successively larger bites between 598 and 586 B.C., when they finally destroyed Jerusalem and its temple.

Almost a century and a half prior to this, the Assyrians had attempted to persuade King Hezekiah to surrender Jerusalem to them by promising—at least temporarily—the same sort of peace and prosperity that Israel had enjoyed in Solomon’s day. King Sennacherib’s Rabshakeh (i.e., his chief cupbearer, negotiator, and enforcer) told the Judeans, **“Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria: ‘Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land.’”** (II Kings 18:31-32, cf. Isaiah 36:16) Judah had been far from guiltless during the preceding centuries, but under Hezekiah’s leadership, they had repented and restored the worship of Yahweh. One had to wonder, though: was this repentance too little, too late? Had Assyria been recruited by Yahweh to punish Judah for her past sins, as had already transpired with the Northern Kingdom? Hezekiah didn’t really know at this point, but he had cringed at the Assyrians’ blatant blasphemies as they declared that Yahweh had no power to save them. But the prophet Isaiah finally delivered a word from Yahweh: **“Don’t fall for it—I will deliver you.”** (See Isaiah 37:6-7.) We all know what happened: the angel of Yahweh came and slaughtered 185,000 Assyrian troops in one night as they besieged Jerusalem, prompting Sennacherib to pack up and go back home—where he was assassinated by his own sons.

There is a striking contrast between what happened to Jerusalem when the Assyrians threatened, and later, when the Babylonians did. In the first instance, the Israelites were told to trust in Yahweh and wait for His deliverance. But later, such prophets as Jeremiah actually urged Judah to submit to the chastisement of Yahweh by surrendering to the Babylonians. The lesson (one of them) is that Yahweh is patient, but He is also on a schedule: all of His plans must come to fruition, in His own time and in His own way. If we as a nation—*any* nation—have turned our back on His word, we will suffer the consequences, though not until He is good and ready. But as faithful *individuals* within those apostate nations, our trust in Yahweh is always efficacious—even in the midst of well-

deserved national trial: **“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in Yahweh. I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Yahweh, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer’s. He makes me tread on my high places.”** (Habakkuk 3:17-19) Even as we witness the ebb and flow of our national fortunes, we can always count on the salvation of Yahweh. As Yahweh encouraged the good king Jehoshaphat, **“Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of Yahweh on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed.”** (II Chronicles 20:17)

This “salvation of Yahweh” has a name; or should I say, *is* a name: Joshua, Jesus—the English transliteration of the Hebrew name alternately rendered Yahowsha’, Yahuwshuwa’, Yahushua, Yahshua, Yəhowsu’a, Yāhowshuwa’, Yāhowshu’a, Y^əhowshu’a, Yehoshua, Yēhōšūā’, Yeshua, Yahoshua, Yeshuwa’, or Y’shua in our standard lexicons—the name I’ve been rendering Yahshua. There are as many as ten individuals who bore this name in scripture, and several of them were pressed into service as “types” of the definitive man named “Yahweh is Salvation,” the one the world knows as Jesus of Nazareth. One example: **“Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign....”** Joshua was the High Priest who, with Zerubbabel (the civil governor), was charged with leading the Babylonian exiles returning to Jerusalem in rebuilding the city and the temple. As the High Priest (and one not so coincidentally named Joshua—the same name our Savior would bear), he is clearly meant to be seen as a type of Christ. The “friends who sit before you” are priests of lesser rank, who are in turn symbolic of us believers—people who follow Yahshua, our “High Priest,” we whose function it is to intercede between man and God. I find it fascinating that they are described not as Joshua’s staff, supporters, or underlings (which they were), but as *rea’*—friends, companions, fellows, intimate and affectionate associates.

The “sign” of which Zechariah speaks is explained next: **“Behold, I will bring My servant the Branch.”** The “Branch” is clearly a euphemism for Yahshua the Messiah—the very One who causes the priests sitting before Joshua to be “a sign.” Confirmation is plentiful: see for instance Jeremiah 33:15 (which identifies Him as King David’s descendant), Zechariah 6:12 (where “the Branch” is predicted to build the temple of Yahweh), and Isaiah 4:2 (a passage that defines the Branch as belonging to (or extending from) Yahweh, and then describes Him as “beautiful” and “glorious,” imagery uniquely descriptive of the Feast of Tabernacles, itself prophetic of the Millennial reign of Christ). **“For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares Yahweh of hosts....”** We are reminded that Yahshua is our rock, the stone that the builders rejected, the One who sees perfectly.

“And I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.” What day would that be? It can be none other than the definitive Day of Atonement, prophetic of the national awakening of Israel to the identity of their Messiah—accompanied with the “affliction of soul” and the appropriate response to their King (both of which concepts are included in the Torah’s requirement, expressed in the Hebrew verb *anah*.) This day will precede the commencement of Yahshua’s Kingdom by a mere five days (between Tishri 10 and Tishri 15), during which time the “Battle” of Armageddon will be waged, and Satan will be bound in chains and consigned to the lake of fire. **“In that day, declares Yahweh of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree.”** (Zechariah 3:8-10) On the Day of Atonement, the state of blessing that had been enjoyed under the reign of Solomon will be reinstated. Peace will prevail within Israel and throughout the world. It is a peace that will persist unabated throughout the next thousand years.

The image of the fig tree, then, is certainly compatible with Israel, although we haven’t yet established any direct scriptural association. The clearest link we have, in fact, was extremely hard to see before the middle of the twentieth century. There are hundreds upon hundreds of prophecies in the Bible suggesting, implying, or outright declaring that Israel will be restored to her own God-given land, and that she will be led by the Messiah. The temple will be rebuilt, peace will reign, and the nations will look to Zion for guidance—admittedly a far cry from what we experience today. Israel *must* be dwelling in the Land of Promise for all of this to take place. But Israel—the Jews—were driven to the brink of extinction, not once but many times during their long exile from Yahweh’s shelter. Hitler’s Europe was merely the most blatant example. Who would have dreamt that a mere three years after the Nazi Holocaust was brought to a merciful though belated end, Israel would be back in the Land as a sovereign political entity for the first time in thousands of years, independent if not quite secure within her borders?

It was only on May 14, 1948 that this parable from Yahshua’s Olivet Discourse came into focus: **“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.”** Israel was as “dead” as a fig tree in winter. As Ezekiel put it in chapter 37, it was a “valley of dry bones.” But in 1948, it put forth its first tentative foliage, bright and hopeful, though surrounded by mortal enemies. The “summer” is the season of growth, of bearing fruit, a time concluded by the harvest. So notice how Yahshua ties the sign of the fig tree (Israel) to *His own* impending return: **“So also, when you see all**

these things [not just the fig tree, but a whole range of signs heralding the last days, most of which are recurring realities today], **you know that He is near, at the very gates....**" Yahshua had (in Matthew 24:30) defined "He" as Himself—the "Son of Man" who "will appear in heaven," that is, "coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory," a phrase I'd take to indicate the rapture of the Church (because He will appear at the end of the Tribulation not "in the air" but rather on the ground—on the Mount of Olives, as indicated in Zechariah 14:4).

Summer doesn't last forever. Yahshua tied the budding of the fig tree to a time frame: **"Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."** (Matthew 24:32-35, cf. Mark 13:28-31, Luke 21:29-33) People have tried for centuries to pin down the length of a generation to some specific duration of time, though it's never defined in scripture. I'll settle for this: a generation is, *at the outside*, the length of time encompassed by the life of its oldest member. In personal terms, let me put it this way: I was a toddler when the fig tree budded—I was two years old when Israel was reborn as a nation. I therefore expect to still be around (barring any unforeseen inconveniences, like premature death) when the rapture takes place, waiting and watching like an alert and faithful steward of Yahweh's household. Not that the timing really matters to me, since "the dead in Christ will rise first." But it would—you'll have to admit—be extremely cool to be a living participant.

We saw with the grapevine (mankind) that the issue with God is whether or not any fruit is forthcoming. This is true of the fig tree—Israel—as well, as was demonstrated by Yahshua on Tuesday of passion week. **"In the morning, as He was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once."** Mark explains that "at once" meant the very next day, Wednesday morning. (The verb here is in the aorist tense, meaning that no statement is being made as to the *completeness* of the action, only that it has actually occurred.) **"When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' And Jesus answered them, 'Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.'" (Matthew 21:18-22; cf. Mark 11:20-24)**

Now that we have been introduced to the concept that the fig tree is a symbol representing Israel, we can see why Yahshua was so harsh with this fig tree—even though, as was noted in Mark 11:13, it couldn't really have been expected to have any fruit on it this early in the season. He knew, even if His disciples didn't yet comprehend it, that Israel *as a nation* would reject His offer of salvation and His claims of God's Anointing (that is, that He was the promised Messiah,

Yahweh in flesh). There's wisdom in Paul's admonition to Timothy to be ready in season *and* out of season. Before the week was out, Israel would crucify Him, place His body in a borrowed tomb, and watch incredulously as He rose under His own power from the dead. None of this took God by surprise, of course. He *knew* that Israel wasn't ready for their Messiah. That's why He placed the Day of Atonement *sixth* in order of the Levitical convocations, not fourth. (The fourth and fifth of these seven appointments with God—the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Trumpets—are the bookends of the church age, that “great parenthesis” in the plan of God, the hiatus separating the 69th from the 70th week of the sweeping Daniel 9:24-27 prophecy defining Israel's destiny.)

So Israel—the fig tree—would remain withered and fruitless during the entire age of the ekklesia. Yahshua's other example of prayer is revealing as well: He speaks of a mountain (figuratively, a place of strength and security) being “taken up and thrown into the sea.” The “sea” is a common scriptural metaphor for the gentile nations (as the “land” indicates Israel). Without actually saying so, He has intimated that Israel (who could have been totally secure in Yahweh's care) would be dispersed among the gentile nations. The “Diaspora” already existed in the first century, of course, the lingering legacy of the Babylonian conquest six hundred years previously. But under Titus (in 70 A.D.) and Hadrian (in 135), the expulsion of Israel from the Land was made total and complete. Their national identity wouldn't reemerge until the mid-twentieth century.

Yahshua used the whole scenario to teach on the power of prayer—something He had just demonstrated concerning the fruitless fig tree with visibly shocking efficacy. But Mark adds this notice: **“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”** (Mark 11:25) Besides the obvious admonition for us—to forgive others as we have been forgiven by God—this tells us something about Yahweh's character and plan as well: He does not intend to hold His grudge against the nation Israel of Israel—well deserved though it may be—forever. When the church age is over, there will still be two holy convocations left to play out on His prophetic calendar. The Day of Atonement will mark Israel's national repentance and restoration (after two thousand years of God's “tearing and striking” them—see Hosea 6:1-2). And the Feast of Tabernacles—the last of the series—will celebrate Yahshua's thousand-year kingdom, His reign over the entire earth from His “headquarters” in Jerusalem.

Let us then revisit a parable in which the fig tree plays a starring role: **“And He told this parable: A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on**

manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” (Luke 13:6-9) The fig tree (Israel—specifically in its role as Yahweh’s chosen people) is planted in the midst of God’s vineyard (mankind). The Owner (Yahweh) expects to find fruit—but not the same kind—on both the vines and the fig tree. As He did several times during the Wilderness wanderings, God asks (rhetorically), “What’s the point of keeping this thing around if it doesn’t produce anything useful?” And just as Moses pleaded for mercy for His people, the parable’s “vinedresser” (who I’d see as Christ) continues to intercede for Israel: “Miracles of deliverance and provision have not turned their hearts to You yet, it’s true, but it’s a temporary situation. If we subject them to a little adversity—digging around their roots and covering them in manure—surely they will begin to produce fruit for Your pleasure. They just need to be reminded of what You’ve done for them.” Unlike a real vineyard owner and his vinedresser, of course, both Yahweh and His Messiah *know* that Israel will sprout not only leaves (see Matthew 24:32) but will also bear a bumper crop of figs. Their restored and fruitful future is prophesied hundreds of times in scripture.

Ask the average man on the street what “religion” is, and he’ll tell you that it’s a set of beliefs, rituals, and practices defining what one group or another thinks about their “god” (or gods), and how to reach out to him (or them, or her, or it)—or something like that. Since no god, real or imaginary, is in the habit of making his presence known in any tangible way these days, religion necessarily entails faith: we behave a certain way because we *believe* something to be right or wrong, true or false. The rub is that what we believe—what we have faith in—isn’t born in a vacuum. It either emanates from God Himself (if He’s real) or (if He’s not) from some other source, either derivative or imaginary. Religion, then, is the process and practice of mankind defining god (that is, the one to whom they feel allegiance is due, whether an external deity, an *internal* deity—oneself—or nothing at all). Religion seeks to determine who god is, and to codify what He wants from us.

But if there actually *is* a God—a supreme being responsible for our creation and destiny—this process is entirely backward. We shouldn’t be trying to define Him at all; our opinions have absolutely no bearing on what He might or might not want us to do. Our *only* criteria should be what He actually said and did in our world. In practical terms nowadays, that entails paying careful attention to our scriptures. If you’re a Jew, that means the Torah, Psalms, and Prophets. If you’re a Christian, you’d add the New Testament to the Hebrew canon. If you’re a Muslim, you’d have to follow the *Qur’an* (which is a bit of a problem, because

it's a contradictory and incomprehensible —not to mention bloodthirsty— *political* manifesto). But that's about it for “scriptures” that claim to be the “word of god.” Other well-known examples of “scripture”—the Hindus’ *Rig Veda* and *Bhagavad Gita*, the Buddhists’ *Sutras*, *Suttas*, and *Shastras*, the *Analects* of Confucius, *The Book of Mormon*, Islam’s *Hadith* and the *Sunnah*, and even the Jewish *Talmud* don’t really purport to be God’s word at all, but are rather human wisdom offered up for human enlightenment: the very definition of religion.

The reason I bring all of this up here is that the very first recorded example of “religion” involved a fig tree. The scene: the Garden of Eden. **“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate....”** They had received very little in the way of instruction from God at this point. Just “Be fruitful and multiply,” “Exercise dominion over God’s creation,” and “Don’t eat the fruit from that one tree in the middle of the garden.” So let’s see: they had not borne children yet, they’d let the serpent exercise dominion over them, and then they violated the one specific prohibition that God had given them. So with a record of zero wins and three losses, they found themselves estranged from the God they knew.

“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” The innocent animals they managed had no idea they were naked, and neither did Adam and Eve, until this moment. But now, guilt had precipitated shame, and shame cried out to be covered up. But how? Suddenly reticent to appear before God (who was, ironically, the only One who could actually help them with their new problem), they performed the world’s first recorded religious rite: they tried to cover their sin by means of their own invention: **“And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths....”** All they *knew* was that they were naked. From this bit of information, they extrapolated a whole series of questionable religious precepts: (1) Being naked (which was how God had made them, by the way) was “bad.” (2) They could repair the guilt they felt in their souls by covering their physical bodies. (3) They could make suitable clothing out of any material that was handy. (4) Their own labor was necessary: they did the sewing. (5) They presumed their shame had something to do with their sexual identities, so that’s the only thing they bothered covering up. (Seems to me, if they’d been thinking logically, they would have made bags to cover their heads, since their eyes, mouths, and brains had gotten into this mess. *Mittens* would have made more sense than loincloths.)

But Adam and Eve soon found out that covering their bodies did nothing to diminish their guilt. The minute God showed up, they knew they were still naked before Him. **“And they heard the sound of Yahweh, God, walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Yahweh, God,**

among the trees of the garden.” Eve could have put on a full Muslim head-to-toe burqa and it wouldn’t have mattered: she would *still* have been exposed and shamed before Yahweh. There was no place to hide, and they finally realized it. **“But Yahweh, God, called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’”** (Genesis 3:6-11) One wonders if Adam and Eve had even made the connection between eating the forbidden fruit and feeling naked and guilty at this point. If they hadn’t before this, they surely must have when Yahweh drew this picture for them. It wasn’t the fruit or the tree that changed things, of course. It was their disobedience to God’s clear command that had altered their perception of themselves, the world they lived in, and the God who had made it all.

God didn’t dispute the idea that their guilty bodies now needed covering, though I suspect that clothing was intended as much a symbol of how we appear before Him as anything else—something we’ll explore in detail in a future chapter. At this point, He merely wanted Adam and Eve to understand that fig leaves weren’t suitable as coverings for sin because they implied that man could work his way back to God—and he can’t. So Yahweh implemented a proper solution, one prophetic of His ultimate solution to man’s predicament: **“And Yahweh, God, made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”** (Genesis 3:21) The point, of course, is that innocent animals had to die in order to cover the shame of the guilty humans. It’s not fair; it may even seem cruel. But it’s reality: nothing short of a blood sacrifice is adequate for the task.

This is the Bible’s very first depiction of grace: the innocent being sacrificed to atone for the sins of the guilty. Our parents still had a choice to make, however: they could either accept the gift and put on the clothing Yahweh had made, or they could insist on continuing to do things their own way—practicing their religion, as it were. Note several distinct differences between Yahweh’s solution and theirs: (1) With God’s remedy for sin, innocent blood was shed: the animal who knew no sin gave his life so that our trespasses could be put out of sight of God. It may have seemed “too easy” for Adam and Eve, but I assure you, the animal found it to be nothing of the sort. (2) Our parents weren’t allowed to make their own clothing: God Himself did it. In the same way, we can do nothing to effect our own salvation beyond accepting the gift. (3) The clothing God made proved to be infinitely superior to the scratchy, shriveling fig leaves Adam and Eve first tried. Yahweh does all things well. (It puts a whole new spin on the phrase “Designer fashion.”) Fortunately, Adam and Eve chose wisely, opting to abandon their fig leaf skivvies in favor of God’s opulent substitute.

How does all of this mesh with our “working theory” that the fig tree symbolizes Israel? Obviously, Israel wasn’t around yet when all of this transpired. But the dichotomy we see here between a relationship with Yahweh and a religion designed to circumvent that relationship is clearly in evidence. If you think about it, that’s the same issue with which Israel—God’s chosen people—struggled from their earliest days forward. Even Abraham, the friend of God and progenitor of the Israelites, fell into the trap of “religion” now and then—most notably in the Hagar affair—following his own plan instead of the one God had revealed to him. In fact, Abraham was over a hundred years old when he finally came to the realization that he needed to trust Yahweh implicitly and without reservation. Blessed is the person who figures out the importance of reliance upon Yahweh at a young age.

There is a natural correlation between industriousness and prosperity, and Solomon paralleled that truth with an observation linking loyalty and honor: **“Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who guards his master will be honored.”** (Proverbs 27:18) In symbolic terms, we might paraphrase that, “Whoever supports Israel will benefit by virtue of Yahweh’s undying promises to her (e.g. Genesis 12:3), and whoever honors Israel’s God will be honored in return (see Matthew 10:32-33).

That being said, the Torah points out that before we may enjoy the fruits of our labors as we “tend” the fig tree, we must trust God. This isn’t an occasion for instant gratification, like a cash transaction at your local 7-Eleven. There has to be a hiatus between our obedience and the blessings that flow from it—a necessary corollary to the principle of free will. **“When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten.”** At first, we must simply trust God, relying on His promise that the good fruit from this tree will be forthcoming in His good time. Three is the number of accomplishment: we *will* see Yahweh’s will accomplished in our world—if we don’t get greedy or impatient. **“And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to Yahweh.”** An equally counterintuitive precept is that the entire fourth year’s fruit crop is to be set aside for Yahweh’s use. In theocratic Israel, this portion would have gone to the Levites and priests. But the principle is established for us as well—“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all of life’s necessities will be provided to you” (see Matthew 6:33). The number four indicates God’s design for the earth: we are to honor Him before we honor ourselves. **“But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, to increase its yield for you: I am Yahweh your God.”** (Leviticus 19:23-25) Five, as I noted previously, is the number of grace. Our “trees” will render their fruit if we will but accept it as a gift from God—in His time, and on His terms. And it may (or may not) be significant that the fifth *millennium* after Abraham’s faithful life will be defined

by the thousand-year reign of His descendant, Yahshua the Messiah. The sweet fruit of God's "fig tree" will at last be available to us.

The whole point of grace is that it's something Yahweh provides for us, not something we can work to procure for ourselves (in short: religion). This idea shows up (in a way) in a parable we've visited before. **"And the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.' But the fig tree said to them, 'Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit and go hold sway over the trees?'"** (Judges 9:11) The "trees" in the parable wanted to choose a king from among themselves—something Israel would eventually do in emulation of their pagan neighbors, instead of relying on Yahweh for their leadership. In the parable, you'll recall, they ended up getting ruled by the worst possible "candidate" because he (the bramble, personified by Gideon's ambitious son Abimelech) was the only one arrogant and ambitious enough to take the bait. The other candidates included the olive tree (perhaps symbolically indicating that the anointed priests could have ruled Israel—something Yahweh never authorized), and the vine (representing mankind—that is, setting up their government in emulation of the surrounding nations—something God had specifically warned them *not* to do). The fig tree "candidate," representing Israel's self interest, suggests a state of avaricious anarchy—being ruled by "sweetness"—whatever felt good (or, as it was phrased at the end of the Book of Judges, "doing what was right in their own eyes"). Though all of these "kings," in turn, directed the children of Israel, they rarely followed the path that Yahweh had laid out before them—being led by Him alone.

Yahweh's path, of course, led inexorably to His Messiah. A potentially revealing incident involving a fig tree occurred early in Christ's ministry. Immediately after His baptism by John, Yahshua began attracting disciples—many of whom had already responded to John's calls for repentance. The *only* thing that could have shifted their focus from John to someone else was that they became convinced that this "someone" was He whom John had come to announce: the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed of Yahweh. So Andrew called his brother Simon (whom Yahshua would dub "Peter"), and Philip brought Nathanael. **"Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'"** (John 1:45-46) Nazareth, and indeed, the whole Galilean region, was considered by the "enlightened cognoscenti" of Israel to be a cultural backwater, the home of toothless country bumpkins, funny accents, and uncouth manners—sort of the way Manhattan elites today might view rural Appalachia—hardly the sort of place from which the Messiah would hail. In fact, the Pharisees were adamant: "No prophet would arise from Galilee" (See John 7:40, 52).

Of course, adamant isn't the same thing as "correct." Factor in Isaiah's stunning prophecy: **"Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, as when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles."** Oops. These were the very regions being denigrated by the Pharisees. So what was supposed to happen there in Galilee? A prophet—nay, *the Messiah Himself*—would arise. **"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.... For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of Yahweh of hosts will perform this."** (Isaiah 9:1-2, 6-7) Thus the cultural prejudice that Nathanael's offhand remark had betrayed, was, shall we say, *misplaced*. The lesson is, don't trust the scholars and experts (or even guys like me). Look it up for yourself.

But Philip was all excited about Yahshua, so Nate felt that the least could do was check Him out. **"Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!'"** Yahshua apparently liked the way Nathanael "called 'em as he saw 'em." Blunt and unpolished honesty was, then as now, was a rare virtue. There was nothing politically correct about the man. **"Nathanael said to Him, 'How do You know me?' Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.' Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'"** Really? All Yahshua had done at this point was demonstrate that He had the gift of prophecy—something unusual but not unheard of among mortal men. **"Jesus answered him, 'Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' And He said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'" (John 1:47-51)**

There seems to be a subtle symbolic correlation here between being "under the fig tree" and "being a real Israelite," guileless and straightforward. The fig tree, as it symbolizes Israel, is indicative of that which Yahweh planted. (As it's presented more than once in scripture, this fig tree is planted in the middle of a vineyard, symbolic of humanity in general.) As it applies to Nathanael, being "under the fig tree" is what gave him the freedom and confidence to speak his mind. It's not that Jews are smarter or more insightful than anybody else. It's not even that they're *right* more often—after all, Nathanael's observation, that it was unlikely for anything good to come out of Nazareth, was actually *wrong*. But Israelites, being the custodians of Yahweh's scriptures, were in a position to see things more clearly than their gentile neighbors—if only they were willing to open their eyes.

The Torah, Psalms, and Prophets had taught them who God was, what He was like, and what He wanted mankind to do. Everybody else was just guessing—inventing “truth” as if it were a subject open to negotiation. That the Jews got things wrong more often than not does not negate the fact that they, of all nations on the earth, had a solid foundation upon which to stand. Yahshua would later acknowledge, **“Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.”** (Matthew 13:52) The scribes, as a class, were the first to condemn Him, and yet He realized that the scriptures with which they were entrusted would—if one were properly instructed concerning their true meaning—yield a treasure of truth more valuable than fine gold: the key to eternal life.

The glorious truth is that now, we *all* have the opportunity to “sit under the fig tree”—that is, to partake of the scriptural wisdom that was initially entrusted to Israel alone. They had been assigned by God to bring a Light to the gentiles—in the person of Yahshua the Messiah (see Isaiah 49:6, etc.). As a nation, they failed in that task, though individual Jews picked up the torch and carried it forward into the darkness where we once dwelled. Now—at the conclusion of the church age—the only reason for *not* sitting in peace beneath the fig tree of Israel’s legacy is treachery. Either you have betrayed yourself into believing the lie (which is, sadly, the default position of most Jews today), or someone else has prevented you from seeing the light. I pray that the blindfold will be lifted before it’s too late.

There is one place in which Yahweh directly and unequivocally linked Israel to the symbol of figs. But it’s a good-news, bad-news story: the figs in question are of two contrasting conditions—fresh or rotten. **“After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon, Yahweh showed me this vision.”** The prophet Jeremiah is speaking. He was in a perfect position to comprehend the vision, for he had been warning Judah for decades to repent, and lived to see its fall to Babylon. **“Behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of Yahweh.”** The temple, you’ll recall, signifies the plan of Yahweh for our salvation. Israel was the medium through which Yahweh had chosen to implement that plan. But it doesn’t follow that they played their part flawlessly. As it turned out, there were two opposing responses within Israel to the impetus of God’s instructions. **“One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be**

eaten. And Yahweh said to me, 'What do you see, Jeremiah?' I said, 'Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten....'

It occurred to me that when fresh figs are picked from the tree, there are *three* (not two) different “destinies” possible for them. (1) They can be used fresh—eaten, cooked in recipes, made into jam or fig newtons—enjoyed for their juicy, sweet flavor right off the tree. (2) They can be dried—preserved by carefully removing the moisture from them like raisins, prunes, or dried apricots (or my personal favorite, Craisins—dried cranberries). This process doesn't just happen, of course: you have to purposely process the fruit. The idea is to preserve it, give it a long shelf life, and make it useful for food long after the fresh fruit would have spoiled. (3) They can be left to rot—neither eaten nor preserved, just neglected and ignored until they are no good to anyone, disgusting and putrid.

Though He didn't allude to it here, Yahweh *did* see an “option #2” in Israel's future. In the end, He *would* make “dried figs” of them, carefully preserving them so they could be useful in the future, after they turned to Him in repentance. But for the moment, He saw them as either good or bad, and would treat them accordingly. **“Then the word of Yahweh came to me: ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am Yahweh, and they shall be My people and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart....’”** The “good” figs were those among Israel (like Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Mordecai) who received Yahweh's rod of correction in Babylon in the spirit in which it was offered: as an opportunity for national repentance and reflection—a long overdue wake-up call.

And the bad figs? **“But thus says Yahweh: ‘Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.’”** (Jeremiah 24) Like Jeconiah, the puppet king Zedekiah would never again see Israel, never be restored to blessing, never again have a role to play in the unfolding history of his people. Why? Because he was rebellious and arrogant—against both Yahweh and Nebuchadnezzar—preferring desperate human solutions to the clearly delineated proclamations of Yahweh delivered by His prophets. Don't look now, but the leaders of the world's nations are—to a man—making the very same blunders today. Judgment is coming, but they are encouraging their nations, like Israel of old, to sit there in their fruit baskets until

mold, decay, and putrefaction devour them from within. Those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

A bit later, Jeremiah again referred to the “rotten figs” represented by the unrepentant exiles in Babylon. **“Because you have said, ‘Yahweh has raised up prophets for us in Babylon...’”** Let’s break this off in mid-sentence, and figure out who he was talking about—these “prophets in Babylon.” In the near term, he’s referring to those among the exiles who envisioned a quick return to the Land, a speedy restoration of Judah—although Yahweh had clearly indicated that the Land would be allowed to enjoy its Sabbaths. This was written before the final siege and total destruction of Jerusalem: there were still Jews living there, and a king (well, a puppet king) sitting on the throne. It is often said that Israel’s captivity was to last seventy years, but careful exegesis reveals that it was actually *Babylon’s ascendancy* that was to last only seventy years (though the two things are largely coterminous). The Israelites were allowed to return after *a mere* 67 years of captivity (as it was experienced by Daniel, one of the earliest exiles), soon after the Medo-Persians under Cyrus took Babylon down, in 539 B.C. So those who were saying, “Don’t bother unpacking your suitcases; we’re going to be out of here in a jiffy” were proven to be false prophets. Two of these people are mentioned by name in verse 21: Ahab, son of Kolaiah (not Omri) and Zedekiah, son of Maaseiah (not Jeconiah—in other words, *not* the kings of Israel and Judah bearing the same names, but exiles in Babylon who were calling Jeremiah’s “seventy-years” prophecy a lie).

But beyond that, let’s look at this phrase “prophets in Babylon” from a symbolic point of view. Babylon represents confusion resulting in systematic false worship in all its guises—religious, political, and commercial. It’s the seat of manmade religion, our “faith” in false gods, as opposed to relationship with Yahweh. So Jeremiah’s message is ultimately directed toward anyone who trusts in his own understanding and relies on his own labors to save him.

And what is that message? Basically, that the “prophets of Babylon” are misguided fools for presuming that Zedekiah’s man-centric plots and intrigues wouldn’t lead to the destruction of Zion. **“Thus says Yahweh concerning the king who sits on the throne of David [Zedekiah], and concerning all the people who dwell in this city [Jerusalem], your kinsmen who did not go out with you into exile: Thus says Yahweh of hosts, behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten. I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, because they did not pay attention to My words, declares Yahweh.”** (Jeremiah 29:15-19) This all came to pass in 586 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar’s armies came back and razed Jerusalem and its temple to the ground.

God's point in having His prophet use the "rotten figs" metaphor is that if people (in this case, Israel, but the truth is universal) refuse to receive Yahweh's rod of correction when it's applied, and rather rebel and seek human solutions to their self-induced problems, they will become worthless. What could have been a sweet source of "nutrition" for the world (if allowed to ripen on God's perfect schedule) would instead be good for nothing—actually *worse*: disgusting, worm infested, stinking, and putrid.

I'll offer an example of how this works. On September 11, 2001, America was attacked by Islamic fundamentalists who targeted three symbols of our national strength and pride—our financial prowess, our military might, and our political infrastructure. Our response *as a nation* should have been to humble ourselves before Almighty God, admit that we had been "worshipping" false gods (though we may not have even realized it), and resolved to trust and rely upon Yahweh alone in the future. Granted, America's churches experienced a slight "bump" in attendance for a few weeks. But our national response as a whole was to double down, to rely even more vehemently on our political wisdom (*cough, choke*), our presumed financial invulnerability, and our ostensibly invincible military might. In short, our "leaders" became the "prophets in Babylon."

The result (as seen from my current perspective over a decade later) has been (1) the weakest, most ineffectual, most godless political leadership our nation has had since its founding; (2) the deepest, most recovery-resistant recession we've seen in over half a century, exacerbated by swelling welfare roles, unfathomable national debt, an apparent inability to manufacture anything of value, falling real estate values, rising taxes, and jobless figures in double digits; and (3) endless, horrendously expensive wars with no definable objective, no possibility of victory, and no honorable way out, despite the skill, heroism and sacrifice of our troops. We have become a picture of Israel of old—rotten to the core, good for nothing, and odious to our enemies and friends alike.

It would be tempting to blame Islam for our woes, for it is indeed a powerful influence for evil in today's world. But although Islam is a problem, it's not *our* problem, exactly. *Our* problem is our stubborn national refusal to honor Yahweh as God and Yahshua—Jesus—as His Messiah. Islam, in the meantime, is like Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon: a tool in the hand of God designed to get the attention of His people. Yahweh will deal with Islam—as He did with Babylon—when the time is right.

Israel wasn't the only nation God dealt with using the counterintuitive surrogate of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar gobbled up the surrounding nations like potato chips—or, using the example of the prophet Nahum, ripe figs: **"All your [Nineveh's] fortresses are like fig trees with first-ripe figs—if shaken they fall into the mouth of the eater.** (Nahum 3:12) Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, had been the nation

employed by God to scatter Israel's ten northern tribes to the wind—the result of centuries of their apostasy and idolatry. But the brutality with which they carried out their task did not go unnoticed by God. Babylon's rise was fueled by Assyria's fall. The cycle was repeated with Persia, then with Greece, then with Rome. No nation that held the fate of Israel in their hands and failed to show them kindness survived to tell the tale. I realize that that statistic is hard to prove, though, because *no* nation has ever honored Israel and her God consistently—even (I'm ashamed to admit) the United States. What was true of Assyria back in the seventh century B.C. is still true of nations today: there is always a "Babylon" breathing down their necks, willing and able to shake the fig tree.

This truth will come into sharp focus, I'm afraid, during the Last Days—which I'm convinced are practically upon us. Even before Assyria met its demise, Isaiah saw what was on *our* horizon. **"For Yahweh is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; He has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter."** We tend to see evil in one entity or another, but we need to realize that during the Tribulation, Yahweh intends to confront and destroy *all* evil in this world. *Anyone* who refuses to honor the true and living God—and show it by supporting His people Israel—will be "devoted to destruction." That, alas, will include all nations, and the majority of their citizens. **"Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise. The mountains shall flow with their blood..."**

And in the end, even the stars of the heavens will echo the earth's judgment: **"All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree."** (Isaiah 34:2-4) We are reminded of the fig tree alongside the road to Jerusalem, the one that Yahshua cursed to show what would happen to Israel if she didn't recognize her Messiah, bearing fruit unto righteousness: it shriveled from the roots up, becoming unable to bear fruit or even leaves. There will come a time when the entire physical universe will suffer the same fate. After the Great White Throne judgment (see Revelation 20:11-15) all of us will have become what we will be throughout eternity—either alive, dead, or damned. Mortality will have been rendered obsolete; death itself will have been cast into the lake of fire. The material universe is, as Peter puts it, **"stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.... The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."** (II Peter 3:7, 10) Once Yahweh's creation is no longer needed to provide the stuff from which our mortal bodies are made, He won't be sentimental about keeping it around. I have a feeling He has something even more spectacular planned to take its place.

POMEGRANATE

❧ 3.3.11 ❧

Refuge in the Blood

Pomegranates appear in scripture only in the Old Testament, and often appear side by side with other Torah symbols, such as grapes and figs. The Hebrew designation is *rimmown*, or *rimmon*—used several times in scripture as a proper place name—a town in Southern Judah (Joshua 15:1); one in Zebulun (Joshua 19:13; or a rock fortress near the city of Gibeah (Judges 20:45)—all apparently named after the pomegranate trees that grew there. There was also a Syrian weather god or storm deity named Rimmon (known to the Babylonians as Ramanu) mentioned in passing in the story of Namaan (II Kings 5:18). Another significant place name incorporating Rimmon is Hadad-Rimmon (in the plain of Megiddo), where Josiah, the last good king of Judah, was slain in a battle with Pharaoh Necho of Egypt (see II Chronicles 35:20-25). The mourning that followed his death was legendary. It is compared (in Zechariah 12:11) to the mourning—the national affliction of the soul—that will mark the definitive Day of Atonement, when King Yahshua will be seen and recognized at last by Israel, at His second coming. Believe it or not, all of that is significant when exploring the symbolism of the pomegranate.

It's easy enough to comprehend the connection between the pomegranate and blood. The seeds of this fruit yield a dark red juice that stains anything it touches. What's not so easy to see is the connotation of the refuge—the safety—this blood can secure for us. We'll get to that in a moment. The “blood” being pictured symbolically in scripture by the pomegranate is, of course, that of Yahshua the Messiah—the blood He shed for our sins upon Calvary's tree. In that respect, it tells roughly the same story as that of the slain animal sacrifices and the wine poured out upon the ground—both oft-mentioned components of Torah ritual worship, and both prophetic of Christ's self-sacrifice.

In light of New Testament revelation concerning who Yahshua was and what He accomplished, it's little wonder that for the past two thousand years, the Jewish religious establishment has been scrambling for alternative explanations. The rabbis have tried to make the case that pomegranates represent the Law of Moses, because they contain 613 seeds. Problem is, *they don't*. These apple-sized fruits always have lots of seeds, it's true. In fact, that's what the Anglicized name of the plant means (Latin: *pomum* = “apple,” and *granatus* = “seeded”). But they range from under 200 to over 1,300 in number—hardly the precision you'd expect from a biblical metaphor, if that's really what it was supposed to mean. And besides, there *aren't* 613 distinct “laws” in the Torah (something I convincingly

demonstrated in my comprehensive Torah study, *The Owner's Manual*). That's a Talmudic prevarication, nothing more.

The symbolic significance of the pomegranate is tied to its seeds, which when crushed yield a sweet-to-sour red juice (the basis of grenadine, for example) that represents the shed blood of Yahshua the Messiah. I suppose you could say that whether the “blood” of the pomegranate is sweet to you or sour depends upon your relationship with the One who did the bleeding. Something else we should note is that this one of the few plant-based Biblical symbols in which the *seed* (as opposed to the plant itself, or its fruit, or its foliage) comprises the basis of the metaphor. The seed is the genetic component within the fruit. It is that by which life is transferred from one generation to the next. It is no coincidence that we read time and again in scripture that “the life is in the blood.” That's true not only of mortal man and the animals in his world. It's also true in a spiritual sense: real life—*everlasting life*—is not possible except through the efficacy of the shed blood of Yahshua our Messiah. If it has been allowed to indelibly “stain” our souls, we will carry the life with which we've been marked forward into eternity.

The promise of this life—and the blood that purchased it on our behalf—was made evident to the wilderness wanderers soon after they left Egypt. That is, the *symbols* were presented: it was left to future generations (like ours) to figure out what it all meant. It's a good-news/bad-news story again: Yahweh had told them to just go in and possess the land, but instead, they sent in twelve spies. **“And they came to the Valley of Eshcol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them; they also brought some pomegranates and figs.”** (Numbers 13:23) Beyond the obvious agricultural ramifications, there was spiritually symbolic significance to what the spies brought back with them. At this late date, we can discern what it was: the blessings of the Land would be bestowed upon Israel (the figs), they would be carried to the entire human race (the grapevine—and remember what I said about *poles* when we were exploring the acacia tree), and they would be brought about through the blood of Yahshua's sacrifice—something that was either sweet or sour, depending on your relationship with and reaction to it.

You know what happened. Ignoring the bounty God had provided for them in Canaan, and fixating instead on the “giants in the land” (giants that Yahweh had promised to fight on their behalf, just as He had the Egyptians), ten of the twelve spies convinced an entire generation of Israelites to distrust their God—in effect, calling Him a liar. So He acquiesced to their wishes: if they didn't want to face the challenges (and receive the blessings) of the Promised Land, then they wouldn't have to. Their kids would enter the Land in their place. That, however, left them homeless, destined to wander about in the wilderness until they all died

off. (Remember, at this point, they couldn't exactly go back to Egypt and ask for their old jobs back, not after that "sucker punch" in the Red Sea.)

Eventually, their perception of their place and purpose shifted. They began to think of the wilderness as the destination, when in fact, it was no-man's land, and always had been. So a few chapters later, we read, **"Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before Yahweh!'"** Yahweh must have been thinking, *That can be arranged*. **"Why have you brought the assembly of Yahweh into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle?"** You? *Moses*? No, it was Yahweh Himself who had done these things. Moses was just a shepherd, assigned (again) to herd Somebody else's sheep in the desert for forty years. **"And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink."** (Numbers 20:2-5) Really? You geniuses turned up your noses at the place where the grapes, figs, and pomegranates grew, where the rain clouds blew in off the Mediterranean and turned the desert into a land of milk and honey. Or did you forget?

A generation later, Moses made sure their children understood what awaited them when they entered the Land: **"So you shall keep the commandments of Yahweh your God by walking in His ways and by fearing Him. For Yahweh your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs [symbolic of the presence of the Spirit of Yahweh, if they'd walk in His ways and revere Him], flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley [God's provision], of vines and fig trees [blessings for all mankind, beginning with Israel] and pomegranates [the refuge that would be found in the sacrifice of Christ], a land of olive trees [the source of the Spirit] and honey [the sweet life], a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing."** (Deuteronomy 8:6-9) The literal, physical "goodness" of the Land was enough for Joshua's generation, of course. But as with everything else in the Torah, the stunning ramifications of what it all *meant* would become clear only when the Messiah took center stage. It was only then that the symbolic significance of the good land that God had given to Abraham and his descendants would eclipse their mundane material inheritance.

It's easy enough to see the "blood" connotation of the pomegranate. All you have to do is cut one open and "wound" one of the seeds. But where did I pick up the counterintuitive notion that this blood provides refuge or shelter? It's a long, convoluted story that begins in Judges 19 and runs through the end of the book.

An incident took place in the Benjamite city of Gibeah (only a couple of miles north of Jerusalem) which began as an instant replay of Lot's desperate hospitality that was shown to the two angels in Sodom—meant to protect them from being gang raped by a crazed homosexual mob. In this case, the one trying to provide shelter for the vulnerable travelers sent his own concubine out to face the sodomites, who (though she wasn't exactly the prey they were after) raped her repeatedly and left her dying at the man's front door. Understandably outraged (even though he himself had condemned her to death through his own cowardice), the householder cut the concubine's corpse into twelve pieces and sent one to each of the twelve tribes—a gruesome call to war against Gibeah's homicidal homosexuals (who would, ironically, prefer to be called “gay” these days). And Israel answered the call with a huge, angry army.

But the tribe of Benjamin decided that blood is thicker than righteousness, so to speak. They refused to go to war against their evil brothers in Gibeah, opting instead to defend them against the rage and disgust of the rest of Israel. Lesson number one: it is never a good idea to defend sin, even if the guilty party is someone very near and dear to you. Loving the sinner is one thing; enabling and supporting the evil he practices—and defending it against the world's outrage—is something else entirely. At some point, crime must meet punishment. Meanwhile, Israel consulted Yahweh (just as they should have) through Phinehas the High Priest (Aaron's grandson), who confirmed that Gibeah must be dealt with. But the first few sorties against the Benjamites ended in Israel's defeat. Again, they enquired of Yahweh, who told them to persevere. This time, the army of Israel put Benjamin to flight, burned Gibeah to the ground, and slew the sodomites. And this is where the pomegranate symbol comes into play—sort of.

“Eighteen thousand men of Benjamin fell, all of them men of valor. And they turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon.” If you'll recall, the Hebrew word *Rimmon* means “pomegranate.” **“Five thousand men of them were cut down in the highways. And they were pursued hard to Gidom [literally, “a cutting off”], and 2,000 men of them were struck down. So all who fell that day of Benjamin were 25,000 men who drew the sword, all of them men of valor. But 600 men turned and fled toward the wilderness to the rock of Rimmon and remained at the rock of Rimmon four months.”** This is where the pomegranate symbol is first used to suggest a place of refuge. **“And the men of Israel turned back against the people of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, the city, men and beasts and all that they found. And all the towns that they found they set on fire.”** (Judges 20:44-48) Here we see the “Law of Unintended Consequences” at work. The Benjamites had merely set out to guard the despicable perverts of Gibeah because they were kin. But in defending evil, they fomented a full scale civil war that left their entire tribe in ruins. Oops.

But let's analyze this. Who found shelter at "Pomegranate Rock" (a.k.a. the Rock of Rimmon)? It wasn't the guilty gay guys of Gibeah. They were summarily executed (along with everybody else who was found in that town, innocent or not), which was the whole original point of the military campaign: **"The men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush moved out and struck all the city with the edge of the sword."** (Judges 20:37) No, the ones who found refuge at the rock—in its system of crags and caves—were their naïve Benjamite cousins (and then, only a tiny remnant of them), who had so unwisely chosen to militarily defend the morally indefensible. Lesson number two: there is nothing to be gained by subsidizing or tolerating evil, no matter how logical or honorable your reasoning might seem. This is a lesson America had better learn, and quickly—or face our own "four months at Rimmon Rock."

What happened at Pomegranate Rock? The Benjamite remnant were protected from the annihilation that they had earned themselves by siding with sin. I'm guessing that by the time they reached the shelter of Rimmon, they had rethought their position and had concluded that they had backed the wrong horse, family or not. Their foolish misplaced tribal loyalty had cost Israel's coalition over 40,000 valiant men, and the tribe of Benjamin another 25,000. All because a couple of dozen sodomites in Gibeah refused to control their lust. Lesson number three: ignoring God's law can get really expensive in a hurry. But even though *swimming* in innocent blood, the six hundred Benjamite refugees found safety at Pomegranate Rock—a new definition of sweet refuge mitigated by sour reflection upon why they needed it, all rolled into one.

Is this not a perfect picture of what Christ's blood does for us? Like the Benjamites, we have all made some disastrous choices along the way, tolerating—even defending—the evil we see in our society, and in the process incurring guilt ourselves. It is only when we wake up to the error of our ways, when we repent and seek shelter at "Pomegranate Rock"—the atoning blood of our Messiah—that we can avoid the punishment that our poor choices have earned us. The Rock of Rimmon is thus a picture of grace. The eye-opening truth here is how the "works" contrasted with this grace are defined. What had the troops of Benjamin had been *doing* prior to their repentance? They'd been fighting against the very armies of God, whether they realized it or not.

On a national level, Americans are particularly susceptible to this error: we (especially our conservatives) tend to equate patriotism with godliness—and that's a leap you can't logically make. When the time comes for the guilty among us to pay for their crimes, we too often unwittingly find ourselves waging battle against God Himself—instead of humbly submitting to His rod of correction. When our once-great nation suffers setback after setback because of our creeping lack of reverence for Yahweh, Satan's minions mock the patriots among us for

“clinging to God, gold, and guns.” But perhaps they’re correct in doing so: the correct solution is to put *no faith at all* in gold or guns, and rely totally on the true and living God—Yahweh.

If the evidence presented here connecting the pomegranate symbol to refuge seems a little thin, don’t feel bad. I wouldn’t have even brought it up were it not for the fact that God repeated Himself, with a twist. He used the very same metaphor three or four centuries later. Again, we find valiant Israelite soldiers on the field of battle. Again, men of the tribe of Benjamin play a prominent role. Again, they number about six hundred troops. And even the *place* (formerly called the Rock of Rimmon, outside Gibeah) is the same. What’s different this time is that “Pomegranate Rock” is where they *started*. The lesson (if I’m seeing this correctly) is meant to reveal what’s possible when you *begin* from a position of strength and safety, covered by the blood of Christ.

Here’s the data: **“One day Jonathan the son of Saul said to the young man who carried his armor, ‘Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side.’ But he did not tell his father.”** Jonathan was heir-apparent to the throne of Israel, son of their first king—from the tribe of Benjamin (which means “son of my right hand”). **“Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave [NKJV: “under a pomegranate tree”] at Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men.”** (I Samuel 14:1-2) The word used to describe Saul’s location is our old friend Rimmon. I’m afraid the word translated “in” or “under”—*tahat*—is so versatile, we can’t be dogmatic about what is meant. You can’t get six hundred men under a pomegranate tree, of course. What seems clear is that the place was a rocky stronghold known (and named) for the pomegranate trees that grew nearby, perhaps with a cave system big enough to conceal a force this size. (Remember, Jerusalem is built on limestone, a rock type in which caves naturally form due to water runoff, and Gibeah wasn’t very far away.)

Israel was fighting against the Philistine invaders on their own home turf: Gibeah was, you’ll recall, in Benjamite territory. The Philistine base, meanwhile, was located way over on the Mediterranean coast, near present day Gaza. They had no business being there, except for their hatred of Yahweh’s people. Some things, it would appear, never really change.

“Within the passes, by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistine garrison, there was a rocky crag on the one side and a rocky crag on the other side.” If you’ll recall our discussion about “Rocks” in Volume I, two Hebrew words for “rock” are used more or less interchangeably, *tsur*, and *sela*—the latter stressing the shelter to be had within the “cleft of the rock,” as when Moses was given a glimpse God. The word translated “crag” here is *sela*. **“The name of the one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh.”** *Bozez* means “surpassing white: glistening,” and *Seneh* means “thorny.” The idea seems to be that Jonathan’s little exploit could have gone

either way—ending in glory or disaster. He had no guarantees, only faith in Yahweh. **“The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba [locations just north of Gibeah]. Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, ‘Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that Yahweh will work for us, for nothing can hinder Yahweh from saving by many or by few.’”** (I Samuel 14:4-5) This wasn’t like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza tilting at windmills: Jonathan and his squire were operating in the power of Yahweh. The record goes on to state that this little two-man guerrilla force pulled a “Chuck Norris” (so to speak) on the startled Philistines, killing twenty of them and precipitating a panic in which the heathen troops began killing each other—a tactic Yahweh uses often, from Gideon’s commando raid against the Midianites (Judges 7) to the yet-future Battle of Magog (Ezekiel 38:21). Israel’s armies finally noticed the commotion and joined the fight, regaining the initiative.

In light of the “pomegranate” symbol, the point of all this seems to be that if we begin in a position of safety and confidence in the blood of Christ and venture out from there, we needn’t be many in number, mighty in strength, rocket-surgeon smart, or otherwise gifted, to accomplish great things in the kingdom of God, for He is fighting our battles for us and through us. All we have to do is proceed in faith. But you have to start out “under the pomegranate tree.” If you launch your expedition from any other place, you’re on your own.

Up to this point, you may be thinking, the presentation of the pomegranate as a Biblical symbol may not quite seem warranted. It may appear as if I’ve grasped at irrelevant straws, seeing things as significant that were either incidental or coincidental. But the truth is, I was *forced* to see the pomegranate as a scriptural symbol because of Yahweh’s use of the motif in His instructions for the tabernacle service. Since God does nothing on a pointless whim, I was compelled to ponder the pomegranate.

That’s not to say it’s a common element in tabernacle symbology: in fact, it shows up only once. But that one instance is impossible to ignore. It begins as Yahweh tells Moses, **“You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue. It shall have an opening for the head in the middle of it, with a woven binding around the opening, like the opening in a garment, so that it may not tear....”** This was a garment to be worn by the High Priest when he ministered in the tabernacle before Yahweh. The ephod itself was an apron-like affair with shoulder straps, worn over the robe and held in place around the waist with an integral decorative “band.” The High Priest’s “robe” was more like a sleeved poncho than a coat, in that it wasn’t open at the front. Rather,

it was slipped on over the head. The “neck” was reinforced so it wouldn’t tear. It was customary in these times for someone to rend his clothing in order to express profound anguish or deep mourning (e.g. Ezra 9:3), but the High Priest was specifically prohibited from doing so (see Leviticus 21:10). The reason, I believe, is wrapped up in what the robe represented: since the robe was made entirely of blue-dyed fabric, the ultimate High Priest’s (i.e., Yahshua’s) role as King is being stressed here: the high priest’s *office* is thus defined as being prophetic of the coming Messiah. The point of never tearing the robe was that although the Messiah in his role as the Lamb of God would *Himself* be “torn”—slain to atone for our sins—His position as King was unassailable. It made no difference if billions of lost and rebellious people said, “We will not have this Man to rule over us.” He *does* rule, whether they like it or not. The role of King of kings cannot be torn away from Yahshua.

What does any of this have to do with pomegranates? **“On its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, around its hem, with bells of gold between them, a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, around the hem of the robe. And it shall be on Aaron when he ministers.”** Representations of pomegranates embroidered in costly blue, purple, and scarlet were to ring the hem of the robe, interspersed with bells made of pure gold, sewn on in a way that would allow them to ring when the High Priest walked. **“And its sound shall be heard when he goes into the Holy Place before Yahweh, and when he comes out, so that he does not die.”** (Exodus 28:31-35) So that he *does not die*? This is apparently more serious than it looks at first glance.

The key, I think, is the metal from which the bells were to be made: *gold*—precious, immutable, and proven pure in the crucible of adversity. The golden bells “announce” to Yahweh that the High Priest is there in his role as a symbolic representative of the coming Anointed One—he is not standing before Yahweh pretending to be “good enough,” trying to intercede for the people on his own. He is, rather, the emissary of the King. The “decorative elements” on the hem of the robe, then, are *anything but* merely decorative. They speak of the two functions—and two advents—of the Messiah. The pomegranates prophesy the death of the suffering servant, whose blood (either sweet or sour, depending upon our response to His resurrection) was shed on behalf of a world desperately seeking refuge. And the golden bells foretell the reigning king, whose absolute purity qualifies *us* to stand before Yahweh as righteous beings. The pattern—a bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate—was repeated over and over again around the hem of the High Priest’s robe, so we wouldn’t lose sight of one thing or the other.

Of course, instructions are only as good as the way they’re carried out. In this case, Moses had a talented “art director,” a fellow named Bezalel, to oversee the

craftsmen in a dozen different disciplines as they brought Yahweh's tabernacle to life. Having being a designer myself at one time, I've always had a soft spot for Bezalel, an appreciation for the magnitude and import of the work set before him. I mean, it's one thing to render service "as to the Lord and not to men" (Ephesians 6:7); it's something else entirely when your client actually *is* God. Or is it?

Anyway, it is written of Bezalel, **"He also made the robe of the ephod woven all of blue, and the opening of the robe in it was like the opening in a garment, with a binding around the opening, so that it might not tear."** The only High Priest on record as having torn his robe was Caiaphas, at the "trial" of Yahshua. There was apparently a lot about the Torah that he was willing to overlook if it suited his purpose. There's a lesson in there somewhere. **"On the hem of the robe they made pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen. They also made bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates all around the hem of the robe, between the pomegranates—a bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate around the hem of the robe for ministering, as Yahweh had commanded Moses."** (Exodus 39:22-26) Doing things exactly "as Yahweh had commanded Moses" is a very good thing, whether you're a designer or not, because everything God told Moses to do was prophetic of the Messiah, our Savior. If we play fast and loose with the Instructions, we lead people astray. That being said, there was some latitude in Bezalel's instructions.

The story I'm about to relate is apocryphal, but compelling nonetheless. (It's related in full in my book on prophecy, *Future History*, Chapter 13.) It was January 6, 1982, and amateur archeologist Ron Wyatt found himself (after two years of arduous labor) in a limestone cave in Jerusalem, outside the old city wall, beneath "Gordon's Calvary," near the Garden Tomb. Sweeping his flashlight across a bed of fist-sized stones filling the chamber to within a couple of feet of the ceiling, something caught his eye—the glint of gold. Subsequent examination revealed it to be piece of furniture built to the exact dimensions of the table of showbread, made of wood but covered with pure gold (Exodus 25:23-30). The Torah specs said nothing about decorative elements, but Wyatt noticed that the table had a flat top and a raised molding on the sides, carved with a repeating motif: a bell, a pomegranate, a bell, a pomegranate—the same pattern that had been prescribed for the robe of the High Priest's ephod in Exodus 28:33 (though here, of course, the bells were graphic representations, not the real thing). Wyatt subsequently found several other important pieces that had *not* been listed among the booty that Nebuchadnezzar hauled off to Babylon—the most significant among them, the ark of the covenant itself.

For reasons of His own, Yahweh saw to it that nothing left the chamber except the story. Half a dozen glory seekers have died trying to exploit the find, and not surprisingly, the Israeli government is not particularly keen on publicizing it,

considering the volatility of its political ramifications. Calm is king, at least for now. But assuming the story is true (and I have no reason to doubt it), I find it touching (and revealing) that Yahweh allowed Bezalel's creative nature to find expression, even as he followed His Instructions to the letter. If we are the Creator's children, the apple needn't fall very far from the tree.

The pomegranate shows up in other ways in the design of Solomon's temple, the plan of which was basically a scaled-up version of the wilderness tabernacle. As with Bezalel's apparent use of the motif on the rim of the table of showbread, we have no record of Yahweh having instructed Solomon to use the pomegranate as a design element, but it is pretty clear that he felt justified in doing so based on its use on the hem of the High Priest's robe and the rim of the Table of Showbread: if Yahweh had commanded it to be used in one place, and then allowed it in another, the pomegranate theme must have had God's blessing. So Solomon used the pomegranate element in profusion—not inside the temple, but on two massive bronze pillars that were to stand just outside of the entrance: **“In front of the house he made two pillars thirty-five cubits high, with a capital of five cubits on the top of each.”** The “thirty-five cubits” is apparently a textual transmission glitch. The height is listed as “eighteen cubits” in three other places. (The letter-number designations in Babylonian Hebrew script look quite similar— η versus $\eta\eta$). So when assembled, these columns stood over three stories tall. **“He made chains like a necklace and put them on the tops of the pillars, and he made a hundred pomegranates and put them on the chains. He set up the pillars in front of the temple, one on the south, the other on the north; that on the south he called Jachin, and that on the north Boaz.”** (II Chronicles 3:15-17)

It has been hypothesized that these two massive pillars comprised the visible part of an elaborate sand hydraulics system that enabled the ark of the covenant and other pieces to be removed from the temple unseen. (Again, the full story is related in *Future History*.) There was nothing analogous to them in the tabernacle design. It's worth our time to figure out what the names of these two free-standing pillars meant. Both of them were named for (or should I say, *shared* names with) men in Israel's history. Jachin (*Yakiyn*) was the fourth son of the patriarch Simeon, the second son of Jacob. Boaz was the kinsman-redeemer in the story of Ruth, not to mention being the great grandfather of King David. But, as usual in Hebrew, both of these names *meant* something. Names expressed the hopes and aspirations of the parents for their child, or were a statement about something—either positive or negative—that was going on. Jachin means “He will establish,” and Boaz may mean “quickness” or “swiftness” (it breaks down literally to “in him, strength”). So together, Solomon's two columns declare: “He will establish quickly” or “He will establish in His strength.” Both things are true, in their own way, of what the temple and its service symbolically represent—the plan of Yahweh for mankind's redemption.

It is my experience that if something is really important, Yahweh arranges to bring up the subject in His scriptures more often than if it's a side issue, something less than crucial to our understanding. So I take it as noteworthy that these two pomegranate-encrusted columns are mentioned *half a dozen times*—far more often than the hem of the High Priest's robe. As with the account of Bezalel's involvement with the tabernacle design and construction, Solomon's art director is also credited: **"So Hiram [or Hiram—not the king of Tyre named Hiram, but a master craftsman, the son of a Tyrian father and an Israelite mother] finished the work that he did for King Solomon on the house of God: the two pillars, the bowls, and the two capitals on the top of the pillars; and the two latticeworks to cover the two bowls of the capitals that were on the top of the pillars; and the 400 pomegranates for the two latticeworks, two rows of pomegranates for each latticework, to cover the two bowls of the capitals that were on the pillars."** (II Chronicles 4:11-13) At first glance, there seems to be a discrepancy between the number of pomegranates listed here and in the chapter 3 reference above. But a careful reading clarifies it: each column was adorned with a latticework and chain design circumscribing it: each of these had *two rows* of one hundred pomegranates, and there were *two* columns, for a total of four hundred bronze pomegranates.

The description in I Kings gives us more detail: **"He [Solomon] cast two pillars of bronze. Eighteen cubits was the height of one pillar, and a line of twelve cubits measured its circumference."** This makes the pillars almost six feet across. The math implies that the decorative bronze pomegranates were each a little over two inches wide. **"It was hollow, and its thickness was four fingers [about three inches]. The second pillar was the same. He also made two capitals of cast bronze to set on the tops of the pillars. The height of the one capital was five cubits, and the height of the other capital was five cubits. There were lattices of checker work with wreaths of chain work for the capitals on the tops of the pillars, a lattice for the one capital and a lattice for the other capital. Likewise he made pomegranates in two rows around the one latticework to cover the capital that was on the top of the pillar, and he did the same with the other capital."** If I'm picturing this correctly, the latticework and chain section with all the pomegranates stood *above* the massive hollow bronze columns, obscuring the "plug" at the base of each solid bronze capital that fit inside the column, holding it in place. **"Now the capitals that were on the tops of the pillars in the vestibule were of lily-work, four cubits. The capitals were on the two pillars and also above the rounded projection which was beside the latticework [NKJV: "...the convex surface which was next to the network"]. There were two hundred pomegranates in two rows all around, and so with the other capital. He set up the pillars at the vestibule of the temple. He set up the pillar on the south and called its name Jachin, and he set up the pillar on the north and called its name Boaz."** The temple entrance faced east. **"And on the tops of the pillars was lily-work. Thus the work of the pillars was finished."** (I Kings 7:15-22)

Thus ends the description of Solomon's pillars as they were built and used at the entrance of the first magnificent temple. But there's also quite a bit of scripture dedicated to the fact that they were later hauled off to Babylon in the wake of centuries of Israelite apostasy. Jeremiah was a witness to the sack of Jerusalem (and he was probably the man who secreted the ark of the covenant and the other pieces into safe keeping before Jerusalem fell—see II Maccabees 2:4-8). He reports what the Babylonians hauled away. **“And the pillars of bronze that were in the house of Yahweh, and the stands and the bronze sea that were in the house of Yahweh, the Chaldeans broke in pieces, and carried all the bronze to Babylon.... As for the two pillars, the one sea, the twelve bronze bulls that were under the sea, and the stands, which Solomon the king had made for the house of Yahweh, the bronze of all these things was beyond weight. As for the pillars, the height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits, its circumference was twelve cubits, and its thickness was four fingers, and it was hollow. On it was a capital of bronze. The height of the one capital was five cubits. A network and pomegranates, all of bronze, were around the capital. And the second pillar had the same, with pomegranates. There were ninety-six pomegranates on the sides; all the pomegranates were a hundred upon the network all around.”** (Jeremiah 52:17, 20-23) So once again, Jeremiah mentions the pomegranate decoration on Solomon's columns.

There is a provocative discrepancy in the account of what was taken as listed in II Kings—which was in all likelihood also penned by Jeremiah. **“As for the two pillars, the one sea [Solomon's version of Moses' bronze laver], and the stands that Solomon had made for the house of Yahweh, the bronze of all these vessels was beyond weight. The height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits, and on it was a capital of bronze. The height of the capital was three cubits. A latticework and pomegranates, all of bronze, were all around the capital. And the second pillar had the same, with the latticework.”** (II Kings 25:16-17) Again, the lattice work and its pomegranates are mentioned prominently. But note that the height of the capitals as described here was two cubits (about thirty-six inches) *shorter* than when they were built. Why? Most commentators simply ignore it, and unfortunately, the passage is missing in the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Barnes Notes* flippantly presumes it's a mistake—that it should read “five.” But it doesn't (a *gimel* doesn't look anything like a *hei*). I, for one, am willing to take the dimension at face value, which begs the question: why were the capitals three feet shorter when the Babylonians hauled them away? One “crazy” but perfectly plausible explanation is that Solomon had built a sand hydraulics “elevator” into the holy of holies, allowing four dedicated priests (such as Jeremiah) to remove the ark of the covenant, the table of showbread, the seven-branched menorah, and the altar of incense to a safe location. Laugh if you will, but be aware that none of those things were listed among the booty that Nebuchadnezzar stole—and they accounted for *everything* they took, right down to the spoons and shovels.

The larger question for our immediate purposes, however, is why we were given all of these numerous mentions of the pomegranate appliqué on two bronze columns, together named “He will establish swiftly” or “He will establish in His strength.” (1) The temple was all about *Yahweh’s* plan—what *He* intended to establish, whether suddenly, or in His own power, or both. (2) The columns were erected at the very door of the temple: thus whatever they represented “guarded” *Yahweh’s* plan for our redemption. (3) The pomegranates were rendered (as were the columns and their capitals) in bronze or brass—itsself symbolic of judgment, of judicial separation of good from evil. (4) We have already established that the pomegranate is symbolic of the refuge that can be found only in the blood of Christ.

I can only conclude that Solomon (whether he realized it or not) had presented a picture of how we can find refuge and sanctuary in the blood of the Innocent Sacrifice as we enter the plan of God. And at the risk of stretching this analogy beyond the breaking point, notice that the lily-shaped capitals, though beautiful and elevated in the sight of man, had to be made smaller in appearance, diminished and hidden within the pomegranate-encrusted latticework. We too must humble ourselves and be hidden within the place of refuge provided by the blood of *Yahshua* if we wish to stand holy and justified in *Yahweh’s* presence at the judgment seat of Christ.

The most prolific purveyor of prophetic pomegranate propositions was Solomon. Not only did he specify that four hundred of them would grace the two pillars that guarded the entrance to the temple, he also mentioned them frequently in his poetic allegory, the Song of Solomon. Whether or not Solomon realized it, this little book speaks of the torrid love affair between Christ (a role played by King Solomon) and His beloved bride, the church (a part played by the Shulamite maiden). If you’ll recall, we explored the background of the book a bit during our study of frankincense. Also playing an important role are the “Daughters of Jerusalem,” representing (obviously enough) the nation of Israel, who are seen in enthusiastic support of the love match. Needless to say, the whole esoteric book is predictive of the state of affairs that will prevail during the Millennial reign of the Messiah, for at present, Israel’s relationship with both Christ and His church is strained and suspicious—and has been since the first century. It will remain so, I’m afraid, until they repent (the most prevalent prophetic theme in the entire Tanach, and one central to the definitive Day of Atonement, during the last few days of the Tribulation).

If we keep the symbols of scripture in mind, the whole thing begins to make sense (in a steamy, R-rated sort of way). First we hear the King saying, **“Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.”** (Song of Solomon 4:3) Yahshua finds us beautiful. (Love is blind, thank God.) But on another level, the images of lips, mouth, and cheeks speak of speech: that is, He finds what we say as sweet as grenadine. If we love Him, we speak of what He did for us—shedding His own blood that we might live in absolute security, fearing nothing. The church, in fact, is the only one who speaks of such things. The rest of the world doesn’t want to hear it—preferring to keep our testimony hidden behind a veil because the truth is just too brilliant, too glorious to be comfortable with, if they’re not prepared to see it. Moses knew what it felt like to radiate a glow from being in Yahweh’s presence: see Exodus 34:29-35. And interestingly enough, exuding God’s glory is a perfect etymological synonym for the concept of praising God. *Hallelujah* literally means “radiate Yahweh’s light.”

A bit later in the same chapter (one in which the king is heard praising His bride’s beauty), the pomegranate is mentioned again. **“A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a spring locked, a fountain sealed. Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choicest fruits, henna with nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all chief spices—a garden fountain, a well of living water.”** (Song of Solomon 4:12-15) We have encountered most of these exotic substances previously in this volume. Calamus (*qaneh*, that is, cane) and cinnamon were ingredients in the anointing oil used in the tabernacle service. And frankincense and myrrh (in the form of stacte) were used in Yahweh’s exclusive formula for incense, symbolic of the prayers of the saints. Aloes, as we saw, are fragrant wood used to symbolize the presence of love. And pomegranates speak of the sweet sacrifice of the Messiah’s blood—that which provides refuge for His bride.

The refuge theme is subtly brought into play here. The bride is called a locked garden, a sealed fountain, a secluded spring. She is quite secure. It is revealing that the word translated “orchard” here (*pardes*) is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word translated “Paradise” in Christ’s promise to the thief on the cross: **“Assuredly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”** (Luke 23:43) Technically, it denotes a walled garden, an enclosed park or forest preserve—a place of safety and seclusion. But look closer. *What* is this pomegranate paradise? It is her *shoots*, that which is sent out from her—the Hebrew word is *shelach*: a sprout, shoot, or missile, based on a root verb (*shalach*) meaning to send forth, let go, or stretch out. Thus it is no *stretch* at all to hear echoes of the Great Commission in Solomon’s description of the King’s bride, the church, in this passage. We who have been reached and given refuge by the sweet sacrifice of Christ personify the Paradise of Pomegranates of which Solomon speaks.

And what does the bride have to say about it? **“I went down to the nut orchard to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom. Before I was aware, my desire set me among the chariots of my kinsman, a prince.”** (Song of Solomon 6:11-12) She isn’t found sitting around the palace eating bon-bons and watching television. She’s out in the world, searching for signs of life and fruitfulness, for opportunities to serve. She wants to see a great harvest; she’s willing to work for it. And this desire gets her noticed—and desired herself—by the Prince of Peace. She tells her beloved, **“Let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love.”** (Song of Solomon 7:12) Once again, the fruitfulness of the Gospel—represented symbolically by the juxtaposition of the blossoming pomegranates and grapevines—finds its culmination in the love shared by the King and His bride.

In a fascinating twist, Solomon foresees not only the passion between the King and His beloved, but also the frustration of their being kept physically apart until the marriage supper of the Lamb. The world—willing enough to ignore its own dalliances with silly and superficial false gods—does not see our torrid passion for our divine King as a proper and seemly thing. They can’t understand our longing, our desire, our *obsession* for someone they can’t even perceive—someone they don’t believe really even exists—not as we describe Him. Christianity is increasingly looked upon by the lost world as a mental illness, like some crazy widow who refuses to believe her man is never coming back to her. (But no, I don’t think that’s what “going down to the nut orchard” means.) Meanwhile, we’re thinking, “If only He were *here among us* again, we could at least be close, intimately familiar, like a big brother and his doting little sister”: **“Oh that you were like a brother to me who nursed at my mother’s breasts! If I found you outside, I would kiss you, and none would despise me. I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother—she who used to teach me.”** Who is “mom?” The Holy Spirit! **“I would give you spiced wine to drink, the juice of my pomegranate. His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me! I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.”** (Song of Solomon 8:1-4) That last sentence is puzzling, but it seems to me that perhaps the difference between the role of the church and that of Israel is once again being clarified. The bride, the church, is the King’s undying passion, His visceral desire, now and for eternity. But what about Israel? He will someday display His loving affection and devotion to the “daughters of Jerusalem” as well, but that time must wait. It’s a different sort of love, shown in a different way, at a different time, under different circumstances.

The reason the expression of Yahweh’s love for Israel must wait is that they are still in rebellion against Him. They have rejected His Messiah, and until they recognize their disastrous error, they will remain asleep, estranged, and at enmity

with Him. Fortunately, scripture reveals that this reconciliation *will* happen—they *will* awaken from their spiritual coma. Their epiphany will be so monumental an episode, in fact, it is singled out as one of the seven most significant events in Yahweh’s entire plan: it’s prophesied by the sixth of Yahweh’s seven annual holy convocations, the Day of Atonement.

Devout Jews today call the ten days between the Feast of Trumpets and the Day of Atonement the “ten days of awe,” using them, ironically enough, to reflect upon their spiritual condition. But since the Feast of Trumpets is predictive of the removal of the church from the world, these “ten days of awe” (that is, the time between the definitive Feast of Trumpets and the ultimate Day of Atonement) are going to be an occasion for more than spiritual reflection: they’re going to be (as Yahshua put it) a time of **“great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.”** (Matthew 24:21) And during this time, the sign of the pomegranate is going to be *very* hard to see: **“Be ashamed, O tillers of the soil; wail, O vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished. The vine dries up; the fig tree languishes. Pomegranate, palm, and apple, all the trees of the field are dried up, and gladness dries up from the children of man.”** (Joel 1:11-12) Many of God’s symbols, in fact, will be impacted by the dire circumstances that will dominate the earth after the rapture. Wheat and barley speak of Yahweh’s provision—gone. The vine symbolizes mankind—severely depopulated. The fig tree describes Israel—languishing. The palm tree, indicating righteousness in the earth—will be hard to come by. And the pomegranate? The refuge formerly afforded to those who sought shelter in the blood of Christ will be gone—in temporal terms, anyway. **“It was granted to [the beast] to make war with the saints and to over come them.”** (Revelation 13:7) There will be no place to hide.

It will be like an echo of Haggai’s rebuke to the post-exilic Israelites, who dragged their feet in restoring the worship of Yahweh at the rebuilt temple—a neglect Yahweh answered with drought and infertility. When they get serious about Him, He says, He will once again pour out blessings upon them: **“Indeed, the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have yielded nothing. But from this day on I will bless you.”** (Haggai 2:19) The world *will* recover from the Great Tribulation, brought back from the brink of utter destruction. And (judging by the symbols) mankind, beginning with Israel, will find refuge in the blood of the Messiah, and (as the prophet Joel tells us) the Spirit of Yahweh will be poured out upon all flesh.

SYCAMORE

❧ 3.3.12 ❧

Abundance

When I was a kid growing up in Southern California, we had a big sycamore tree growing in our front yard. It was a great “climbing tree,” as I recall. It had leaves the size of the palm of your hand—the bane of my existence for a few weeks every autumn. This tree *wasn't* the biblical sycamore (*Ficus sycomorous*). The sycamore of scripture is not a cousin to the Eurasian maple or plane tree so common in America. Rather, it's a large fruit tree common to Africa and the Middle East, bearing a sweet, edible fruit, similar (but considered inferior) to the common fig. It's called a *shiqmah* in Hebrew or *Sukomoraia* in Greek. (The Greek word for “fig” is *sukon*.)

Remember what I noted a while back about repetition in scripture? It seemed obvious to me that if a single subject is brought up several times, its importance is being stressed. Sycamores don't show up too often in the Bible, but what struck me is that the same descriptive characterization of the sycamore shows up—virtually word for word—*three times*. One of them reads: **“Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules, so much year by year. And Solomon gathered together chariots and horsemen. He had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone, and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah [the lowland].”** (I Kings 10:23-27; cf. II Chronicles 1:15, II Chronicles 9:27)

Under the blessing of God, everything Solomon had, he had in abundance. Whereas sycamores trees grew like weeds in the lowlands of Israel, the cedar was costly and slow growing, harvested from Lebanon and shipped to Jerusalem at great expense. Sycamores were *naturally* plentiful. A parallel example of the principle is silver, which is compared here to stone: Jerusalem limestone is the stuff the city is built on—and *of*. It is the very ground beneath your feet, if you'll dig down a few feet and quarry it. Solomon made silver, a precious metal that must be laboriously mined and smelted, as “common” (so to speak) as the very bedrock of Zion. The point is that under Solomon's reign, Yahweh provided everything in abundance, in profusion. This economic reality was the spiritual legacy of Solomon's father, David. It says a lot about what can happen when a nation and its leader are totally and unreservedly devoted to Yahweh: peace,

prosperity, and plenty follow. The ultimate example of this phenomenon will be the Millennial reign of Christ, according to scores of glowing prophecies.

Solomon's prosperity, then, began under David. In I Chronicles 27:25-31, we are even given the names of the men who were appointed "cabinet secretaries" or "czars" over Israel's vast resources under King David. (Believe it or not, the Hebrew word describing this office—literally meaning "chief, ruler, official, or overseer"—is *sar*.) **"Baal-Hanan the Gederite was over the olive trees and the sycamore trees that were in the lowlands."** (I Chronicles 27:28) *Ba'al-Hanan*? Wasn't Ba'al the name of one of Canaan's most infamous pagan deities? Yes. As a matter of fact, Ba'al-Hanan (which means "Ba'al is gracious") was also the name of an early pagan king of Edom. What's a guy with a name like this doing supervising David's Sycamore plantations?

In all fairness, we don't get to pick our own names, so the man (who was obviously someone David respected and trusted) didn't have any say in the matter. But this may be a good time to look into this loaded word "ba'al." It's actually a common Hebrew verb simply meaning to possess, own, or rule over. Used as a noun, it describes an owner, ruler, or even a husband, and is thus the basis of the name of the pagan deity Ba'al or Bel, meaning "lord." We are so used to seeing Yahweh's name mistranslated as "the LORD," encountering a rival god named "Ba'al" creates understandable confusion—something Yahweh wished to avoid from the outset.

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes: "One may own (*bā'al*) a house (Exodus 22:7), or rule over (*bā'al*) territory (cf. I Chronicles 4:22). A man may take a wife and marry (*bā'al*) her (Deuteronomy 24:1). A focus on the verb *bā'al* from the theological standpoint leads to a consideration of marriage terminology employed by God in defining His relationship to His people. 'For your Maker is your husband (*bā'al*), the Lord [YHWH] of hosts is His name' (Isaiah 54:5ff.). In Jeremiah, the existing marriage relationship becomes a motivation for repentance: 'For I am a husband (*bā'al*) unto you' (Jeremiah 3:14, ASV; RSV renders it "I am your master"). In the justly famous new covenant passage the former covenant is described as a broken covenant, a situation which is the more sobering and shocking because 'I was a husband (*bā'al*) to them, says Jehovah' (Jeremiah 31:32, ASV; RSV similar; cf. Malachi 2:11). The future delights which God will have with his redeemed people are stressed in Isaiah where the land is said to be married (*bā'al*, Niphal), apparently to YHWH. The name of the land, Beulah (passive participle of *bā'al*), signifies both the intimacy and the joy of YHWH in conjunction with the land. The background which such language gives to the New Testament concept of Christ as the bridegroom or husband of His people, the church, should be obvious (cf. Ephesians 5:21ff.). In any case one must not miss the close covenantal tie which

this metaphor suggests, not only of love but of loyalty between God and His people.”

So (getting back on track) it would appear that the *real* name of the keeper of David’s sycamore groves meant “my ruler (or husband) is gracious.” If we realize that the One in question is actually Yahweh, it all begins to make sense. And if we factor in the principle that sycamore trees are scripturally symbolic of abundance or plenty, then we find that the keeper of David’s trees was well-named indeed. Note that Ba’al-Hanan was also the officer in charge of the King’s olive trees—symbolically, the source of the Spirit. So we are reminded of the words of John: **“Whoever receives His testimony sets His seal to this, that God is true. For He whom God has sent utters the words of God, for He gives the Spirit without measure.”** (John 3:33-34) The sycamore and the olive tree, it would seem, *belong* together. The Holy Spirit is present in great abundance—filling, indwelling, and guiding everyone who *knows* that Yahshua, “his ruler and husband, is gracious.”

The prophet Amos was another who was employed tending sycamore trees—metaphorical of the abundance our God showers upon us. And his second job also entailed doing something fraught with symbolic import in God’s vocabulary: minding otherwise defenseless sheep. So when Yahweh called him to do *literally* what his occupation had formerly entailed only figuratively, the false prophets of Israel (like Amaziah, who was the priest at Bethel and royal chaplain to King Jeroboam II) were incensed: **“And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom....’”** Amaziah was quite wrong, of course. The only authorized temple stood in Jerusalem, but the ten northern tribes had turned their backs on it, and on the God whose plan it represented, building their alternate reality north of the border.

“Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, ‘I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But Yahweh took me from following the flock, and Yahweh said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel....’” In this case the “abundance” of the sycamore metaphor is linked in Yahweh’s narrative to “sheep,” people who would have been lost and helpless were it not for His constant watchful care. In other words, (1) there are a lot of people in the world, and (2) we *all* need Yahweh. Amaziah’s arrogant reaction was, “Go prophesy someplace else, Amos. We don’t want your kind around here. We’ve got our own king and our own religion: we don’t want to be reminded (by your inconvenient and discomforting presence) that it’s all as phony as a pink three-dollar bill.”

So the sycamore pruner-turned-prophet announced that the abundance Israel had been enjoying was about to get cut back—and Amaziah himself would be proven to be a false prophet. “Dressing sycamore figs” entailed pinching or nipping the buds, a necessary procedure in order for the fruit to ripen. God’s point

in recruiting someone of Amos' profession was that Israel—the northern kingdom—was ripe for judgment, a judgment designed to encourage repentance. They were at the height of their prosperity. They had material abundance, but had become morally and spiritually corrupt (just like sycamore figs, whose “shelf life” is notoriously short). So Amos—who was from Tekoa in Judah (in other words, a foreigner)—delivered the unwelcome news: **“Now therefore hear the word of Yahweh. You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’ Therefore thus says Yahweh: Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line. you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”** (Amos 7:12-17) This would all be fulfilled a few decades later (in 722 B.C.) when the Assyrians under Sargon II invaded the land.

The front-yard sycamore of my youth apparently *did* have something in common with the fig-bearing tree of the same name in Israel: it made a good climbing tree, as any boy (or tomboy) in Sunday school can attest: we all related to the story of Zacchaeus, didn't we? **“He [Yahshua] entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus.”** Jericho sits 850 feet below sea level (an elevation 3350 feet *lower* than Jerusalem), overlooking the Jordan River valley. If you'll recall, these *lowlands* (called the *Shephelah* in I Kings 10, above) were where sycamore trees were particularly abundant. **“He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small of stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was about to pass that way....”** The objective of Zacchaeus was to get a good look at Yahshua. This squares perfectly with what we've determined to be the symbolic meaning of the sycamore tree—though few of us ever think about the truth being presented here.

But first, some background. Zack had (if I may read between the lines) heard of the works and teaching of the young rabbi, and was in a repentant frame of mind, for his neighbors and countrymen never let him forget for a moment how *hated* he was for doing what he did. Being a “chief tax collector” (Greek: *architelones*, the chief or supervisor of the ordinary tax collectors, the *telones*), he not only collected taxes for the hated Roman occupiers, he also had other publicans working for him, from whose takings he received a percentage. So he was rich, but he knew that at least some of his money was ill-gotten—obtained through extortion, fraud, and creative accounting, all of which was permitted—perhaps even encouraged—by the Romans. (In what may or may not be a coincidence, a Greek verb meaning “to accuse wrongfully, to attack with

malicious devices, to extort or exact money wrongfully” is *sukophanteo*, a word based on *sukon*—the fig that grows on a sycamore tree. The word comes from the extortion that was often imposed on suspected Athenian fig smugglers: a *sukophantes* came to mean one who accuses someone falsely in hopes of gaining profit.) Zacchaeus did the job because the money was so good, but his soul was weighed down by his guilt—whether his own or derived from the sins of his underlings. It’s no fun being part of the problem, even if it does pay the bills.

So Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree, which, as our theory goes, speaks of abundance. Here, the metaphor works two ways. First, there are thousands of reasons for seeking God’s solution for our sinful predicament. Zack’s was arguably the most obvious; but even the scribes and Pharisees—the most outwardly righteous people around—had good reason to suspect that they were falling short of Yahweh’s perfect standard. I am reminded of the morning prayer: “Father, I have not sinned against you today, and I feel really good about that, for I hate letting you down. But any minute now, that alarm clock is going to go off, and I’m going to have to open my eyes, get out of bed, and face the world. I need Your righteousness within me, or I haven’t got a chance.” Second, there are plenty of opportunities to pray, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” While life lasts, repentance is an ever present option. Yahshua is *still* walking up your street, knocking at the door of your heart, and making Himself easy to see—“strolling beneath your sycamore tree,” as it were. Don’t take this the wrong way: there is only one way to God—through the atoning sacrifice of His Messiah. But there are a million ways to see Him, if only we’ll look.

The fascinating thing is, Yahshua is looking for us just as hard as we’re looking for Him: **“And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today....’”** *Must?* Yes. It’s not enough for us to merely catch a glimpse of the Messiah as He walks by. Seeing the Author of life won’t make you alive any more than looking at a grave will kill you. If we are repentant, as Zacchaeus was, then it is imperative that a deeper connection be made: He must come and “stay at our house,” that is, enter our life and become a part of it. And more than just a part: He must become the center of our life, the One about whom everything else revolves.

“So he hurried and came down and received Him joyfully. And when they [the crowd, led by the religious elite] saw it, they all grumbled, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner....’” The thought was: a rabbi with prophetic gifts (or merely a modicum of discernment) should have been able to tell who this guy was—a *sinner* (gasp!)—defined in their eyes as “somebody demonstrably worse than me.” Yahshua, of course, understood what they did not: that *every one of them* were “sinners,” people who had fallen short of Yahweh’s assessment of how we should live our lives (see Romans 3:23). In this game, a miss is as good as a mile:

to be imperfect in one little thing is to define one as a “lawbreaker” (which was sort of the point of the Torah in the first place, explaining why all those animal sacrifices were in there alongside the behavioral instructions).

Christians today brush off the ramifications of Zack’s self prescribed penance, but we shouldn’t. **“And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold....’** Zacchaeus went right back to the Torah. He didn’t say to himself, *Now that I’m on a first-name basis with Jesus, the Law of Moses doesn’t apply to me anymore. All my sins—including the ones that are going to buy me a new country villa next year—are covered by grace. Hallelujah!* No, he took God’s word seriously, and literally. Knowing he had personally defrauded people, he promised to repay them precisely as if he had stolen their sheep (see Exodus 22:1)—fourfold. But then, realizing that much of his wealth had been derived from underlings who had in all likelihood extorted money from people in transactions he could neither trace nor set right, he did what he could to rectify the situation: he gave half of his wealth to the poor. In other words, Zacchaeus repented: he changed his mind and changed his ways. And recognizing his guilt before God, he did what the Torah prescribed. He made restitution.

So what was Yahshua’s response? **“And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.’”** (Luke 19:1-10) He was not saying (as it may sound at first blush) that his new propensity to “toe the Torah’s line” had saved him. Yahshua didn’t call Zacchaeus a “son of Moses.” He called him a “son of *Abraham*,” someone who never even *heard* of the Law of Restitution, but who nevertheless trusted Yahweh with a whole heart, demonstrating a faith that was accounted unto him as righteousness. Zack’s willingness—even eagerness—to obey the Torah indicated a newfound trust in Yahweh alone. Money was no longer going to be a god to him; he would never again cheat in order to gain an advantage, for such dishonesty betrayed a lack of reliance upon the Almighty.

Interestingly, the record is silent on the issue of whether or not Zacchaeus gave up his day job—collecting taxes for the Romans. Yahshua didn’t instruct him to do so, as far as we’re told. The provocative (though speculative) conjecture would be that Zack continued doing his job, but cleaned up his act—including that of his employees, the *telones* who worked for him. He may have reflected that the Romans were going to exact their pound of flesh no matter what. So if Zack quit, some other *architelones* would simply be assigned to replace him, and things could conceivably have gotten even worse for the people. But the repentant Zacchaeus was now in a position to ensure that the people would be taxed fairly (as fair as these things ever get). That is, he and his men would henceforth collect the absolute minimum they could get away with. This strategy, at least, would

reflected the Torah's emphasis on mercy, though nothing remotely like this was codified in the Law. It's all a question of who (or what) you trust. The object of Zacchaeus' trust shifted—when confronted with Yahshua's holiness—from a fat bank account to an unlimited God, One who uses gold as *paving material*, so to speak.

The sycamore tree (or something like it) came up again in the context of faith as Yahshua taught His disciples. He was teaching them about the necessity of forgiving others, but since this tenet (though written between the lines) wasn't blatantly obvious in a Torah-based culture like theirs, they concluded (quite reasonably) that they were going to need more faith in order to comply. So, **“the apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ And the Lord said, ‘If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.”** (Luke 17:5-6) The “mulberry tree” here is the Greek *Sukaminos*, sometimes translated sycamore or sycamine. It seems the *sukaminos* had the form and foliage similar to that of the mulberry tree, but fruit resembling the fig. Apparently, one of these 20-foot high trees stood nearby as Yahshua was speaking, so He used it to illustrate His point. *Barnes' Notes* notes: “It [the *sukaminos*] is easily propagated, merely by planting a stout branch in the ground, and watering it until it has struck its roots into the soil. This it does with great rapidity and to a vast depth. It was with reference to this latter fact that our Lord selected it to illustrate the power of faith.”

But other factors also emerge if we pay attention to the symbolic significance of the elements in Christ's illustration. (1) The mustard seed is extremely tiny. The message is, “You won't need *much* faith (as in “motivation contrary to reason or experience”) at all, though some is required. Remember the “faith” exercised by Naaman the Syrian—minimal but hopeful, just enough to admit the *possibility* that the God of Israel was real. (2) The mulberry/sycamine, if it can be legitimately included within the sycamore symbol, indicates that something *abundant in nature* can be moved through the application of a little bit of faith. (3) The fact that the tree in question bore a fruit that was similar, but not identical, to figs tells us that what would be moved through faith would be *like Israel* in some way. And (4) the destination of the “move” was to be “the sea,” a ubiquitous scriptural metaphor for the gentile world.

Yahshua's picture, then, spoke of the church, His called-out assembly of believers. It revealed how the church would be spread and what its nature would be. The disciples—who would soon be “apostles” sent out to the nations—wouldn't need very much “faith” at all, for they would have seen the risen Christ with their waking eyes, and heard Him explain—in His glorified body—how He had fulfilled the entire Torah through His death, burial, and resurrection. So spreading the Good News of His salvation would be as natural as breathing to

these “men of little faith.” Furthermore, the church *would* be like Israel (the fig tree), in a way: they would both receive their marching orders from the same God, Yahweh. But if I may stretch the analogy a bit, the sycamore figs (the church) were of somewhat inferior quality, and had to be eaten fresh or they’d go bad, whereas the real figs (Israel) would keep for a long time if they were carefully dried out. Israel, having rejected her Messiah, *would be* “dried out”—like a “valley of dry bones,” in fact: see Ezekiel 37. But the sycamore symbol—abundance—as it relates to the church, is made clear through Christ’s mission statement: **“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** (John 10:10) And finally, the “planted-in-the-sea” metaphor informs us of the counterintuitive truth that the church was to be uprooted from its original place within Israel and replanted among the gentile nations, where it would take root and flourish. All it would take is a little bit of faith.

As we have seen before, Yahweh often uses an “attack” against one of His symbols as an indication of the destruction of whatever the symbol represents. In this case, the destruction of sycamore trees would signal a shift from abundance to want, from plenty to famine—whether temporal or spiritual. This shows up in a Psalm by Asaph, a Psalm that begins with a reminder that Yahweh communicates with us through parables and symbols: **“Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of Yahweh, and His might, and the wonders that He has done.”** (Psalm 78:1-4)

The whole Psalm is an indictment of Israel, a recounting of how, time after time, they ignored Yahweh’s warnings, failed to heed His instructions, and met His chastisement with contempt. At one point, Asaph recounts how Israel was delivered from Egypt, but in the long run, they didn’t properly respond even to this miraculous display on their behalf, but forgot about God’s power and provision at the earliest opportunity. **“They [Israel] tested God again and again and provoked the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power or the day when He redeemed them from the foe, when He performed His signs in Egypt and his marvels in the fields of Zoan....”** Zoan, a.k.a. Tanis, was a frontier city of Goshen. Zoan would therefore have been in a perfect position to see *the difference* between what Yahweh was doing to Egypt and how He was simultaneously protecting His people in Goshen. It’s no wonder Isaiah called the princes of Zoan “fools.” (See Isaiah 19:11.) Some things never change.

Asaph goes on to describe the judgments Yahweh brought upon Egypt in response to their stubbornness, their reluctance to release Israel from their bondage. **“He turned their rivers to blood, so that they could not drink of their streams. He sent among them swarms of flies, which devoured them, and frogs, which destroyed them.**

He gave their crops to the destroying locust and the fruit of their labor to the locust. He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamores with frost. He gave over their cattle to the hail and their flocks to thunderbolts....” The list is neither comprehensive nor in order, but any Israelite throughout their subsequent history should have been awestruck at this reminder of the magnitude of what Yahweh had done for them. The “frost” isn’t mentioned *per se* in Exodus, but the seventh plague, hail, is after all, a type of ice storm. The word is used only this once in scripture. Some lexicons see this as freezing rain or sleet. In any case, the tropical-climate-loving sycamores of Egypt were destroyed—and with them, the abundance that had characterized the Egyptian economy for centuries on end. It really doesn’t pay to say “No” to the true and living God.

Asaph wasn’t done, nor was Yahweh. **“He let loose on them His burning anger, wrath, indignation, and distress, a company of destroying angels. He made a path for His anger; He did not spare them from death, but gave their lives over to the plague. He struck down every firstborn in Egypt, the firstfruits of their strength in the tents of Ham.”** (Psalm 78:41-51) How could Israel “not remember His power” when Yahweh had bought their freedom for them at such a terrible price? Such institutional thoughtlessness would seem illogical—even insane. And yet, is that not precisely what the majority of the human race has done with that which the exodus deliverance was designed to foretell? I’m speaking, of course, of our redemption from slavery to sin—bought at an even more “terrible price,” the blood of Christ. Just as Israel’s freedom from temporal bondage was purchased at the price of Egypt’s firstborn (note that the Hebrew word for “Egypt” is Mizraim, who was the son of Noah’s son Ham—Genesis 10:6), the *spiritual* freedom of the whole human race was secured for us at the price of the death of Yahweh’s “firstborn” (so to speak), Yahshua the Messiah. The parallel usage of “firstborn” and “firstfruits” in this passage reminds us of the significance of the Feast of Firstfruits—the day prophesying and commemorating the resurrection of Yahshua from the tomb.

The slaying of Egypt’s firstborn was the culmination of the process which included the destruction by hail of Egypt’s sycamore trees—symbolic of plentiful abundance in their culture and economy. We should not be unaware that Yahweh tends to repeat Himself, sometimes to the point of ennui, if the lesson is critical to our understanding and well being. God removed Egypt’s abundance in hopes of getting their attention. (The fact that it didn’t work is no reflection on His omniscience or power, only on His longsuffering nature.) He later did the same thing with Israel, and obtained roughly the same result: He had to go much, much farther to get the job done. And I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings, but the whole scenario is about to be repeated on a global scale: when blood, flies, lice, and frogs don’t bring about the repentance of mankind, Yahweh will once again rain down hail on our sycamore trees, so to speak. John saw it all in prophetic vision: **“And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures,**

saying, 'A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!'...And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth." (Revelation 6:6, 8) Okay, sycamore trees aren't overtly mentioned in Revelation, but what they symbolize—the abundance of God's blessings our race has been enjoying on this planet—is once again going to be severely curtailed, though this time, the whole earth is going to be affected. God's point in doing this will be the same as always: to get our attention.

At the end of our section on cedar trees (earlier in this interminable chapter), I addressed the Isaiah 9 principle, in which people (America, for example) express their defiance against Yahweh by refusing to receive His rod of correction in the spirit of humility, opting instead to rebuild what God has torn down, bigger and better than ever. **"Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria... say in pride and in arrogance of heart: 'The bricks have fallen, but we will build with dressed stones; the sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place....'"** Or, translated with *The Torah Code* secret decoder ring, "That with which we had been blessed by God in such abundance was all very nice, I suppose, but now that it's gone, we can surely do better in our own strength. We may have hit a few 'bumps in the road' (a phrase I borrowed directly from President Obama) but we are too big to fail, and proud of it. Nothing can stop us from reaching our glorious self-assigned destiny."

Though the players may have changed, the scriptural scenario is identical to what we see in our present world: **"But Yahweh raises the adversaries of Rezin against him, and stirs up his enemies."** Rezin was the king of Aram (Syria), and his "adversaries" were the dreaded Assyrians. **"The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west devour Israel with open mouth...."** The point here is that there is invariably more than one enemy to deal with. Sun Tzu's famous military maximum, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," isn't necessarily true, in any causal sense. The enemy of my enemy may be *my* enemy as well (as Russia was to America and Britain in World War II), temporarily neutralized via mutual interest though he may be. But hear me well: dar al-Islam is an ally to no one—not even to themselves. Christians (or Jews) who imagine it to be prudent to ally ourselves with Muslims—even in defense against other "more dangerous" political foes—will find themselves betrayed. If we were smart, our *only* allies would be others allied to the Almighty. To amend Sun Tzu, "The friend of my Friend is my friend, if our mutual Friend is Yahweh."

Granted, that leaves us with a very small pool of potential allies. As far as I can tell, there is not a single country left on earth that *as a nation* honors Yahweh, though His people are scattered all over the globe, hidden in pockets large and small. Ironically, it is nations like Israel and America that are *most* likely to get

sent to God's woodshed, for like any good father, Yahweh disciplines only His own children. The others are left alone to fend for themselves, which in the long run is far, far worse for them. But Yahweh chastises His people (often by merely withholding His hand of miraculous protection) in attempt to encourage us to repent from our creeping apostasy and apathy—to rekindle our relationship with Him by letting us experience eye-opening setbacks. So when we see defeat after defeat, we must remember *why* God is letting this happen to us: **“For all this His anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still. The people did not turn to Him who struck them, nor inquire of Yahweh of hosts....”** There it is. It's all designed to encourage us to (1) turn to Him (which requires a change of direction on our part) and to (2) enquire of Yahweh. That's the hard one for people arrogant enough to believe they've got it all figured out. Pride will keep us separated from our God more readily than anything else.

The conclusion of the matter is a warning to those in positions of power and influence. And unless I'm mistaken, what Yahweh did with Israel, He is perfectly willing to do to America, if He opines that it might help us arise from our self-induced coma: **“So Yahweh cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day—the elder and honored man is the head, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail....”** Starting with the premise that being “cut off from Israel” is a bad thing, we need to define who, precisely, is suffering this fate. The “head” is equated to both the palm branch (not *tamar*—symbolic of righteousness—but *kipah*, the same word used of the palm of the hand, or the hand in general, indicating “doing” or achievement) and the honored man. The “head,” then, is the best, brightest, and most powerful—the leaders of a society. And the “tail” is likened to both a reed (which in Hebrew speaks of something pliable, weak, and of little value) and to a lying prophet, someone who promotes falsehood for profit, especially as seen in a supporting role to the “honored head.”

In other words, the leadership of the nation (*any* nation) will fall—and not just the figureheads, but their behind-the-scenes minions as well—if they fail to heed Yahweh's calls to repentance. **“For those who guide this people have been leading them astray, and those who are guided by them are swallowed up.”** (Isaiah 9:9-16) When we see our “sycamore trees”—our abundance—being sacrificed to hail and locusts (so to speak), we are to take it as a sign that we have fallen (or jumped) out of favor with God—we have come up short of His opinion of how things ought to be. At that point, denial is senseless; heroic determination to replant and rebuild is counterproductive. There's only one thing to do: repent!

OAK OR TEREBINTH

❧ 3.3.13 ❧

Death or Dormancy

Well, this is depressing, I must say. I live in a neighborhood called “Seven Oaks,” in the middle of wooded area bristling with oaks, hickories, maples, and other deciduous trees. I love it here, but a survey of the scriptural mentions of “oak trees” reveals that they are invariably connected with death, something that leads to death, or the state of being dormant or inactive. Perhaps God chose this symbol because these trees lose their leaves every autumn, feigning death as they await the renewal of spring. And I don’t know how spiritually significant this might be, but oak trees sometimes endure the “death” of winter without actually dropping their dead leaves—a condition known as being “half-dressed.” These oaks don’t seem to want to accept their condition—that of being “dead” (okay, *dormant*) where they stand. They make a bold show of it in the face of winter’s chill, but their leaves are no longer green, no longer feeding the tree with the sun’s gift of life. These shriveled pale yellow holdouts, hanging on until the bitter end, are nothing but a sad reminder that real life is something that just can’t be faked.

The tone for the oak tree symbol was set way back in Genesis: **“And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel [“God of the house of God”], because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother. And Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak [*allon*] below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth.”** (Genesis 35:6-8) *Allon-bacuth* means “oak of weeping.” Like a gravestone, this oak was chosen to mark the resting place of the lifeless body of a beloved friend. As we shall soon see, this begins a pattern: whenever we encounter an oak in scripture, death is never far away. Alas, it is part of the human condition: these bodies in which we live were not built to last. They’re designed as the ideal vehicles in which to make our choices before God, but once our course is determined, they’re not really needed anymore: all we can do is plant them under an oak tree and await the resurrection. The oak’s own “rebirth” in the spring is but one of a score of hints Yahweh built into nature designed to remind us of our own coming renewal—*if* our roots are secure in Him.

There are actually two trees in scripture that share this symbolic profile, the oak (Hebrew: *allon*) and the terebinth (*elah*). The names are translated almost interchangeably, depending on what English version you’re consulting. The *allon* and *elah* are mentioned in parallel in this passage: **“Then I said, ‘How long, O Lord?’**

And He said: ‘Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and Yahweh removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth [*elah*] or an oak [*allon*], whose stump remains when it is felled.’ The holy seed is its stump.” (Isaiah 6:11-13) This is one of only two Hebrew passages in which the two trees are mentioned together, and they don’t appear in the New Testament at all.

This is in the chapter describing Isaiah’s prophetic commission. Yahweh has just called, and Isaiah has answered: “Here am I—send me.” But then God gives His young prophet the bad news: *Practically nobody’s going to heed your warnings, Isaiah. They’ll hear but not listen, and see but not perceive, because of the hardness of their hearts.* So Isaiah asks the salient question: How long will this condition persist? Yahweh’s answer is recorded above, peppered with ominous words like “waste,” “desolate,” “forsaken,” “burned,” and “felled.” In other words, Isaiah’s audience, Israel, is to be rendered dormant—to all appearances *dead*, like an oak or terebinth tree that has been cut down and burned—until its “holy seed,” an acorn as it were, rises from the ashes in miraculous, renewed life. Israel’s “cutting” happened at the hands of Assyria and Babylon; the “burning” took place on Rome’s watch. But now—after almost two millennia of waiting in dormant exile—the oak and terebinth have sprouted anew from the fallow ground, amid the ashes of their former identity. They’re not yet what you could call a “tree,” but they’re finally showing signs of life.

The body of Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, wasn’t the only dead thing Jacob buried beneath a tree. The story begins in the verses just prior to the passage we reviewed above: **“God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there.’** He was in Shechem at the time, about twenty miles north of Bethel. **“Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”** This is a reference to the “wrestling match” recorded in Genesis 32, the one in which Jacob refused to let the theophany go until He blessed him—and where his name got changed from Jacob (“supplanter”) to Israel (“strives with God”). Israel and his clan were being instructed to go back to holy ground. **“So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone....’”**

It is not necessary to postulate that Jacob’s family were still idolaters. By this time, Jacob had four wives, eleven mostly-grown sons (plus multiple daughters, though only one is mentioned by name) and considerable wealth in the form of flocks and herds. So it is axiomatic that there were quite a few hired hands and domestic servants—like Deborah, for example—in his employ: it is *they* who

were still clinging to their local gods and traditions. At Jacob's word (having seen what his God was all about) they all complied: **"So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth [*elah*] tree that was near Shechem."** (Genesis 35:1-4) The principle is thus beginning to emerge: dead things should be buried in the ground under the shade of a terebinth or oak tree. They are not to see the light of day.

Half a millennium later—with the Egyptian experience now in their rear-view mirror—Israel got a little *déjà vu*, with a twist. We pick up the story as Joshua—now the aging leader of Israel with many miles, and battles, under his belt—gives his "commencement speech" to the people. After recounting their many failures of faith in the wilderness, and after reiterating his own determination to follow Yahweh no matter what (Joshua 24:15), Joshua expressed his doubts about Israel's commitment. **"But Joshua said to the people, 'You are not able to serve Yahweh, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake Yahweh and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good....'"** That's the "downside" (so to speak) to being Yahweh's chosen people: He expects you to respond to His love and provision in kind, and He's not shy about applying the rod of correction if He decides you're worth saving from your own foolishness.

"And the people said to Joshua, 'No, but we will serve Yahweh.' Then Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen Yahweh, to serve Him.' And they said, 'We are witnesses.' He said, 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to Yahweh, the God of Israel....'" *What?* He had to tell them—at this late date—to *put away their foreign gods*? What's going on here? Did they even *know* they still had "foreign gods" among them? We have to read between the lines, of course, but I surmise that the Israelites of Joshua's day were doing roughly the same thing many Christians of *my* day are doing: adamantly proclaiming their willingness and determination to follow and revere the One True God, while at the same time holding on to "foreign gods"—things they don't even recognize as such. These are not necessarily "bad" things; they're merely things we find ourselves serving, defending, and supporting *in place of Yahweh*, with our time, money, and effort. We don't (I would hope) maintain shrines to little stone idols, or offer incense to statues representing demons any more. But we all too often *do* confuse the good with the essential, or the created with the Creator. A few examples (tailored for my American friends): our comfortable lifestyles (and the careers that pay for them); our recreational passions (or, in some cases, *obsessions*); our religious traditions, holidays, and creeds; and our political points of view, our candidates, political parties—even our Constitution. See what I mean? It's stealth idolatry. The things in our lives don't have to be evil to distract us from what's essential.

So, where does the oak or terebinth tree enter the picture this time? **“And the people said to Joshua, ‘Yahweh our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.’ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth [*alah*, a variant of *elah*, used just this once] that was by the sanctuary of Yahweh.”** At a terebinth tree near *Shechem*? Is it possible that this was the very same place where Jacob had buried the idols belonging to his household? We’re left to ponder it, of course (and remember, this *was* five hundred years later), but the irony is delicious indeed. **“And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of Yahweh that He spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.’”** (Joshua 24:19-27) The stone Joshua set up was like a grave marker: “Here lies the idolatry of Israel.” It stood as a witness of the nation’s good intentions to honor Yahweh alone. And as far as we know, those who were there that day pretty much kept their word.

But here’s the thing about graves: you only bury one generation at a time. When my father died, we all stood around his grave celebrating his life, singing hymns from memory, and praising God for his testimony. But my brothers and I went on living; we continued making our own choices, for better or worse. And our children too make their own decisions, independent of our desires or counsel. We can influence them, perhaps, but we cannot determine their destinies for them. And so it was with Israel. Another couple of generations down the road, and Joshua’s “witness marker” stood mocking Israel’s “best laid plans” like a losing lotto ticket. They—many of them—had turned back to idolatry, and had suffered the consequences. But it had all happened so gradually, they apparently didn’t even realize what they’d done.

So we read, **“Now the angel of Yahweh came and sat under the terebinth [*elah*] at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites.”** That’s the rough equivalent of concealing your lunch money in your shoe in hopes that the school bully won’t steal it from you. It was, to anyone familiar with the “cursings” of Deuteronomy 28, an undeniable indication that Israel had *not* “obeyed the voice of Yahweh their God, to observe carefully all His commandments.” But Gideon didn’t know that (as he should have). In fact, he seems genuinely puzzled at his nation’s predicament: **“And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him and said to him, ‘Yahweh is with you, O mighty man of valor.’ And Gideon said to him, ‘Please, sir, if Yahweh is with us, why then has all this happened to us?’”** (Judges 6:11-13) Had he forgotten about the wooden image of Ba’al that *his own father* maintained? If we’re attuned to the symbol of the terebinth tree, we can see that the theophany was—as gently as He could—pointing out that Gideon and his generation were as good as dead, or *would be* if they didn’t do something to reverse their fortunes.

Calling Gideon a “mighty man of valor” as he hid out from the Midianites in his daddy’s winepress sounds like sarcasm—like when somebody calls me “genius” when I’ve done something really stupid. But angels—or theophanies—aren’t really known for their cynicism or sense of humor. They invariably tell the straight, unadorned truth. And so it would seem here, if the subsequent story is factored in. It was actually a prophecy: Gideon *would become* “a might man of valor” once he learned to trust Yahweh unreservedly. The lesson of the terebinth tree was that Israel would remain dormant until they returned to Yahweh—something they would do (at least temporarily) under Gideon’s leadership.

Same song, second verse: the story of King Saul’s untimely death. The account is recorded in full in I Samuel 31, but the burial is described in I Chronicles: **“But when all Jabesh-gilead heard all that the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and took away the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons, and brought them to Jabesh. And they buried their bones under the oak [*elah*] in Jabesh and fasted seven days.”** The tree is described in I Samuel as a tamarisk (Hebrew: *eshel*). But the tamarisk is an evergreen, thus probably not included in the symbolic profile. In any case, this passage ties the death of Saul to the oak tree, but more importantly, to the reason for his untimely demise: **“So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with Yahweh in that he did not keep the command of Yahweh, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from Yahweh. Therefore Yahweh put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.”** (I Chronicles 10:11-14) In other words, the oak tree (death or dormancy) speaks of one’s mistrust for and disobedience of Yahweh.

Saul’s successor—and the one to whom God turned over the governance of Israel—was David. Saul had met David when he was just a teenager. Their first meeting (*maybe*—the record skips around a bit) apparently took place when David was sent by his father to bring provisions to his older brothers as they fought against the Philistines. Young David was surprised to find the armies of Israel stopped dead in their tracks because of the taunts of the Philistine champion, a giant named Goliath. Of course, any *reasonable* man operating in his own strength and skill would have been perfectly justified in cowering in his tent. But David was not yet a man, reasonable or otherwise. He was just a kid, a shepherd boy, one his oldest brother Eliab (knowing him all too well) accused of being insolent and overconfident (see I Samuel 17:28). Well, perhaps he was. After all, he had successfully defended his flock against lions and bears, no less fearsome (to him) than this oversized Philistine thug.

But David also had something that nobody else in the camp of Israel had that day: a wholehearted, unshakable trust in Yahweh. We all know the story: David met Goliath on the field of battle, beamed him with a well placed sling stone, and then cut off the giant’s head with his own sword—one the kid could barely lift.

And then he did what any victorious testosterone-fueled adolescent might do: he carried Goliath's head around with him for the rest of the day as Israel's troops chased the Philistines through the countryside. We all tend to miss the point of the story, misapplying it by observing that the small and weak can overcome great odds and defeat the giants in life. But the *real* point is that David wasn't fighting in his own strength at all, but in God's. Against Yahweh, Goliath never had a chance. It mattered not that David was a scrawny little shepherd boy, unschooled in the ways of war. God could have brought Goliath down with a mosquito, had He chosen to. But His purpose was to be glorified through the faith of one insignificant lad—who himself subsequently gained immeasurable significance in Israel simply because He trusted Yahweh.

I'm sure you found all of that quite fascinating, but why am I bringing it up? It's because of *where* the face-off took place. This happened at a place called the Valley of Elah—the valley of the oak tree. The symbolic significance of this (I'm thinking) lies not so much in Goliath's death, but in the ineffectiveness—the *dormancy*—of Israel's armies until they were reminded by a simple shepherd boy that human valor isn't really worth much on the field of battle without trust in Yahweh. Men have gone to war since the dawn of time claiming that “God was on their side,” of course, though such “faith” is invariably nothing more than wishful thinking. The Philistines encamped in the Valley of Elah may have marched under the banner of their god Dagon, but it's pretty clear that they *trusted* Goliath. The invocation of their god (or gods) was actually just “cheap insurance” to them, a hopeful, superstitious method for ensuring success in what they had *already* decided to do, independent of any direction the deity in question may have been said to provide. It should be obvious that it doesn't help to pray to a god who isn't present, isn't real, and has no power. But it is just as useless to pray to the One True God—Yahweh—if you have no intention of doing what He instructs you to do. David did. Saul did not.

That's not to say David was sinless. Although his heart was Yahweh's throughout his life, his head (not to mention some other body parts) wandered off and got lost occasionally. And there were always consequences—setbacks that scripture links directly to these lapses in behavior. One such consequence was that his own son Absalom tried to seize the throne of Israel at one point, and he nearly succeeded. Civil war ensued, and David found himself fighting for his life against the forces of his own son. But Yahweh *was* on David's side, and as the battle turned in the king's favor, Absalom was forced to flee through the woods of Ephraim.

As a young man, David had refused to harm King Saul when he had the chance, even though the king was trying to kill him. His point was that, for all his faults, Saul was still Yahweh's anointed; David knew it was not his prerogative to

remove Saul from the throne of Israel, but God's alone. Now, since Absalom had seized the throne, the repentant David couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Yahweh had removed *him* for his sins, just as He had Saul. So whether out of compassion or godly prudence, he issued instructions that Absalom, if found, was to be dealt with gently. But it was not to be: **"And Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great terebinth, and his head caught fast in the oak, and he was suspended between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on...."** Just to keep things interesting, the same word (*elah*) is translated as *both* "terebinth" and "oak" here. Whichever tree the word actually means, the symbolic indication is that Absalom's coup was dead, even if he wasn't—yet. In today's vernacular, we might say that he had been "hung out to dry," unable to run, hide, defend himself, or make amends for the disastrous choices he'd made.

Don't look now, but we'll all eventually find ourselves in that position—"hanging by our heads" (that is, by what we think, believe and decide) from the "oak tree" of our own fragile mortality, utterly vulnerable before a holy God. Will we be punished as rebels against Yahweh's Anointed King, or will we be treated with mercy, as the King Himself desires? With Absalom (whose name, *'Abishalom*, means "my father is peace") it depended upon who got to him first—the rescue squad or the firing squad. But unlike Absalom's finite father David, *our* King is able to meet us on a moment's notice, wherever we are, if we will but call out to Him.

Anyway, **"A certain man saw it and told Joab [David's top General], 'Behold, I saw Absalom hanging in an oak [*elah*].' Joab said to the man who told him, 'What, you saw him? Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt [that is, an armament upgrade]....'"** Joab was ostensibly on David's side, but what he said and did betrayed an utter lack of respect for the king's wishes. We Christians would do well to examine our own lives to determine whether we are treating Christ as Joab did David. When we do things our own way, according to our own inclinations (instead of His specific instructions), we are demonstrating treasonous proclivities. We must never forget that although David didn't deal with Joab's treachery during his lifetime, he did instruct his son and heir Solomon to do so, which he did with lethal efficiency (see I Kings 2:28-35). What goes around comes around, as they say.

"But the man said to Joab, 'Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not reach out my hand against the king's son, for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, 'For my sake protect the young man Absalom....'" This unnamed soldier knew better than to obey Joab's unlawful order. He had heard the directive from the very lips of the king: "Show mercy to my son, even though he has rebelled against me." I can't help but reflect that Joab's reaction

demonstrates the error of *religion* (as opposed to relationship with God). Yahweh desires that everyone should be given the chance to repent: His mercy is designed to encourage this very thing (see Romans 2:4, II Peter 3:9). But “religion” seeks to curtail free will, to force the issue, to punish nonconformity—and worse, to do it in “the interests of God,” as if God couldn’t take care of His own affairs.

The wise soldier knew that double crossing the king would be a losing proposition: Joab would surely have “thrown him under the bus” to save his own skin, if it came to that. For the general, loyalty ran a distant second to perceived expediency. So the soldier told his commander, **“On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof.”** Joab said, **‘I will not waste time like this with you.’** And he took **three javelins in his hand and thrust them into the heart of Absalom while he was still alive in the oak. And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him and killed him.”** (II Samuel 18:9-15) Having no good answer to give, Joab dismissively brushed off the soldier, along with his implied word of caution. Surrounded by sycophants, he proceeded to do what he deemed personally advantageous, despite the stated decree of King David. But the prudent soldier had told him something we must all take into consideration: nothing is hidden from the King.

The moral of the story is going to sound “unpatriotic” or “cowardly” to some. But I must call ’em like I see ’em. There are many wrongs in the world, things that war against the kingdom of God and against all that is decent and holy. A few isolated examples: Islam, Communism, atheistic secular humanism, abortion, illicit drugs, pornography, organized crime, shady lawyers, greed, and racism. As the end of the age approaches, we can perceive all of these things (and more) being “caught by their heads” like Absalom in the oak tree. That is, their own corrupt nature will ensure their eventual downfall. But human logic (the path of Joab) might say that we need to stamp these things out by attacking and killing those who promote them: *Since God is on our side, we can and should appoint ourselves judge, jury, and executioner.*

But God Himself said, **“You shall not murder”** (Exodus 20:13). And Christ clarified the principle: **“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”** (Matthew 5:21-22). He went on to say, **“Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”** (Matthew 5:39-42) *Do not resist evil people?* Yes. Whereas *religious people* may feel justified in bombing abortion clinics, shooting drug

dealers (or their lawyers), or waging genocidal wars against Muslims, gays, or Communists, we followers of Yahweh are not authorized or instructed to do anything like this. On the contrary, God says, “Trust Me to take care of these things Myself, in My own good time.”

It isn't “logical,” I know. First, we're told to **“Take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.”** Does not armament imply warfare? Does not warfare require aggression? Not really: look carefully at our arsenal: **“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”** (Ephesians 6:13-17) All of the items on the list except one are purely for defense. And the single “offensive weapon”—the “sword of the Spirit, the Word of God”—comes with instructions: it is to be used *in prayer*. If I may use a crude analogy, this is like a soldier in the field, equipped only with a helmet, boots, body armor, and a radio. If there's a target that needs “taking out,” he doesn't throw his walkie-talkie at them: he uses his radio to call in an air strike. That's our job as soldiers in God's army: to communicate the situation on the battlefield to headquarters, so our Commander in Chief (the *real* One) can take care of things properly and decisively.

Remember, Absalom (i.e., anyone who is in rebellion against the King) is hanging there in the “oak tree” of his own mortality. In his own strength, he's stuck: he's either dead or dormant. He's not going anywhere. So it is *not* our job to throw a javelin at him. It is, rather, our duty to report the situation to the King, Yahshua (through prayer, via the Holy Spirit, to Yahweh). The obedient unnamed soldier in the story only made one miscalculation. He didn't go straight to David, but instead told General Joab what had happened to Absalom. We must not make the mistake of assuming religion can do Yahweh's job.

Now that we've established the concept that whenever we see an oak or terebinth tree in scripture, death is invariably in the picture, we can use the symbol to reverse engineer (or at least verify the truth of) another ubiquitous Biblical premise: that idolatry leads to death. This may be a good place to start: **“They [he's speaking of Israel] sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak [*allon*], poplar, and terebinth [*elah*], because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery.”** (Hosea 4:13)

He's not talking about Levitical sacrifices here. Those could only be made "in the place where Yahweh chooses to make His name abide," that is, wherever the tabernacle or temple stood—in Hosea's day, Jerusalem.

Offering sacrifices in groves of trees or on hilltops is a dead giveaway that we're talking about Babylonian-style cultic observance: Ba'al worship using Asherah poles, the rites of which included religious prostitution, both literal and figurative. As intimated here, the idolaters loved their "shade," for they didn't really want their wicked practices exposed to the light of day: some things never change. The oak/terebinth symbol, then, reveals (actually, *confirms*) that such idolatrous practices are the pathway to death. It's not as if the principle hadn't been laid out in the Torah so many times you couldn't miss it. A few examples will suffice: **"Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than Yahweh alone, shall be devoted to destruction."** (Exodus 22:20) This gives substance to the warning implied in the Second Commandment: **"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I Yahweh your God am a jealous God."** (Exodus 20:4-5)

Later, Moses got even more specific: **"If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. But you shall kill him."** This wouldn't be construed as murder (prohibited in the Sixth Commandment) because it's a God-instituted punishment for a specific crime. **"Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."** Stoning was the method of execution specified when the capital crime being addressed (in this case, enticement to idolatry) had been perpetrated against the whole congregation, not just one individual. Besides being just and fair (because idolatry in their midst put the entire nation at risk), there was a deterrent implied in the punishment: **"And all Israel shall hear and fear and never again do any such wickedness as this among you."** (Deuteronomy 13:6-11) One gets the feeling that if this severe and disquieting commandment had been observed a few times early in Israel's history, they never would have gotten themselves into the sorry state Hosea described above.

In a perfect world, it would never be necessary to put someone to death for enticing others to abandon Yahweh and embrace false gods. But because of His gift of free will, it's *not* a perfect world; far from it. In fact, after the rapture, the

world will be *defined* by ubiquitous, universal “imperfection.” But while the church remains, we have Paul’s practical permutation of Moses’ precept to ponder: **“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.”** (Colossians 3:5-6) Now that idolatry is endemic in the world, now that Pandora’s box is open, it’s a little late to begin getting literal with Deuteronomy 13—physically killing everyone who suggests doing what God would call idolatry. (And to be perfectly clear about this, the precept was clearly only intended to be applied—literally, anyway—within theocratic Israel. Review the entire law, beginning in Deuteronomy 12:29.) But it is still entirely possible to “kill” the enticements to idolatry that confront us daily—not people, but the temptations on Paul’s list. I didn’t say it would be easy, but it *is* possible.

One might logically long for the “good old days,” when idolatry required overt stupidity, as Isaiah describes it: **“He [the idolater] chooses a cypress tree or an oak [*allon*] and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar [the worship of power] and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, ‘Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!’ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’”** (Isaiah 44:14-17) Nowadays, the enticements to idolatry that we face are a wee bit more subtle. The **“sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness”** about which Paul warned us are woven into the fabric of our daily lives—even (or should I say, *especially*) in an ostensibly “Judeo-Christian” environment like America. And the more educated, sophisticated, technologically advanced, and well informed we get, the more insidious the constant bombardment of idolatrous suggestion becomes. It’s no wonder Christ and the apostolic writers constantly encourage us to remain vigilant. It’s a jungle out there, inhabited by oak trees and roaring lions that seek to devour us.

The Bible makes no secret of the fact that there are consequences for idolatry—in reality, for *any* disobedience of Yahweh’s instructions. And the frequent, seemingly incidental, mention of oak trees in the context of such disobedience should remind us that those consequences include death. But bear in mind that the death of the body is, in the end, intended to serve as a symbol teaching us about a far more significant kind of death—the separation of our souls from Yahweh’s Spirit. We (our souls) are, like the oak trees of the forest, *designed* to reawaken from physical death—the dormancy of winter. In fact, as I looked for “oak tree” references, I was reminded of one of the strangest tales in the entire Bible, one that ended in the death of a faithful prophet of Yahweh—just to make a point. Worse, the guy died because he was tricked—deceived—by

another prophet, lying to him (apparently) because *God told him too*. Weird. The whole thing is about as counterintuitive as any story you can find in scripture—especially if you’re laboring under the mindset that physical death is a problem. To Yahweh, death is just one of those things people do in life: if we deal with it well, it will (or can) honor Him. But it’s not remotely the end of existence for us who live by virtue of His Spirit, any more than winter is really fatal to an oak tree.

Anyway, the story begins, **“And behold, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of Yahweh to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings.”** Jeroboam was the king who divided Israel after Solomon’s death, taking the ten northern tribes away from Judah’s petulant Rehoboam, and plunging them into an age of unprecedented apostasy. Bethel was his alternative to Jerusalem: the new center for Israel’s false worship. **“And the man cried against the altar by the word of Yahweh and said, ‘O altar, altar, thus says Yahweh: “Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.””** *Josiah?* We are all familiar with the name of the future reformer-king of Judah, of course, but Josiah came to the throne *291 years* after Jeroboam did. This is roughly like Isaac Newton predicting that “a guy named Barack Obama will someday be president of the United States, whatever that is.” But forget the *who*. The *what* is the message here: burning human bodies and bones on an altar is the clearest possible way of saying, “This place is utterly defiled before God.” **“And he gave a sign the same day, saying, ‘This is the sign that Yahweh has spoken: “Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.””** (I Kings 13:1-3)

Needless to say, King Jerry, whose entire political existence depended on weaning Israel off of the worship of Yahweh and getting them to buy into his new counterfeit scam at Bethel, was not amused. So he screamed to his guards, “Get him!” But as he pointed at the object of his rage, his hand withered up, paralyzed in place. *Oops*. Then, just as the prophet had predicted, his bogus altar crumbled before his eyes, spilling its ashes on the ground. So Jeroboam, terrified by God’s power (though not exactly repentant) begged the prophet to reverse the curse. So he prayed to Yahweh, and the king’s withered hand was restored, whereupon Jerry did what any clueless, unrepentant, but nevertheless impressed fat cat might do: he offered the prophet his hospitality and a nice reward. This was hardly a “Zacchaeus” moment, in which the king had awakened to the error of his ways, vowing to return to Yahweh. It was merely good manners (punctuated by sheer terror). All it really meant was that he was relieved—even thankful—that his hand had been restored. But **“The man of God said to the king, ‘If you give me half your house, I will not go in with you. And I will not eat bread or drink water in this place, for so was it commanded me by the word of Yahweh, saying, “You shall neither eat bread nor drink water nor return by the way that you came.””** (I Kings 13:8-9) So the prophet headed

for home in Judah via a different route. So far, so good. He had done precisely as God had instructed. But this is where things start getting weird.

“Now an old prophet lived in Bethel. And his sons came and told him all that the man of God had done that day in Bethel. They also told to their father the words that he had spoken to the king. And their father said to them, ‘Which way did he go?’ And his sons showed him the way that the man of God who came from Judah had gone. And he said to his sons, ‘Saddle the donkey for me.’ So they saddled the donkey for him and he mounted it. And he went after the man of God and found him sitting under an oak [*elah*]....” Uh-oh. The oak tree symbol has raised its ugly head. Cue the ominous music. Somebody’s about to die.

“And he said to him, ‘Are you the man of God who came from Judah?’ And he said, ‘I am.’ Then he said to him, ‘Come home with me and eat bread.’” That’s pretty much what the king had said, but the young prophet had remembered his instructions, and had refused. **“And he said, ‘I may not return with you, or go in with you, neither will I eat bread nor drink water with you in this place, for it was said to me by the word of Yahweh, ‘You shall neither eat bread nor drink water there, nor return by the way that you came.’”** Nothing had changed. But he was about to get thrown a curve ball. **“And he [the old guy] said to him, ‘I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of Yahweh, saying, ‘Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.’”** But he lied to him. So he went back with him and ate bread in his house and drank water....”

This is where the wheels come off our typical, naïve, simplistic Christian beliefs. We’ve got two men, both of them *bona fide* prophets of Yahweh (as we shall soon see). Mr. Young had received his word from Yahweh Himself, whereas Mr. Old, bearing the opposite message, only *claimed* that his message was genuine, when in fact it was a lie. So here’s Salient Question No. 1: how was Mr. Young supposed to know what to do? Answer: consider the source. As a prophet, he had gotten his instructions *directly* from Yahweh. Mr. Old was telling him to ignore what he had heard from God, and listen to him instead. What Mr. Young should have done is to wait for Yahweh’s confirmation before he violated his original instructions.

Salient Question No. 2, then, is this: since nobody is seriously purporting to be a prophet of God these days (in the Old Testament sense), how are *we* supposed to know what to do in the face of plausible spiritual counsel? What are we to do when somebody tells us, “God says to do this...”? Answer: go back to the source, the Word of God. We have the scriptures to consult: the “God-breathed” Torah, Psalms, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, and Epistles. Yahweh has chosen to protect and defend the canon of scripture we now possess over the past two millennia, to the exclusion of scores of other books, some of them quite compelling. In recent decades, we have been blessed with a plethora of study tools to help us in better

understanding the Hebrew and Greek texts, even if we're not scholars. And of course, since Pentecost, we have had the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide us in the way of truth. The Spirit will *never* give us counsel that's contrary to the revealed Word of God.

But unfortunately, we can't say the same thing about people—even well-meaning, knowledgeable people. The human heart is deceitful and wicked: it can't be trusted. God's word *can be* (when properly translated and considered in context, of course). The rub is that you have to be intimately familiar with Yahweh's scripture if you hope to avoid being led astray by mere men. And *that* is a lifelong pursuit: you can learn everything you need to know about God's love from a couple of paragraphs in the Gospel of John, but you can also spend an entire lifetime studying God's word and not remotely get to the bottom of it. I've been a believer for *sixty years*, and I still learn new stuff all the time. But for all you know, I could be lying to you, like Mr. Old in our story. The only way to know for sure is to check my words against the truth of scripture.

We're not nearly done with this strange tale. The “weird-o-meter” is about to redline. **“And as they sat at the table, the word of Yahweh came to the prophet [“Mr. Old”] who had brought him back. And he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, ‘Thus says Yahweh, “Because you have disobeyed the word of Yahweh and have not kept the command that Yahweh your God commanded you, but have come back and have eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, ‘Eat no bread and drink no water,’ your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers. ””** Okay, *that* is exceedingly strange: the same guy who led the young prophet astray is heard delivering God's proclamation *against him* for having taken the bait. If I were Mr. Young, my retort would have angrily focused on Mr. Old's plausible lie—the one that enticed me to disobey the word of Yahweh in the first place.

But pointing out the guilt of another does nothing to minimize my own, no matter how “good” it might make me feel in comparison. No one likes to be put to the test (if for no other reason than we usually fail). But if we're honest, we'll realize that it happens all the time. These tests are a component of our free will. Every opportunity we have to do the right thing comes with a choice: the temptation not to do it. The lie Mr. Old told to Mr. Young may have been more blatant than usual, but if you think about it, it presents pretty much the same sort of choice we all face twenty times a day: to do what God said to do, or do something else. It was relatively easy for Mr. Young to obey God when faced with Jeroboam's offer: the king, after all, was *understood* to be the adversary. But when meeting someone presumed to be a prophet of God, he was caught totally off guard. There's a lesson in there somewhere.

We are not told what the young prophet did, or how he felt, when he was called on his lapse of judgment. (I probably would have thrown up all over the old

man's humus.) The Old prophet apparently went on with his meal as if nothing had happened. **"And after he had eaten bread and drunk, he saddled the donkey for the prophet whom he had brought back. And as he went away a lion met him on the road and killed him. And his body was thrown in the road, and the donkey stood beside it; the lion also stood beside the body. And behold, men passed by and saw the body thrown in the road and the lion standing by the body. And they came and told it in the city where the old prophet lived..."** Don't you wish you could read the lion's mind? *Gee, I don't know what came over me. I just suddenly had this irresistible urge to kill the guy. I'm not even hungry! Sorry, mister.*

The reaction of the old prophet is equally inexplicable (if you ignore Yahweh's long-term strategy). **"And when the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said, 'It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of Yahweh; therefore Yahweh has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him, according to the word that Yahweh spoke to him.' And he said to his sons, 'Saddle the donkey for me.' And they saddled it. And he went and found his body thrown in the road, and the donkey and the lion standing beside the body. The lion had not eaten the body or torn the donkey."** The lion, at least, knew how to follow instructions. But not being a man, he wasn't burdened with moral choices. As for us, our greatest gift—free will—is also our heaviest responsibility. **"And the prophet took up the body of the man of God and laid it on the donkey and brought it back to the city to mourn and to bury him. And he laid the body in his own grave. And they mourned over him, saying, 'Alas, my brother!..."** This demonstrates that the old prophet's lie wasn't told with malice or evil intent toward the victim. It was merely a test—one that the young prophet failed, with fatal consequences. And as such, it stands as a cautionary tale to us today: we are to heed Yahweh alone, and *anything else* we hear is to be strained through the filter of His Word. The counterintuitive truth is that we can't even safely accept what we hear from godly or gifted men—not without comparing what they say against the solid truth of scripture. Blithely receiving "conventional wisdom" isn't necessarily a wise thing to do.

There are still one or two loose ends to the story, but scripture wraps them up for us. **"And after he had buried him, he said to his sons, 'When I die, bury me in the grave in which the man of God is buried; lay my bones beside his bones. For the saying that he called out by the word of Yahweh against the altar in Bethel and against all the houses of the high places that are in the cities of Samaria shall surely come to pass."** (I Kings 13:11-32) The old prophet is thus heard doubling down on the young prophet's imprecations against Jeroboam's altar at Bethel. I am reminded of Yahshua's observation that **"A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown."** (Matthew 13:57, Mark 6:4) Mr. Old apparently lived within shouting distance of Jeroboam's bogus altar at Bethel, but Yahweh didn't send him to deal with it; instead He called for Mr. Young, from Judah, leaving Mr. Old (and his gravesite) to witness against the apostasy of Israel from that day forward.

Almost three hundred years later, Judah's King Josiah, true to Mr. Young's ridiculously specific prophecy, began to institute sweeping reforms in Israel: **"Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, that altar with the high place he [Josiah] pulled down and burned, reducing it to dust. He also burned the Asherah...."** In case you're wondering why a Judean king is seen here tearing down a pagan altar in Israel (i.e., the Northern Kingdom), remember *when* this happened. Josiah's reign began in 640 B.C., but, because of Israel's idolatry, they had been hauled off in chains by the Assyrians in 722—over eighty years earlier. But wouldn't that place Jeroboam's bogus altar in Assyrian-held territory? Yes, but Bethel is only about twelve miles north of Jerusalem, with the old border between Judah and Israel lying midway between the two cities. Although Bethel was technically an Assyrian possession, Assyria was itself, by this time, being wracked by internal dissention and crippled by corruption; they would fall to Babylon in 612. As far as Yahweh was concerned, it was all His land anyway: He would "loan it" to whomever He pleased, to hold it in escrow, as it were, until Israel was at last ready to receive it.

"And as Josiah turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount. And he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar and defiled it, according to the word of Yahweh that the man of God proclaimed, who had predicted these things." This is confirmation that the young prophet from Judah had indeed spoken in the authority of Yahweh. (See Deuteronomy 18:22.) God had provided both immediate and long term fulfillments of the prophecy. We would thus be foolish not to look for further, more universal lessons bound up in the narrative. **"Then he said, 'What is that monument that I see?' And the men of the city told him, 'It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel.' And he said, 'Let him be; let no man move his bones.' So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet who came out of Samaria."** (II Kings 23:15-18) Thus there is one final point: those who honor Yahweh—even those who have made fatal mistakes along the way—can rest in peace, secure in the knowledge of their coming bodily resurrection and reconciliation with their God. This incident was symbolic, of course: it really didn't matter what happened to the bones of the two prophets, as far as Yahweh's program is concerned: their souls were secure either way. But I believe God is telling us here that if our *intentions* are to honor Yahweh, even if we don't succeed in perfect obedience (as was the case with both Mr. Young and Mr. Old—not to mention you and me), we will not, in the end, be counted as participants in the defilement of our fellow man. At least, I certainly hope that's the case.

It's disturbing, in a way, to see how often Yahweh links trees like the mighty oak to idolatry. Personally, I would have preferred to see idol worship associated with weakness, flimsiness, and vulnerability. But the oak tree grows large, lives for centuries, and yields a wood prized for its hardness and density. But maybe that's the point: idolatrous practice is ubiquitous and well-entrenched, and it springs from hard hearts (not to mention dense minds). And (if I may stretch the analogy), the oak tree of idolatry is useful to man under only two conditions: (1) when it's cut down; and (2) when it's understood (as it is here) to signify death. One thing is certain: idolatry inevitably leads to death (or at least dormancy, pending repentance). It doesn't matter how strong the culture of idolatry seems to be, how well-established and immovable it looks: it is, despite all appearances, dead where it stands.

In a way, the oak trees of scripture are parallel to cedars—whose strength and stature contribute to a caricature of pride. Indeed, oaks and cedars often appear side by side in Yahweh's admonitions. For example, **“For Yahweh of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks [*allon*] of Bashan; against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills; against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and Yahweh alone will be exalted in that day.”** (Isaiah 2:12-17) It doesn't matter how strong you think you are, or how proud you are of your achievements or your ability to bend other men to your will. Such arrogance is idiotic when compared with the least of Yahweh's endeavors. Pride and death stand side by side, just as humility before God parallels life.

Another prophet offers an example of one such proud nation, the Amorites, who had been blown away like dandelion fuzz before Yahweh's Spirit: **“Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them [the armies of Israel], whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks [*allon*]. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath.”** (Amos 2:9) In context, unfortunately, Amos is not congratulating Israel for having allowed Yahweh to work through them in battle, but is rather berating them for having over time become worse idolaters than the Amorites ever were. Alas, Amos' words fell on deaf ears: unrepentant Israel would fall under the cruel lash of the Assyrians only a few decades after he spoke these words. Were it not for the promises of Yahweh to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, these ten tribes of Israel would have disappeared as thoroughly as had the Amorites. As it is, no one *to this day* knows who or where they are, but God has promised to reunite all twelve tribes in His future kingdom. Nice trick, after almost three millennia of exile and obscurity.

Zechariah offers another example of the relationship between pride and death: **“Open your doors, O Lebanon, that the fire may devour your cedars! Wail, O cypress, for the cedar has fallen, for the glorious trees are ruined! Wail, oaks [*allon*] of Bashan, for the thick forest has been felled! The sound of the wail of the shepherds, for their glory is ruined! The sound of the roar of the lions, for the thicket of the Jordan is ruined!”** (Zechariah 11:1-3) The shepherds are the “leaders of the flock,” and the lions represent those in authority. Their power, the source of their pride, is to be taken away from them, symbolized as forests of cedar and oak being cut down or burned. The prophet says that Yahweh’s hand of protection over Israel will be removed: their pride will result in their death. **“For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of this land, declares Yahweh. Behold, I will cause each of them to fall into the hand of his neighbor, and each into the hand of his king, and they shall crush the land, and I will deliver none from their hand.”** (Zechariah 11:6)

What would Israel have to do to bring upon itself rejection of this intensity from the God who had sworn to preserve it? These verses introduce a passage describing the dire consequences of Israel’s rejection of her Messiah—an event half a millennium in the prophet’s future. Zechariah goes on to speak of consigning the flock to slaughter. He predicts desperate hunger, even to the point of cannibalism—punishment Israel would suffer literally at the hands of the Romans within a generation of Christ’s crucifixion. He then predicts betrayal at the price of thirty pieces of silver, and of throwing this money to the potter. (See Matthew 27:3-7 for how this came to pass.) The chapter ends with a description of a coming “worthless shepherd,” the one we’ve come to know as the antichrist, who will be embraced by the lost world in ways the true Messiah never was. As Yahshua Himself prophesied to those “shepherds” and “lions” who would later crucify Him, **“I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him.”** (John 5:42-43)

Isaiah speaks of the same dichotomy—the choice we must all make between good and evil, life and death, Yahweh and any conceivable alternative. He points out that the destruction of Israel, though well deserved, is not inevitable: **“Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake Yahweh shall be consumed...”** It’s the same principle we’ve seen a thousand times: those who forsake Yahweh will be forsaken by Yahweh. The choice is ours to make.

Isaiah then describes the nature of the repentance that will bring about this redemption: **“For they [those who repent in righteousness] shall be ashamed of the oaks [*’ayil*, a generic large tree; the same word is translated “ram,” “leader,” “porch,” and “doorpost”] that you desired.”** The “you” here are the unrepentant idolaters to whom the prophet was speaking. **“And you shall blush for the gardens**

[pagan worship sites] **that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak [*elah*] whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.**" (Isaiah 1:27-31) The idolaters are compared to a failing oak tree—they may look alive and strong, but without the “water” of God’s Spirit, they will be revealed to be what they really are: dead where they stand. And being found in this dead, dry state, they are easy prey for the fires of judgment. Note too what will ultimately set the forest ablaze: the “work” done by “the strong” (that is, the “rebels and sinners” who have been likened here to the dry oak tree). Basically, God is saying that He needn’t go out of His way to punish sinners. Their own actions will destroy them; their own choices will condemn them.

Virtually every prophet pursued this theme, and quite a few of them used the oak tree symbol to tie Israel’s idolatry to the death that would surely follow. Ezekiel said it this way: **“Thus says the Lord Yahweh: ‘Clap your hands and stamp your foot and say, “Alas, because of all the evil abominations of the house of Israel, for they shall fall by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. He who is far off shall die of pestilence, and he who is near shall fall by the sword, and he who is left and is preserved shall die of famine. Thus I will spend my fury upon them....”**” Note that the “fury of Yahweh” will be administered—at least in part—through the hand of man, the sword wielded by Israel’s enemies. If they had heeded the “blessings and cursings” passages of the Torah (such as Deuteronomy 28), they would have known that the reason for their misfortune was their own rebellion against God. In other words, all this misfortune should have encouraged them to examine their lives and repent of their idolatries.

God had only one objective in sending “sword, famine, and pestilence” upon His people: to encourage them to remember who He is. **“And you shall know that I am Yahweh, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak [*elah*], wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols. And I will stretch out My hand against them and make the land desolate and waste, in all their dwelling places, from the wilderness to Riblah.”** That is, from the far south of the land to the far north. Riblah is mentioned in Yahweh’s excruciatingly specific Numbers 34 description of the borders of Israel. It is well within the borders of Syria at the moment, but during Christ’s Millennial kingdom, Israel’s borders will once again be pushed to their God-ordained limits (as they were under David). **“Then they will know that I am Yahweh.”** (Ezekiel 6:11-14) Once again, we are reminded that “knowing Yahweh” is the whole point of Yahweh’s punishing Israel for their idolatries. He wants them (and us) to live, and the only way that can happen is if we come to know Him. The word translated “know” here is the verb *yada*, meaning to know, perceive, see, find out, discern, distinguish, recognize, admit, acknowledge, and confess. It’s

more than mere cognitive awareness, but also implies acceptance, belief, and acquiescence—the formation of a relationship.

Ezekiel also mentioned oaks in reference to the kingdom of Tyre, a people who became rich and powerful through trade upon the sea. **“O Tyre, you have said, ‘I am perfect in beauty.’ Your borders are in the heart of the seas. Your builders made perfect your beauty. They made all your planks of fir trees from Senir. They took a cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you. Of oaks [allon] of Bashan they made your oars. They made your deck of pines from the coasts of Cyprus, inlaid with ivory.”** (Ezekiel 27:3-6) *That doesn’t sound so sinister*, you may be saying. They made oars for their galleys so they could ply the Mediterranean, trade with other nations, and become rich in the process—a perfect example of successful iron age capitalism. Tyre reminds me a lot of Victorian England, or twentieth century America—projecting power and growing rich in the process. But with riches and influence came arrogance and corruption. Their greed began to feed on itself: riches became their god. And the oaken oars of their ships made it all possible.

Once again, a seemingly off-hand mention of the oak tree symbol leads us to a significant principle: don’t rely upon wealth or power. Don’t worship money. It is a false, fickle god, not worthy of our devotion. If we read between the lines, we can perceive that during the golden age of Israel, Tyre was, as gentile nations go, a friend of Yahweh and His people. Their king Hiram is on record as having loved and respected David, offering invaluable help in the construction of Solomon’s temple in response to that friendship (see I Kings 5). But by Ezekiel’s day, they had sunk as far as Israel had into idolatry. This, I’m afraid, is a path that Great Britain and America have followed as well.

So at the height of their power, God’s prophet pronounces judgment upon Tyre: **“Your rowers [remember the oars of oak?] have brought you out into the high seas. The east wind has wrecked you in the heart of the seas.”** The Tyrians were a seafaring people, of course, but the “sea” also symbolically refers to gentile nations, many of whom were participants in Tyre’s destruction. **“Your riches, your wares, your merchandise, your mariners and your pilots, your caulkers, your dealers in merchandise, and all your men of war who are in you, with all your crew that is in your midst, sink into the heart of the seas on the day of your fall. At the sound of the cry of your pilots the countryside shakes, and down from their ships come all who handle the oar....”** Those oars of oak were the “engine” that drove the Tyrian economy, the foundation of their pride. Oars or rowing are mentioned at least four times in this passage. It is not my purpose here to trace the unbelievably improbable series of biblical prophecies concerning the demise of Tyre. For that, I’ll refer you to Josh McDowell’s 1972 classic *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (pages 285-291). Peter Stoner once calculated the odds against Tyre’s undoing happening as the

Bible predicted it to be 7.5×10^7 to 1—astronomical odds, any way you slice it—and yet, it took place precisely as Yahweh’s prophets predicted it.

My purpose, rather, is to echo the warning of the prophets concerning what was killing this prosperous—and once God-fearing—nation: pride, greed, and selfishness. Ezekiel goes on to state, **“The mariners and all the pilots of the sea stand on the land and shout aloud over you and cry out bitterly. They cast dust on their heads and wallow in ashes. They make themselves bald for you and put sackcloth on their waist [both signs of mourning and distress], and they weep over you in bitterness of soul, with bitter mourning. In their wailing they raise a lamentation for you and lament over you: ‘Who is like Tyre, like one destroyed in the midst of the sea? When your wares came from the seas, you satisfied many peoples. With your abundant wealth and merchandise you enriched the kings of the earth. Now you are wrecked by the seas, in the depths of the waters. Your merchandise and all your crew in your midst have sunk with you. All the inhabitants of the coastlands are appalled at you, and the hair of their kings bristles with horror. Their faces are convulsed. The merchants among the peoples hiss at you. You have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever.”** (Ezekiel 27:26-36)

You may be asking, *So what? This is all ancient history. Tyre went the way of the dinosaur a long, long time ago.* Yes, but it is my experience that “history” in scripture virtually always bears significance beyond the mundane historical events. Everything, it seems, is prophetic, illustrative, or symbolic of something that affects our lives now, on a daily basis. And as I read Ezekiel 27 (and note that I edited out quite a bit), I was struck by the remarkable similarity to a prophecy that’s still yet to be fulfilled. The names have changed, but the situation—and the warning—is identical. I’m speaking of Revelation 18, and the demise of commercial Babylon.

Historically, Babylon was a city-state, as was Tyre. But as a symbol, Babylon describes a system of idolatry that will persist until the very end of the age. It is not only “religious,” but also has political and commercial permutations as well. It is, in short, Biblical shorthand for the worship of *anything* other than Yahweh. Tyre’s pride was founded upon her wealth. Her riches were derived from trade with the other nations huddled around the Mediterranean shore, nations she reached with fleets of galleys—hence the importance (symbolically) of the oak from which their oars were made. Commercial Babylon’s “sea” is the whole world, but her pride, greed, and self-adoration is but an extension of the sort of thing Ezekiel saw in Tyre.

And as John points out, the problem was more than just people acting out of their own self interest, simply trying to earn a living through trade. Babylon’s wealth and power (like Tyre’s) have become objects of worship to her, and worse, the whole scheme is demonically inspired: **“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory.**

And he called out with a mighty voice, **'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living....'**" Note that John sees a distinction between Babylon and both the "nations" and the "merchants of the earth." While the "merchants" sell Babylon's demonic agenda, and the "nations" buy into it all (making them her victims), Babylon itself is the proverbial eight hundred pound gorilla in the room, the entity whose pride and greed is driving the rebellion against God. Drunkenness and sexual immorality, beyond the obvious literal references, also speak symbolically of being filled with a spirit other than Yahweh's, and of idolatry—i.e., giving to some other "god" the devotion that rightfully belongs to Yahweh alone.

Faced with such a foe—the enticement to abandon Yahweh in favor of shiny distractions and attractive substitutes—what are we to do? John has the answer: **"Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities....'"** Babylon is all around us; her merchants incessantly lure us with enticing offers of pleasure and convenience, distractions that take our minds off what really matters. But we don't have to play the game; we don't have to participate or cooperate. Babylon is too strong, too well established—and too demonically empowered—for believers to fight her on their own. So the angel advises us to flee, run away, resist her blandishments and enticements—for if we don't, we will be destroyed in her destruction.

Rather, the God who has "remembered her iniquities" will deal personally with Babylon. The angel prays, **"Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds. Mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.' For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire, for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her...."** Having bought into Satan's lies, Babylon thinks she's so well established, nothing can bring her down. After all, the whole world has become dependent (or so she presumes) on what she has to offer.

I should explain that this passage is prophetic of a time yet future (though not by much), a time we can hardly imagine. It's called the Tribulation—seven years (actually, *schematic* years of 360 days each—a total of exactly 2,520 days) in which God's wrath is to be poured out full strength upon the earth, and man's sinful propensities will be given free reign. The church will have been removed ("raptured") from the earth sometime before this time of wrath begins, but vast

multitudes (the “church of repentant Laodicea”—see Revelation 3:14-22) will belatedly come to faith as the Tribulation wears on—many of whom will pay for their new belief with their mortal lives. It is *they* (in particular) who are being encouraged to “flee from Babylon.” And it is they who will witness her sudden demise. I can only hit the high spots here, but I would refer you to my comprehensive work on Bible prophecy, *Future History*, for the whole story.

The sudden “plagues” that will destroy commercial Babylon “in a single day” will very likely be connected to the first or second Trumpet Judgments, discussed in Revelation 8:6-9—apparently thermonuclear war, and (if I may speculate) the eruption and collapse of the Cumbre Vieja volcano in the Canary Islands, precipitating the largest and most destructive tsunami man has ever seen, affecting major cities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. **“And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, ‘Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city [read: *system*], Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come....”** The “kings of the earth” reference makes it clear that the politicians are up to their necks in the evil of Babylon. We tend to think of kings and presidents as the ones who hold the reins of power, but here Babylon’s denizens are unmasked: they are the power *behind* a thousand thrones. After commercial Babylon falls, the politicians’ schemes won’t last much longer.

Babylon then (its commercial and industrial aspects, at least) are to be suddenly and unexpectedly destroyed. My research places this event sometime during the first half of the Tribulation, perhaps two and a half years into it—that is, a year or so *before* the abomination of desolation (when the Antichrist will assume dictatorial control over the entire earth). The collapse of the world’s commercial and financial infrastructure (commercial Babylon) will be followed inexorably by the rapid unraveling of the earth’s system of governments—up to and including the United Nations (political Babylon). That will leave but one permutation of false worship left for God to deal with: religious Babylon—“Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth,” as its’ described in detail in Revelation 17. Actually, we see this facet of Babylon still in play until the very end of the Tribulation: its destruction is described as part of the seventh bowl judgment—the last event in the ultimate series of God’s judgments upon the earth (see Revelation 16:19).

But we weren’t done looking at the fall of commercial Babylon, some four and a half years previously—the sudden and total collapse of the world’s commercial, industrial, and financial infrastructure. The first things to go are the luxuries, the perks of power and prestige that made the whore of Babylon so irresistible to so many for so long: **“And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen,**

purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls....” That last entry—the bodies and souls of men—is telling. It was through the machinations of Babylon, supported and abetted by the “merchants” and “kings” who personally benefited by pandering to her, that so many people were held in bondage—and not just during the Tribulation, but in all the ages leading up to it. The angel’s advice during the Tribulation was to “Come out of [Babylon], my people.” But Isaiah, Zechariah, and Jeremiah all warned us—multiple times—to “Flee from Babylon! Run for your lives! Do not be destroyed because of her sins. It is time for Yahweh’s vengeance; he will pay her what she deserves,” as it’s worded in Jeremiah 51:6 (NIV).

It’s not like Babylon had to work all that hard for her successes. Many of us, like Esau of old, were all too willing to sell our birthright cheaply—for a bowl of soup, as it were. A few trinkets were enough to distract us from what really matters: a familial relationship with the True and Living God. So John’s angel observes, **“The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again! The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, ‘Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste....”** Interesting. They’re not particularly concerned when billions of people are held in bondage through falsehood and paranoia. They don’t much care when Christians and Jews are hounded and slaughtered for their faith. But these guys are *really upset* when they realize that they’re not going to be making any more obscene profits from doing business with Babylon.

The hand wringing isn’t restricted to the top tiers of the food chain, either. Even the middlemen, the grunts who made a living doing Babylon’s dirty work, are shocked at the suddenness and extent of the devastation: **“And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, ‘What city was like the great city?’ And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out, ‘Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste....”** There’s nothing quite as sure to get your attention as a cut in pay. They may be mourning that the world’s entire commercial infrastructure has collapsed like a house of cards, but what they’re really thinking is, *How am I going to feed my family now?* You don’t have to be wicked to make disastrously bad decisions. To place your trust in “business as usual” or “the way it has always been done” may seem prudent, but it’s actually a “faith in nothing.” This is what they call a “black swan” event: people think it can’t happen, just because it never has (to

their knowledge). But we were warned: don't place your trust in *anything* except Yahweh. Babylon ("the great") is fallen, *fallen*.

Not everyone is upset, however. Remember those who were told to "Come out of her, My people?" Some of us did. We didn't buy Babylon's lies. We refused to be distracted and deceived by her counterfeit gods and substitute saviors. So the angel tells us that it's okay for the redeemed (who are now in heaven) to make the politically incorrect response: **"Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!"** *But horrible things have happened! People are going to starve! Oh, the humanity!* This time, there are no government bailouts forthcoming, no FEMA agents on the scene, no insurance payouts, no Red Cross volunteers. There aren't even going to be any church relief efforts—the only thing that has really worked all that well during many previous disasters. Everything is gone. There's no work, no money, no hope. Anarchy reigns supreme. Preppers, hoarders, and survivalists figure they can ride out the storm at first, only to find themselves set upon and attacked by hungry mobs—angry that they themselves didn't have the foresight to plan ahead. *The wealth must be redistributed!* Even if "the wealth" is now only a loaf of bread and a bottle of clean water. God says, "I told you so. I told you not to trust anyone or anything but Me. But you wouldn't listen."

The very fabric of society will unravel. **"Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more.'**" Look at what will be destroyed. (1) the entertainment industry: **"And the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, will be heard in you no more,"** (2) manufacturing: **"and a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more,"** (3) agribusiness: **"and the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more,"** (4) energy: **"and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more,"** (5) traditional family structure: **"and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more,"** all because (6) financial and commercial Babylon has fallen: **"for your merchants were the great ones of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery."** Even though we seldom recognize the connection nowadays, God makes it clear that alliance with the world is the same thing as war against Him: **"And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."** (Revelation 18) It's shocking but true: Babylon, the systematic devotion of man to things other than Yahweh, is responsible for *all* of the hatred, war, oppression, famine, and death that the world has seen. That's why we are instructed to "rejoice" at her ignominious fall.

Now we know why the oars of the galleys of Tyre were made out of oak. Their only purpose was to propel mankind toward his death. Our preferred destination, however, is life, which can be found only where Yahweh is.

ALMOND

☞ 3.3.14 ☞

Watching, Awakening, Vigilance

Yahweh once used a play on words (totally lost in the English, of course) to explain the symbolic significance of the almond tree. **“And the word of Yahweh came to me, saying, ‘Jeremiah, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘I see an almond [*shaqed*] branch.’ Then Yahweh said to me, ‘You have seen well, for I am watching [*shaqad*] over My word to perform it.”** (Jeremiah 1:11-12) The word for the almond tree (Hebrew: *shaqed*) is derived from the verb *shaqad*, meaning to watch, awaken, or be alert. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* explains the linguistic connection: “The idea of watchfulness, which is basic to the root, affords the key to the explanation of the Hebrew name for the almond tree. This tree, which in Israel blooms as early as January and February and is affectionately looked upon as the harbinger of spring, is appropriately enough called *shaqed*, ‘the waker.’”

Because God made a point of connecting the almond to the symbolic root verb from which its name is derived, we should look more closely at that verb ourselves. *Shaqad* is defined by the *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains* as “1. To watch, stand guard, i.e., control access into and out of an area or persons that are valuable or notorious, implying care or duty for the object guarded; 2. Be awake, i.e., not be in a state of sleep when one normally should, implying a nervous or anxious state; 3. Watch out for, pay attention, i.e., be in readiness and alertness to learn information about an object or situation, implying an action will follow; 4. Lie in wait, ambush, formally, watch over, i.e., conceal oneself and observe movements until an opportune time to attack; 5. Be intent, have eager desire, be devoted to, i.e., have a feeling or attitude of earnestness toward a goal, as a figurative extension of carefully watching to learn information, or guarding an object; 6. Keep ready, be prepared, not hesitate, i.e., be in a state of being primed and set to take an action, as a figurative extension of carefully watching to learn information, or guarding an object.”

So with an eye toward getting a firm grasp on the concept that will be symbolically personified by the almond tree—that of being watchful, alert, and vigilant—let us first review a few scriptural usages of *shaqad*. **“Unless Yahweh builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless Yahweh watches [*shaqad*] over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”** (Psalm 127:1) The Scottish poet Robert Burns once famously said, “The best laid schemes of mice and men oft go astray.” (Well, he actually wrote “...gang aft agley,” but what does that even mean?) Yahweh’s “schemes” *never* go astray. We humans can plan all we want, engineer our outcomes, work toward our goals, and try to protect our hard-won gains. But

in the end, all of our efforts are futile if performed without reference (or deference) to the will of God.

Solomon—reputedly the wisest man of his age—saw wisdom as something to be sought for diligently, saying, “Reverence for Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom.” Speaking as “the personified wisdom,” he says, **“Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching [*shaqad*] daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from Yahweh, but he who fails to find me injures himself. All who hate me love death.”** (Proverbs 8:34-36) There should thus be an element of active attentiveness, of enthusiastic watchfulness, in our pursuit of wisdom. Note that he speaks not of native intelligence, something that is strictly a gift from God, something you’re either born with or not. Wisdom, rather, is something that *can* be sought out, pursued, and acquired. Like anything else of value, it is a gift from Yahweh, but it’s something that can be attained and utilized by someone of less-than-dizzying intellect or who lacks extensive education. There are both wise children and experienced fools in this world.

Yahweh and His people aren’t the only ones who “watch,” however. **“The ruthless shall come to nothing and the scoffer cease, and all who watch [*shaqad*] to do evil shall be cut off.”** (Isaiah 29:20) It’s bad enough when we *fall* into sin—when we miss the mark of God’s perfect standard through negligence or apathy. But purposeful rebellion against Yahweh’s authority, evidenced here by ruthlessness and ridicule, require effort, intent, preparation, and desire—*shaqad*. We should not ignore (or simply miss) the left-handed encouragement God is offering the righteous here. The world today is overrun with cruel, heartless, self centered people. Mockers abound, characterizing our faith in Yahweh as unbalanced religious fanaticism—evidence of either inexplicable naivety or collective insanity. And evil is no longer (if it ever was) accidental or incidental: it is now something pursued, planned, and purposed. This much we can see. What we *can’t* see (yet) is that all such rebellion against the God we serve will soon be “cut off.” It will cease to be, come to nothing, and have no lasting ill-effect upon God’s people. It will soon be *less than* a memory.

One can “watch” to do either harm or good. Surveillance is a tactic used for both protection and apprehension, depending upon the object’s innocence. **“Behold, the days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched [*shaqad*] over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch [*shaqad*] over them to build and to plant, declares Yahweh.”** (Jeremiah 31:27-28) This is one of hundreds of prophecies in the Bible informing us that God isn’t done with Israel—that He intends to revive, restore, and rebuild her, just as soon as they repent and receive their Messiah, Yahshua. True to His promise, Yahweh has never taken His eye off Israel: through all of

their long years of exile and persecution (the long-predicted consequences of their refusal to heed His word), He has kept them separate from the nations among whom they dwelled. From the concept embodied in *shaqad*—that of being watchful, coupled with awakening—it is a very short leap to the idea of *resurrection*. Israel’s impending resurrection from the graveyard of nations (a.k.a., the valley of dry bones—see Ezekiel 37) to a place of restoration, and indeed, preeminence, is a fitting metaphor for what can happen to any of us who choose (whether early or late) to embrace Yahshua as our Messiah.

With this background in mind, then, let us look at the specific scriptural mentions of almonds, their trees, branches, fruit, or flowers, keeping an eye out for what the symbolism of the “waker” and “watcher” might teach us.

The first time almonds are mentioned in the Bible is in the story of Joseph. It is only in retrospect that we can see Yahweh’s extraordinary *modus operandi* played out in this most circuitous of tales. First, young Joseph is given the gift of interpreting dreams, only to see his jealous brothers sell him into slavery and fake his death. Then he gets thrown into prison for years in Egypt because of something he didn’t do. But his prison experience puts him before the king, whose dream (seven years of plenty followed by seven of famine) he correctly interprets, earning him the No. 2 spot in Pharaoh’s government. The famine will bring his family to Egypt, where they’ll eventually be enslaved. And Israel will remain in bondage for the next four hundred years, only to be delivered through a series of miraculous plagues designed by Yahweh (the One who sent them to Egypt in the first place) to forge them into a nation set apart for His divine purpose—the redemption of all mankind.

We humans, being limited in power and imagination, tend to seek out the most efficient, straightforward course of action, the shortest route between point A and point B. Yahweh, on the other hand, seems to delight in taking the long way around. In Joseph’s case, He could *easily* have kept the boy safe, stopped the famine from happening, and seen to it that Israel’s family stayed in the land that He Himself had promised to their father Abraham. So why all the machinations, suffering, and drama? Why all the convoluted plot twists? In retrospect, we can see (if we’re looking) that it set up multiple “dress rehearsals” for God’s ultimate plan for our reconciliation. The story of Joseph contains upwards of forty distinct pictures that symbolically prefigure the mission of Christ.

One of the more esoteric of these scenes is the following vignette. The situation is that the ten oldest brothers had gone to Egypt to buy food, and nine of

them had returned home, only to find their money within their grain sacks—making them appear to be thieves. (Simeon had been kept under house arrest—“to prove they weren’t spies,” as the Egyptian officer had put it.) So when the food ran out but the famine persisted, Israel had no choice but to send them back to Egypt to buy more. The rub was that having lost Joseph (or so he thought), he was reticent to send his youngest son, Benjamin, along. But the vizier in charge (*Joseph*, though the brothers didn’t recognize him twenty years after their crime) had insisted they wouldn’t be welcomed back unless they brought their youngest brother with them. So here’s the scene as the brothers prepared to return to Egypt: **“Then their father Israel said to them, ‘If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry a present down to the man, a little balm and a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the mouth of your sacks. Perhaps it was an oversight. Take also your brother, and arise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.’”** (Genesis 43:11-14)

In case you haven’t noticed, I operate on the theory that nothing recorded in scripture is accidental or incidental. It all *means* something, whether or not we have the eyes to see it. Here we have a list of things—gifts—that Israel wanted to send to Egypt, ostensibly to gain favor with the man (Joseph, though he didn’t know that yet) who had what he needed. I believe this list mirrors what Yahweh (symbolized by Father Israel) “sent” to the world (represented by Egypt). He had already “contributed” his beloved son—sacrificed him so that Egypt (the world) might live through the famine. But now Israel needed something, which tells us, surprisingly enough, that *Yahweh* wants something from the world. What could that possibly be, and what does it have to do with the specific gifts that were sent? There is only one thing Yahweh “needs,” as far as we’re told—He wants to be reconciled with mankind, we who were created for fellowship with Him; He wants the loving relationship that our parents threw away in the Garden of Eden to be restored. Our love is *sustenance* to Him.

So what can we learn about God’s plan and purpose from the list of gifts that Israel sent to Egypt? The first gift was “balm” (Hebrew: *tsariy*), a gum material obtained from the bark of certain trees. This balm was used for the healing of injuries. Jeremiah laments, **“The wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?”** (Jeremiah 8:21-22) When Israel sent balm to Egypt, it indicated that Yahweh would provide the means of healing to the world.

The second gift, honey, represents (as we have seen) the sweet life that’s only available to us through fellowship with Yahweh. For what it’s worth, this “honey”

could be either the sweet golden nectar we get from bees or grape syrup, a thick, sweet viscous liquid processed from grape juice. Either way, *debash* was the only source of dietary sweetness available back then. Unlike the myriad of sweeteners available to us today, Biblical honey actually offered nutritional value in addition to pleasant taste. The world's sugars and artificial sweeteners may taste good, in their own way, but they offer only empty calories, at best—and slow-acting poison, at worst. But God's word feeds our souls as honey does our bodies: **"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"** (Psalm 119:103)

The "gum" or "aromatic spices" listed as the third gift may be taken as a reminder of the spices with which the body of Christ was anointed for His burial (e.g., Luke 23:56). But there's also something significant about the Hebrew word used here. *Nako 'th*, perhaps indicating tragacanth gum or something similar, is derived from the Hebrew verb *naka'*, meaning to strike, scourge, or smite. We are immediately reminded of what Yahshua endured for our sakes, as prophesied by Isaiah: **"He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way; and Yahweh has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."** (Isaiah 53:5-6) So when Israel sent "gum" or "spice" to Egypt, it was actually a picture of how Yahweh would send His own Son to endure a savage beating on our account.

The fourth gift, myrrh, shows up quite frequently as a symbol in scripture, though usually under a different name than the one used here. As we noted in our study of the ingredients in the priestly anointing oil, "Myrrh is a resinous gum or oil from balsam or other trees with an oily bark. It is fragrant and slightly bitter, hence the name, *mor*, from a Hebrew root meaning bitterness—a reminder of the Messiah's sorrows endured on our behalf." But here, an older word for myrrh is used: *lot* (used only twice in scripture, both in Genesis) is derived from *luwt*, a verb meaning "to wrap tightly, to envelop." Once again, the burial of the crucified Christ is in view: **"Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away His body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews."** (John 19:38-40)

Gift number five was pistachio nuts. The Hebrew word (*batnah*) is used only this once in scripture. But once again, it seems that the root word from which it is derived (*beten*) can shed some light on what Yahweh was thinking when He put *pistachios* on Israel's mind as he prepared to send his sons to Egypt. *Beten* means the belly, womb, or abdomen. Beyond the anatomical connotation, however, it also serves the same linguistic niche as our use of the word "heart"—the seat of

our emotions and desires. A few examples: **“The spirit of man is the lamp of Yahweh, searching all his innermost parts [beten].”** (Proverbs 20:27) **“He [the wicked man] swallows down riches and vomits them up again; God casts them out of His belly [beten].”** (Job 20:15) *Baker & Carpenter’s* lexicon notes, “[Betan] is at times significantly linked with God’s sovereign care, comfort, and the calling of His elect.... In a figurative sense, *beten* means the inner being of a person...the place where thoughts were treasured, and the spiritual being expressed itself and was satisfied.” So although you’d never see the connection if you weren’t *really looking*, it appears that the pistachio nuts Israel sent to Egypt are an expression of His heart’s desire: reconciliation with mankind. On the other hand, since we have for the most part turned our backs on God’s love, there’s another expression reminiscent of *beten* that comes to mind: Yahweh must surely have had “a belly full” of us. Are the prophecies of coming judgment really so hard to believe?

This brings us to the sixth gift on the list—the only reason we’re looking at this passage at all: almonds. As I mentioned above, the almond tree is affectionately called “the waker” (*shaqed*) because it blooms very early, long before most of the other trees—in January or February. Thus the symbolic attributes of the almond are expressed by the verb *shaqad*—to watch, be awake, be intent, or remain prepared. Israel’s gift to Egypt, then (that is, Yahweh’s gift to the world) is the prospect of awakening. The salient question is, *from what?* Paul offers this bit of insight: **“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”** (Romans 13:11-12) “Sleep” represents our former condition—that of being estranged from God, lying comatose in the darkness. Paul is speaking to those who have been redeemed and reconciled to Him, so he urges them to *act like it*. “The day has dawned; you’ve awakened. Shouldn’t you get out of bed and go to work?” The “salvation” of which he speaks isn’t our position in Christ, something that is settled and secure *now* if we’ve been born from above in the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is the proximity of our lives to salvation’s inevitable conclusion—eternity in God’s physical presence. This blessed condition will commence at the second coming of Yahshua the Messiah (well, some of us will get a jump on things when we experience the rapture), and it will never end—*ever*. Every day that passes is one day closer to our goal of enjoying personal, unending intimacy with Yahweh.

The whole “sleeping vs. waking” metaphor takes on new significance in Yahshua’s capable hands. He used the figure of speech to describe a friend’s physical death: **“He said to [His disciples], ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.’”** (John 11:11) He wasn’t speaking of restful recovery from an illness, but of the fate of all men: death. It would sound insane on anybody else’s lips, but Yahshua was God incarnate: He knew that physical death was a

condition from which man was *designed* to awaken. So to provide a preview, a demonstration of the principle, Christ waited until Lazarus had been in the tomb for three whole days—well beyond the range of any “spontaneous resuscitation” or “near death” recovery. Arriving at last on the scene, He told the deceased’s bereaved sister, **“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.”** (John 11:25-26) He wasn’t talking about the sort of physical death Lazarus had suffered, of course. But to prove He held the power of life in His hand, He went out to the tomb, wept in empathy with our universal grief, and promptly raised His old friend back to life.

If you’ll pardon the cornball allusion, this reminds me of a long-running ad campaign selling two similar candy bars—one with almonds, the other without. If we die without Christ, we get buried in “Mounds.” But like the jingle says, “Sometimes you feel like a nut!” When we’re raised in newness of life in Christ, what better description could there be than “Almond Joy?”

The reawakening of Lazarus wasn’t the sort of thing we’re looking forward to, however. It was “merely” evidence (actually, *proof*) that Yahshua was indeed Yahweh’s Messiah. After this demonstration of deity, it would have been *impossible* to rationally conclude that He was a false prophet who deserved to be crucified—which is not to say the religious elite who were pushing for His death were rational, or even sane. The temporary resurrection of Lazarus was merely a dress rehearsal for the fundamental transformation for which Job longed when he said, **“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”** (Job 19:25-27) Yes, Job. Me too.

Israel’s list of gifts to be sent to Egypt wasn’t yet complete. But the next thing he mentioned wasn’t a gift at all, strictly speaking. It was money, the honest purchase price of the grain His sons wished to buy. Remember the symbolism here: Israel represents Yahweh, the God who is reaching out with gifts and payment to the Egyptians because they have something He wants. Egypt (as usual) represents the world. What God wants from the world is our love. That’s why He’s sending gifts: they’re to show us (the world) that His love is genuine and heartfelt. But now, strange though it may seem, we see that God also feels like *He owes us something*. Having created mankind for the purpose of sharing fellowship with Him, Yahweh considers it His responsibility to provide for us.

And not just for His children, those who love Him already: His provision is for *all* of us—the whole human race. As Yahshua put it, **“I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the**

just and on the unjust. For if you love [only] those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect [i.e., complete], as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:44-48) Why does Yahweh (like Israel sending money to Egypt) offer to "pay" humanity? Why does He send sunshine and rain—and yes, even His love—upon all of us equally? It's because, having gifted us with free will, He wants us to be able to *exercise it*, to make moral choices, to live long enough to decide whether to accept His gifts (and yes, His "payment" as well) or to reject Him as a "spy" who merely wants to determine how weak we've become.

There *was* a seventh gift, however. It makes this scene another example of Yahweh's oft repeated six-plus-one pattern: the Sabbath principle. Let us reprise what Israel said to his sons: **"Take also your brother [i.e., Benjamin, his youngest], and arise, go again to the man. May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, and may he send back your other brother and Benjamin. And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."** (Genesis 43:13-14) Young Benjamin was "the baby" of the family, not to mention being the only full brother of the lost Joseph and the son of Israel's true love, Rachel. After having treated Joseph so badly, the other brothers couldn't really fault Israel for thinking of Benjamin as "all he had left."

Symbolically, of course, this last and most precious "gift" represents Christ being sent into the world. For Israel's part, sending Benjamin entailed the greatest risk imaginable, and it was no less so with Yahweh. He had no guarantees of success, since because of His own nature, He was not willing to force us to accept His gift. The captive Simeon is roughly analogous to Adam—fallen man, who had become trapped through his sins in a place not really his home (though Egypt—representing the world outside Eden—was proving hospitable enough). The whole objective in sending Benjamin was to retrieve Simeon, to reunite him with his father and his family. It's as if the problem of procuring grain had become a secondary consideration: the first priority had become to rescue Simeon. Symbolically, it says a lot that Israel was willing to send the innocent and beloved Benjamin to Egypt to free the guilty (see Genesis 34:30) and impetuous Simeon. But that's precisely what Yahweh did for us when He sent Yahshua into the world for our sakes.

Reviewing Israel's seven gifts, then, we see a preview of Yahweh's bequests to mankind, offered to demonstrate His love for us. I've reordered the list to reflect what happens as we receive His gifts with thanksgiving:

5. Pistachios: the revelation that we are Yahweh's heart's desire.
7. Benjamin: the incredible risk God took sending His beloved son.
3. Gum or spices: the punishment the Messiah endured for our sakes.

4. Myrrh: the bitterness of Christ's death and burial.
6. Almonds: the awakening—the resurrection—of Christ from the tomb.
1. Balm: our healing, made possible through the gift of God.
2. Honey: the sweet life of fellowship with Yahweh.

It is reasonably clear (from our perspective) that Yahweh chose Moses and prepared him from the womb to lead the nation of Israel out of bondage and introduce them to His Instructions. But apparently, God's choice wasn't all that obvious as they were living through the exodus. Several times, people came forward to challenge Moses' "right" to lead the nation. They had a point, I suppose. By the world's standards, this guy wasn't exactly "CEO" material. He spoke with a stammer, smelled of sheep, and was decades past his prime. Korah, on the other hand, was a well-regarded sophisticate with a Harvard MBA (so to speak), a scion the "right" family (i.e., that of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son), and he had the backing of Israel's "best," most influential people. There was only one problem with Korah: Yahweh hadn't chosen him for the position he was trying to usurp. Numbers 16 records the story of how the issue was settled—with Korah and his backers being swallowed by the earth at Yahweh's command, right there in the middle of the camp of Israel. Very dramatic.

Shortly thereafter, Yahweh decided Israel needed an object lesson that would pinpoint Moses and Aaron as His chosen leadership team—these two "nobodies" from the "nowhere" middle-child tribe of Levi. **"Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel, and get from them staffs, one for each fathers' house, from all their chiefs according to their fathers' houses, twelve staffs. Write each man's name on his staff, and write Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. For there shall be one staff for the head of each fathers' house. Then you shall deposit them in the tent of meeting before the testimony, where I meet with you....'"** Everybody carried a staff in those days, for this was an agrarian society—every man of property owned livestock, and the staff was the tool used to manage them. Today, I suppose, God might have had the twelve leaders toss their smart phones into a hat or something.

But *this* demonstration would be even more convincing and impressive than getting a congratulatory text message from God Himself. The staffs were all made of wood—wood that had been cut down long ago: they were *dead*. Yahweh promised to select one and give it new life—demonstrating that He, the Originator of life, had chosen its owner over all of the others. **"And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumblings of the people of**

Israel, which they grumble against you.’ Moses spoke to the people of Israel. And all their chiefs gave him staffs, one for each chief, according to their fathers’ houses, twelve staffs. And the staff of Aaron was among their staffs. And Moses deposited the staffs before Yahweh in the tent of the testimony....” Yahweh had shown beyond the shadow of a doubt that Korah and his merry men had *not* been His choice for the leadership of Israel. Now He was about to point out to the whole world who *was*.

“On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony, and behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.” I just love Yahweh’s sense of humor. A few little sprigs of green would have told the tale, but He made Aaron’s staff sprout *blossoms* and *ripe almonds*. There’s no evidence of life quite as convincing as the ability to reproduce—to bear fruit. “Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before Yahweh to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony, to be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumblings against Me, lest they die.’ Thus did Moses; as Yahweh commanded him, so he did....” From that point forward, there would be no discussion or doubt about who had been selected by Yahweh to lead Israel. The evidence had been duly noted.

What we may tend to miss in all this is that God not only disqualified all other possible candidates, He also proactively put His stamp of approval on Moses and Aaron—publically and miraculously. These days, that’s significant, for we often confuse success with mandate. If a political candidate wins an election, or if someone achieves a great deal of power and influence through other means, we too often attribute that accomplishment to God’s blessing—a divine mandate to pursue a certain course of action. But we should assume no such thing. Success in our world can be attained just as easily through hard work, blind luck, or ruthless treachery as through the affirmation of God. And remember, Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar was “blessed” by Yahweh for the sole purpose of exacting wrath upon an unrepentant Judah: the “mandate” implied by success may not be good news (in the ordinary sense) for *anyone* in the winner’s sphere of influence. The ultimate example: the coming Antichrist will be worshipped and adored worldwide, though he will be personally responsible for *billions* of deaths.

What was the reaction of the people to Yahweh’s clear and unambiguous demonstration? Did they say, *Yahweh has spoken, and we are grateful for His unequivocal clarification on the matter?* No, I’m afraid not. “**And the people of Israel said to Moses, ‘Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of Yahweh, shall die. Are we all to perish?’**” (Numbers 17) That’s the rough equivalent of saying, “We have no intention of taking God’s word for anything. Yes, judging by what we’ve seen in the last couple of days, God has the power of life and death over us. But we have the

right to choose whoever we want!” Yahweh had just linked “grumbling against Me” with the prospect of death. How revealing it is that it didn’t seem to occur to the rebels that they should stop grumbling, repent, and take God’s ripe-almond sign to heart. They merely observed, “Since we’re grumblers (and we have no intention of changing our tune) we’re all going to die!” But God’s heartfelt intention was that they would *not* die. They were being given the opportunity to live—and live well: **“I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving Yahweh your God, obeying His voice and holding fast to Him, for He is your life.”** (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

The lesson of Aaron’s almond-wood staff was that Yahweh reserves for Himself the right to call whomever He wishes to watch over His affairs on the earth. We cannot choose, nor should we aspire, to be leaders in God’s economy. We should merely make ourselves available for whatever task He requires, remaining awake and vigilant to the leading of His Spirit. Yahweh’s choices are often surprising. They seldom fit our limited, hazy world view. A few examples: He chose David—the runt of the litter, as it were—to be Israel’s mightiest king and founder of the Messiah’s royal dynasty. He selected Mary—a dirt-poor teenage peasant girl—to be the blessed mother of Yahshua, the prophesied King of Kings. He chose Saul of Tarsus—once a legalistic narrow-minded Pharisee—to communicate His message of grace to the world. The Messiah’s closest earthly companions—by His own choice—were rough fishermen and repentant sinners, not princes, priests, or politicians. It was they, not the royalty or the religious elite, who would lead the world toward the Kingdom of Heaven.

Aaron’s almond-wood staff was not a magic wand. It was merely a tool, one God had used in the past to achieve His purposes (e.g. Exodus 7:19), and one He used now to make His point. That point was, in the end, revealed by what the almond tree symbolized: if we are to live under Yahweh’s care, we must remain watchful and alert, wide awake to message of the word of God—His instructions, His promises, and His plan. This is not as easy as it sounds, for it entails questioning our own “best-laid schemes” (you know—the ones that “*gang aft agley*”). We aren’t *always* wrong, for we’re made in the image and likeness of God. But we can’t count on being right, either: **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares Yahweh. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”** (Isaiah 55:8-9) We need to wake up and smell the almond blossoms.

The one usage of the almond motif in scripture that made its inclusion in our list of symbols absolutely necessary is the design of the golden menorah, the seven-branched oil lamp that was to be placed within the tabernacle. Because its specifications are as detailed and meticulous as anything we'll find in the instructions for building the tabernacle or its furnishings, I can only reflect that Yahweh must have had very good reasons for being so specific. The instructions for its design, as given to Moses on the mountain, are found in Exodus 25, and (as usual) the record of Bezalel's compliance is listed separately, in Exodus 37.

Interestingly, amid all the design detail, the finished size of the menorah is not specified. Tradition states that it was about five feet tall and three feet wide, but the Torah doesn't say, so the dimensions aren't important to us. But otherwise its design is quite specific. **"You shall make a lampstand of pure gold. The lampstand shall be made of hammered work: its base, its stem, its cups, its calyxes, and its flowers shall be of one piece with it..."** The first thing Yahweh emphasizes is its unity: the menorah was to be made of a single piece of beaten gold—the decorative parts as well as those that were functional—it was to work together as a complex unit, teaching a single multifaceted lesson. There was more to this than a simple indoor light source: its form *meant* something.

"And there shall be six branches going out of its sides, three branches of the lampstand out of one side of it and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side of it..." The design called for a center stalk or trunk, from which "grew" six branches, three on either side. Thus we are seeing Yahweh's familiar six-plus-one theme again, something that shows up incessantly in scripture—in the creation account, the six-day work week plus Sabbath rest, the seven annual "feasts" or convocations of Yahweh, the Sabbatical year, and innumerable other, more subtle, places. The pattern has prophetic chronological ramifications: fallen man's tenure of six thousand years will be capped by one final Millennium of perfect government under the Messiah.

But the *arrangement* of the lampstand's elements leads us to another observation: three branches on one side represent Israel, and the other three represent the ekklesia or Church. All six of them grow from, and are dependent upon, the center trunk, that representing Yahshua the Messiah. Indeed, these three entities stand together in balanced unity, though they are distinct from one another. Christ is the trunk, the anchor. Israel and the ekklesia grow side by side, anchored into and supported by Him. Together, then, the menorah forms a perfect picture of Yahshua's Millennial Kingdom—the culmination and terminus of all of the previous ages of man.

Where do almonds enter the picture? All six stems, plus the center stalk, are fashioned to resemble the branches of a living almond tree as it grows. I imagine Aaron's staff that budded looked something like this when God was finished

bringing it to life: **“Three cups [or bowls] made like almond blossoms [*shaqad*], each with calyx [or “ornamental knob” in some translations] and flower, on one branch, and three cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyx and flower, on the other branch—so for the six branches going out of the lampstand....”** Three “ornamental” elements were to grace each of the six branches. They were formed to look like a natural (i.e., botanically accurate) representation of an almond blossom with all its parts intact. (The calyx is that part of the plant forming a protective layer around the flower in the bud. In reality, it’s anything *but* “ornamental.”)

On the living tree, five-petalled blossoms (five being the number of grace) develop into knob-like bowls where the fruit, the almond, grows and matures. Each of the six branches on the menorah were to have three of these knob-and-flower decorative devices. In addition, the center stalk was to display four such knob-and flower units, plus three more—one directly beneath the junction of each pair of branches—for a total of seven. **“And on the lampstand itself [that is, the center supporting stalk representing Yahshua] there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, with their calyxes and flowers, and a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand....”**

The symbolic lesson seems to be that among the watchful, alert believers of both Israel and the church, grace will develop, mature, and bear fruit—a process that’s made perfect and complete in our Messiah, our Center and Support—He who watches over us. Six is the number of man, but our understanding of this fact has been fine-tuned somewhat here: three branches on each side (three being the number symbolizing accomplishment) represent two separate groups who depend upon Yahweh’s Messiah for their very life: the redeemed of Israel and the ekklesia. This means that in the end, as far as Yahweh is concerned, we’re *all there is* of mankind. Just as our Messiah was raised from the dead, both the church (in the rapture) and Israel (See Ezekiel 37:1-14) will follow suit. We will all participate in a “resurrection” of one sort or another. Thus all seven branches of the menorah are defined by the almond tree: the “waker.”

Now, once again, Yahweh stresses the idea that unity is of the utmost importance: **“Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold.”** (Exodus 25:31-36) How sad it is that this unity that He has been so careful to specify is so far removed from reality in today’s imperfect world. While it’s true that Evangelical Christians, for the most part, love and pray for Israel (the nation *and* the race), much of “nominal Christendom” does not, assuming in their ignorance that God is finished with Israel, and that the Church has replaced her in His affections. This position sounds utterly insane to me (not to mention being patently unscriptural), but that doesn’t stop some mainstream liberal “Christian” denominations from refusing to support Israel. In the same way, Israelis are not unaware that Evangelicals are their only

real friends in this world (especially now that the American government has proven itself to be such an unreliable ally—*God forgive us*), but most religious Jews want nothing to do with us or our Messiah. So the menorah, at the moment, lies in pieces on the ground. But as I said, it is a picture of *Millennial* reality—of what will come to pass when Yahshua reigns personally upon the earth: the true church and restored Israel will at last be one with our Savior—He upon whom we both depend for our life, our breath, and our very existence.

The menorah wasn't merely decoration, of course. It was functional: its role was to provide light. Since there were no windows in the tabernacle, it was the only light source within the Holy Place. By implication, this means that the sole source of spiritual illumination for God's redeemed is to be Christ, as He is presented through Israel and the church—but (and this is important) only insofar as they are *connected to Him*. In other words, things that might be done and taught by Israel or the church if they *aren't* anchored in the Messiah aren't to be considered "light" at all. Neither human wisdom, philosophy, nor religious tradition are to be relied upon to "be a light unto our path." These things aren't necessarily *wrong*, you understand, but they are not to be considered authoritative. We are to follow only what God has shown us through Christ and the entities He has endorsed to communicate Him to the world.

Note too that this light is available only within the tabernacle. In order to benefit by it, one must already have encountered the altar of sacrifice and the laver of cleansing. In other words, he must be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb and be made pure by the water of the Holy Spirit *before* the light can do him any good. This in turn reveals why the unredeemed world finds the truths found in God's word utterly useless: they don't comprehend what God is showing them because they haven't entered His world; they're not citizens of His kingdom. The odd idea that Yahshua was a "great teacher," maybe even a prophet, but He wasn't God in flesh, is thus proved from scripture (as it is in practical experience) to be complete nonsense. The light shines only within the tabernacle.

So each of the six branches and the center trunk were to be equipped with an oil lamp, and the light was never to be extinguished or allowed to go dark. The priests (read: believers) were to make sure that olive oil (symbolic of the Holy Spirit) was always available to feed the flame of enlightenment. In case you missed it, that means it's up to *us* to ensure the Spirit's availability to the world. Remember, the Holy Spirit dwells within the redeemed. So Yahshua told us what we are to be doing: **"You [believers] are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."** (Matthew 6:14-16) But how does Yahshua, the center of all this, fit in? John explains: **"In Him [Yahshua]**

was life, and the life was the light of men.” (John 1:4) He was **“the true light which gives light to every man who comes into the world.”** (John 1:9) If lost men don’t see the light of God in our lives, they probably won’t see it at all. No pressure or anything.

Returning to Exodus, we read, **“You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it...”** What was “in front of it?” The menorah was to stand against the south inner “wall” of the tabernacle, facing—and shining—north. The only tabernacle furnishing that stood against the south wall was the table of showbread (literally, the bread of the presence”). Thus what God wants His people to see—that upon which He’s shedding light—is His provision for us, symbolized by the twelve unleavened loaves. It’s worth noting that the arrangement of these loaves once again reveals—as does the design of the menorah itself—the side-by-side nature of Israel and the church: there are two rows of six loaves each, each row sprinkled *separately* with frankincense (indicating purity through sacrifice). The bread of the presence, by the way, was to be replaced—*made new*—on the Sabbath (see Leviticus 24:8). The Millennial ramifications for us are so obvious, I shouldn’t have to spell them out.

Everything was to be made out of pure gold, symbolic of God’s immutable righteousness. **“Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made, with all these utensils, out of a talent of pure gold.”** Even the mundane utensils, the wick-trimmers, tongs, and trays, were to be made of gold. It was as if these utilitarian tools were to be considered part of the menorah—a hint that perhaps what we commonly perceive as “the church” and “Israel” aren’t really all there is to it. All together, the menorah and its utensils weighed one talent—that’s somewhere between seventy-five and ninety pounds of pure gold. With the probable exception of the mercy seat’s cherubim, this is the most lavish single use of gold in the entire tabernacle, which should give us some clue as to the relative importance and symbolic significance of the menorah. **“And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.”** (Exodus 25:37-40) Finally, Moses was told by Yahweh Himself what the menorah was to look like—he wasn’t making this stuff up to please his own aesthetic sensibilities. In fact, it’s doubtful that Moses had a clue as to what the symbols even meant.

There is a seemingly “offhand” mention of the almond tree in one of the most pessimistic passages in the Bible. But now that we’re getting a handle on what the almond tree symbolizes, we can begin to see the reason for its inclusion. Solomon is heard bemoaning what can happen to someone in old age if his life hasn’t been built from the beginning upon the solid foundation of Yahweh’s love. **“Remember**

also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them....'" When we're young, everything seems possible. Life is an adventure, and new experiences lie around every corner. It's easy to be optimistic when we're young, because we're too dumb to perceive the ramifications of our own mortality. But *that's* precisely the time to learn to honor our Creator, *before* our own limitations become obvious enough to be debilitating.

"Before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way...." Having grown (relatively) old myself, I can relate to this. I am well past my "earning years." There was a time when I felt I could afford to "risk it all" on some new venture, because if I failed, I could always earn it all back again. (Well, that was the theory, anyway—one I put to the test on several occasions.) But now, having been forcibly retired for well over a decade, such risks would seem a foolhardy strategy. I must feed my family on what I have, not on what I might be able to earn in the future. And I can see what Solomon was talking about. If my faith were based on my own skills or fortune, I'd be terrified of every new dawn, for the whole world is conspiring to impoverish me, one way or another.

But as it is, having honored my Creator from the days of my youth, I need not fear what the world can do to me or my family, for *nothing* can happen to us that is not known and permitted by my heavenly Father. (I'm not saying that I never worry; only that I don't *need* to, and never have.) It's not that nothing bad can happen—after all, we're promised tribulation in this world. It's just that the very same contingency can bring either terror or peace, depending upon one's spiritual outlook. It's like the bumper sticker says: "Know Jesus: know peace—No Jesus: no peace." A personal example: my last big "gamble," which entailed leaving my own small business behind and taking a job with a start-up three thousand miles away, ended three years after it had begun in what any rational person would call a total disaster. *Billions* of dollars were lost (millions of that belonging to me, if you must know) due to events beyond my control. But the implosion of the venture allowed me the leisure (and just enough resources) to follow my heart's desire, pondering God's word all day long, every day. So because I didn't "forget my Creator in the days of my youth," I am able to see my corporate catastrophe as an "interesting and educational experience," nothing more—not *remotely* "the end of the world" (as some saw it).

Solomon, on the other hand, wasn't done describing the mindset of the one who faces a bleak future without Yahweh. He says, **"The almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity."** (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8) Basically, he's saying that if you've placed all of your eggs in the basket of your own mortal existence, don't be surprised if they get scrambled before it's all over. He's describing the "winter" of a man's life, as he approaches the end, when all he has to look forward to is his "eternal home," wherever it is that he's laid up his spiritual "treasure." His impending death implies separation: his body will return to the dust, and his spirit (*ruach*, the unique eternal component of man's potential) will return to the God who entrusted it to him the day he was conceived.

The only reason we're even looking at this passage is Solomon's mention of the blossoming of the almond tree. As we noted earlier, the almond is known as "the waker," the harbinger of spring, because it blooms as early as January or February. It is a sign that there is something to look forward to beyond the cold, bleak skies of winter. If you had no previous experience to go by, you might reasonably conclude that everything had died with the onset of winter—that all hope was lost, and that the trees and grass would never become green again—that is, until you saw an almond tree, bravely putting forth fresh blossoms in the middle of January. The almond offers the first precursor of renewed life, as incongruous and unexpected as it is—a life beyond the winter without God that Solomon so glumly described, in which everything is vanity, emptiness, and hopelessness. The almond tree tells us, when nothing else does, that there is (or can be) meaning after futility, hope after despair, light after darkness, and life after death.

Yahshua instructed His disciples on this very principle, though He didn't use the almond tree as a symbol, but rather the fig (because the reawakening of *Israel* was the sign we were being instructed to anticipate). **"From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near."** That is, just as the almond's blossoms tell us that death and winter won't last forever, the fig tree's buds state that Israel is coming back to life. **"So also, when you see these things [a whole series of portentous signs, including the budding of the fig tree] taking place, you know that He [the Son of Man—*Yahshua Himself*] is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation [the one that sees the signs] will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away..."** Don't look now, but He was talking about *us*—the present generation. The sign of the fig tree—the political rebirth of Israel—happened for all to see in 1948. And the rest of the Olivet Discourse signs

(wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, famines, persecution of the faithful, the worldwide availability of the Gospel, etc.) have been occurring with startling regularity of late.

We have thus been told how to identify the *season* of our deliverance, defined as the coming of the Son of Man, and that season is upon us. That “coming,” however, will take place in phases—first Christ’s coming for His church (described most vividly in I Thessalonians 4:16-17), and subsequently to deal with the rest of the world. Here in the Olivet Discourse, Yahshua was speaking to Jewish disciples, that is, representatives of *both* the church and Israel. (Israel’s national repentance will take place only after the church has been “kept out of the hour of trial” via the rapture.) So He didn’t differentiate between one phase of His coming and the other. But He did give us a crucial insight: **“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows [literally, “perceives”], not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father....”** The event that begins “the coming of the Son of Man” is the rapture of the church. Yahshua is telling us plainly here that God is keeping that date a secret. We know the *day of the year*, however, for the “catching up” of the church is a perfect prophetic fit for the symbolic imagery of the Feast of Trumpets, the first day of the lunar month of Tishri, in the autumn. But we aren’t told which year, and we won’t see it coming—the rapture has no prophetic harbingers.

This is where the symbolic significance of the almond tree comes into play. As we live through the darkest days of winter, we can see the blossoms sprouting on the almond branches and we know that spring cannot be far behind. We are therefore commanded to **“Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”** (Mark 13:28-37) We have seen the almond branch blossom: we know that spring is coming, and with it new life in our Messiah and King. The fact that we don’t know precisely *when* He’s coming must not distract us from the fact that He will. We are *commanded* to remain vigilant, alert, and awake as the season of Christ’s return approaches. We are the doorkeepers of Yahweh’s household. It is our job to remain watchful until the Master returns. There will be plenty of time to rest after His coming, on the Sabbath.

GRASSES

☞ 3.3.15 ☞

impermanence

Someone once pointed out to me (in defense of a vegetarian diet) that such luminaries as Leonardo DaVinci, Ghandi, Nicola Tesla, Voltaire, Leo Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw, and Albert Einstein were all outspoken vegetarians. I retorted, “These men are all *dead*.” While I recognize the deleterious health effects of too much animal-based food in the diet, my point (besides fulfilling my customary role as provocateur) was that it is pointless to invest too much effort or concern trying to circumvent our inevitable mortality. We are temporary beings: our bodies *are* going to die, no matter what we eat. We should live as if we know that.

Moses (who lived far longer than anyone else in his generation) mused upon man’s mortal destiny: **“You [Yahweh] return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O children of man!’ For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”** God, he says, is on a schedule, like a guard making his rounds. And His plan transcends the life of any man—or *all of us*, for that matter. The Sabbath principle reveals *how many* of these “thousand-year yesterdays” there are to be in the unfolding history of our fallen race. God is eternal, but until humanity’s seven-day week is complete, *we* (our bodies) will be impermanent in form and nature: **“You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers....”** There’s our symbol: the life of grass is temporary and fleeting. One moment it is green and vibrant; the next, it’s brown and dry. It’s all a poignant reminder of our own ephemeral mortality.

Though grass will die soon enough on its own, the process can be accelerated: it can be mown down, cut off before its time. So Moses (who witnessed a lot of this sort of thing) notes: **“For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh....”** If our mortal lives were all there is to it, “a sigh” would be the perfect description of our brief existence. Note that it’s seldom Yahweh who kills us for our sins, although none of them escape His notice: it is *we ourselves* who “bring our years to an end.”

Though he himself lived to the age of one hundred and twenty, the world’s first actuary noted: **“The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble. They are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of Your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of You?”** If we were wise,

we all would. A personal reflection: my father didn't smoke or drink alcohol; he watched his diet, maintained a healthy weight, exercised regularly, and honored God—and he died quite suddenly of a brain aneurism at seventy-eight. My father-in-law, not so much—in *any* of those criteria. *He* died, after a long and debilitating illness, at eighty-one. I realize that as surveys go that's an awfully small sample. Still, I must conclude that if this life were all there is, there would be very little incentive to take care of oneself (physically *or* spiritually)—or anyone else, for that matter. But this earthly life is *not* the sum total of our human existence. It is merely the front porch of eternity, the place where we must decide whether or not to ring heaven's doorbell. And our mortal bodies—though as vulnerable as grass—are the only vessels in which it's possible to do that. **“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”** (Psalm 90:3-12)

Isaiah made precisely the same point: **“A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of Yahweh blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”** (Isaiah 40:6-8) People are impermanent, but God—and His word—endures forever. If we look at this a bit more closely, we can begin to sort out some specific applications of the principle. Who, exactly, is the “voice” to which he refers? We might presume that it's Yahweh (who inspired all of this), but technically he's referring back to an early reference: **“A voice cries in the wilderness: prepare the way of Yahweh. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”** (Isaiah 40:3) If we can determine who this “voice” is, we'll be able to get closer to the heart of the issue by examining what else he had to say.

All four Gospel writers identify who the “voice” is. **“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of Yahweh; make His paths straight...’”** In Isaiah's original Hebrew, the concept of “straight” (*yahshar*) means to be right, level, straight or smooth, so figuratively, to be upright, just, or lawful—“to be just and in a right state or association to a compelling standard, as a figurative extension of a straight object, not twisted or crooked.” (*DBLWSD*) So John, in accordance with Isaiah's prophecy, prepared the way for Yahweh, warning his audience to “be straight with Him.” But who showed up? Who did John identify as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?” It was Yahshua—a mortal man. So either Yahshua was actually Yahweh in the flesh, or both Isaiah and John were false prophets. There's no way around it.

Who, then, comprised the “crooked and perverse generation” who were supposed to get their act straightened out in light of Yahweh's coming? It was the religious elite of the day, the most respected, powerful, connected people in the

whole country. **“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire....”** These guys didn’t really think of themselves as “grass,” ready to wither and fade at the least little puff of breath from Yahweh. No, they were *Somebody*, the best of the best (in their own estimation). They considered themselves mighty trees—majestic cedars of the forests of Lebanon, or the tall date palms of righteousness in the oasis of Israel. Being sons of Abraham, these religious Jews presumed that their very biological heritage put them in an unassailable position of favor with God. *Grass? Not us!* But John, not exactly the most politically correct guy in town, took one look at their arrogant pretensions and declared, “All I see here is kindling.”

He went on to say, **“I baptize you [i.e., people in general, not the Pharisees] with water [because of your] repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”** Remember, the “He” to whom John was referring—Yahshua—had been identified in Isaiah 40 as Yahweh Himself. If Matthew knew enough to make the connection, I can *guarantee* that the Pharisees did too (which is not to say they liked it). **“His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear his threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”** (Matthew 3:1-3, 7-12) That “chaff” is the rough equivalent of the “grass” of which Isaiah had spoken. Since Israel was an agrarian society, there are half a dozen Hebrew words for “grass,” and several of them stress the “ready-to-burn” aspects of dead vegetation—hay, stubble, or chaff.

Peter quoted Isaiah 40 as well. **“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. For ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”** (I Peter 1:22-25) His point was that although our bodies—our flesh—are as vulnerable and temporary as the grass, we, having been born again into a new kind of life in Christ’s eternal word, have been transformed into “imperishable” beings. Our flesh is *still* like grass, you understand; it is still subject to our common mortal predicament. But our life, if it has been purified by obedience to the truth of God’s love, is no longer dependent upon our flesh. It is no longer merely *bios*; it is now *zoe* as well. Our souls will now live on regardless of what happens to our bodies. So Peter’s admonition to believers here is that they demonstrate the life that abides within them by loving one another.

It's not that our bodies are worthless, inconsequential, or evil in themselves. That attitude is an artifact of the Gnostic heresy that plagued early Christianity—the idea that one should view material existence negatively, that thought or knowledge is the only thing that really matters. The human body is seen by Gnostics as evil and constrictive, a prison for its inhabitants. Taken to its logical conclusion, it is deemed that what the body does is unimportant (which, of course, leads to the tolerance of all sorts of sin—lasciviousness, drunkenness, gluttony, etc.—because since they happen “in the body,” it doesn't really matter. Every shred of scriptural doctrine weighs in against this loony idea. The body is, in reality, a vehicle—fearfully and wonderfully made—in which we are given the opportunity to express our free will before God Almighty. It is *anything but* insignificant.

That being said, it would also be a mistake to treat the body as more than it is—the “be all and end all” of the human experience. As I said, it's only a vehicle to get us from point A to point B—from conception to corpse. In the sermon on the mount, Yahshua put the whole thing into perspective: **“I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”** If you think about it, He has thus defined “life” (at least potentially) as something beyond the body—separate from it. The essence of our “life” does not depend on food, drink, clothing, or shelter—though all of these things are necessary for the maintenance of the body. The point is not that we shouldn't take care of ourselves; it's that we shouldn't worry or be concerned about it: that's God's job. **“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?...”** Actually, evolutionists (if they're philosophically consistent) would insist that we're *not* more valuable—that we're nothing more than high-functioning animals. But Yahweh would beg to differ. We *are* different—created (at some level) in the very image of God, with the capacity for free will, hence the ability to love.

Birds never go on diets, dye their feathers, or get plastic surgery, and yet they never have “issues” with their appearance. They simply live as well as they can for as long as they can. People, on the other hand, tend to obsess over things they should leave in God's hands. Is this not idolatry? **“Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?”** Anxiety actually has the potential to *shorten* one's lifespan. **“And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?...”** It isn't that Yahweh is promising to provide His children fashionable apparel to cover their mortal carcasses (though our temporal necessities *are* provided). That thing in the Garden of Eden was just a symbol. The sartorial

splendor with which He clothes us is not designed for bodies of flesh, but for Spirit-indwelled souls. We will receive “robes of righteousness,” the “fine linen, clean and bright, the righteous acts of the saints” in which the Bride of Christ—the church—was described as wearing in Revelation 19:8. Until then, it doesn’t matter whether you’re wearing a designer suit and thousand-dollar shoes, or a Wal-Mart tee shirt and flip flops. Any “splendor” the world will perceive in your wardrobe will be defined by what they see in your heart and life. There’s nothing quite as ugly as a garment of hatred worn by a “beautiful person.”

So while we are supposed to work to provide for our needs in this world, we are not to *obsess* over them. **“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all....”** God wants us to depend on Him while we work to meet our own needs, recognizing that He is the ultimate source of all good things. Compare this to our government. These days they foster a “welfare mentality” because it makes people dependent on them, and dependent people are compliant. (It’s amazing how cheaply some folks will sell their freedom: give ’em food stamps and free cell phones, and they’ll vote for you forever—or at least until you’ve run out of people from which you can borrow or steal.) Our government has attempted to replace God in the lives of its citizens. It has thus made itself into a heathen idol, a false messiah. It’s their choice, of course, to place themselves in competition with Yahweh. But it’s the choice of the people to decide which “god” they wish to follow.

There is, however, one factor that must logically be considered by the chooser (though it seldom is). It’s that “all flesh is grass,” the idea that our bodies are temporary, while God (being Spirit) is not. In light of this, it would seem the height of foolishness to surrender your soul to a human government in exchange for a few cheap trinkets and a break on your taxes. Your government is no more permanent than you are: it makes no sense to depend upon it—especially when Yahweh has declared His willingness to meet our needs if only we’ll trust Him: **“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things [that is, the necessities of a mortal life] will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”** (Matthew 6:25-34; cf. Luke 12:22-32) Trouble and anxiety are endemic in the human condition, He says, but they don’t have to define the personal reality of a child of God.

The scriptures spend a fair amount of time pointing out the contrast between grass when it is well watered and when it's not—dried out, cut down, and thrown into the fire. The same substance (indicative of our own vulnerable condition) can experience either blessing or cursing, abundance or destruction, depending upon our relationship with our Maker. And as with grass, the shift from one state to the other can happen with startling suddenness.

The way it's supposed to be was described by the shepherd-king, David: **"Yahweh is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake."** (Psalm 23:1-3) The word translated "green" here (*deshe*) is one of the basic Hebrew words for grass, stressing its state as young, tender, green vegetation. "Pastures" (*naveh*) actually means "abode or habitation." The idea is that under Yahweh's watchful care, our dwelling place is as fresh, safe, and abundant as "green pastures" beside "still waters" would be for well-cared-for sheep.

David also spoke of such "grass" on his deathbed: **"When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass [*deshe*] to sprout from the earth. For does not my house stand so with God?"** David consistently endeavored to rule Israel "in the fear of God." Although he had a few disastrous lapses in judgment and behavior, his heart always belonged to Yahweh. And God had responded in love: **"For He has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will He not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?..."** This prosperity is the very condition of which he spoke in Psalm 23—a secure and ordered life in God's "green pastures." Notice, however, that he's not talking about individuals here, but of kings and their effect upon the peoples over whom they rule. A just, God-fearing leader will have a salutary effect upon his people.

And *vice versa*. David also knew what the converse situation would look like: **"But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away, for they cannot be taken with the hand; but the man who touches them arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they are utterly consumed with fire."** (II Samuel 23:3-7) David's own grandson, Rehoboam, would prove to be just such a "thorn" to his nation. He was so prickly, in fact, a rival (Jeroboam) got out his pruning hook and lopped off ten of Israel's twelve tribes—all but Judah and Benjamin—leading them down a path of idolatry and error from which they never recovered.

Those ten "lost" tribes (a.k.a. Ephraim, a.k.a. Israel) would suffer the consequences of their choices (as had been predicted in such passages as Deuteronomy 28) at the hands of the Assyrians—who would later come back to try their luck against Judah, the southern kingdom still ruled by David's progeny. God's prophet told Judah's king what He would do with Assyria's aspirations:

“Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, ‘Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel: Your prayer to Me about Sennacherib king of Assyria I have heard. This is the word that Yahweh has spoken concerning him’.... Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you [Sennacherib] should turn fortified cities into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass [*deshe*], like grass [*chatsir*] on the housetops, blighted before it is grown....” The transformation from *deshe* (vibrant, healthy green shoots) to *chatsir* (still green but shallow of root and apt to fade quickly under pressure from the sun or wind) tells the tale. The flat roofs of their houses, which were used as patios or terraces—comfortable outdoor living spaces when the weather permitted (e.g. Nehemiah 8:16, Jeremiah 19:13, etc.)—had a thin layer of soil in which grass would often sprout. But having no depth of root, no reserve of moisture, this *chatsir* grass couldn’t survive the heat of the day. And neither could Ephraim, without roots in Yahweh, withstand the “heat” of the Assyrian onslaught.

Just because Assyria (or Babylon, or Rome, or any other “tool”) is used of God to chastise His errant people, it doesn’t follow that they are on the right side of the equation. Yahweh holds them accountable as well—especially if they go further than He intended. Assyria in particular was far more brutal—and blasphemous—than was needed to get the job done. So Yahweh tells them, **“But I know your sitting down and your going out and coming in, and your raging against Me. Because you have raged against Me and your complacency has come into My ears, I will put My hook in your nose [something the Assyrians themselves were known for in the treatment of their captives] and My bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came.”** (II Kings 19:20-21, 25-28; cf. Isaiah 37:26-29) One cannot help but ponder the successes of fundamentalist Islam against Israel, America, and sanity itself. Yes, they’re grossly incompetent and invariably self destructive; and yet, the political and military inroads they’ve made in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East over the past few decades cannot be reasonably ignored. But like the Assyrians of old, Yahweh will wait until they have served their purpose, assess whether they’ve been overly enthusiastic in their antagonism against His people, and then deal with them accordingly.

The Psalmist points out that just as apostate Israel was as vulnerable as grass, so are they who trouble her: **“May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward! Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms.”** (Psalm 129:5-7) Although I can offer a hearty “Amen” to the Psalmist’s prayer, I’m afraid that “all who hate Zion” in the future will have to be somewhat more robust than the wimpy grass on the housetop if they are to be useful in getting Israel’s attention. I mean, look at the history: in an age in which ninety percent of the world’s known Jews lived in Europe or Russia, Yahweh allowed the rise of Hitler

and Stalin. Now that He has given Israel a toehold in the Land, He has permitted the billion and a half Muslims living next door to rediscover their own genocidal (and suicidal) scriptures—resulting in an unprecedented level of mindless hatred against Zion and her God. And *still*, Israel has not turned in repentance to Yahweh in any meaningful way.

What will it take to open their eyes? How about an Islamic invasion the likes of which the world has never seen—the one described in Ezekiel 38 and 39? When Yahweh has miraculously defeated the Muslim invaders on the mountains of Israel, they'll finally “get it.” We have His word on that: **“All the nations shall see My judgment that I have executed, and My hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am Yahweh their God, from that day forward.”** (Ezekiel 39:21-22) If my prophetic timeline is correct, I'd place “that day” somewhere between late 2028 and mid 2029—during the first half of the Tribulation, and at least seven months before the “abomination of desolation,” which I expect to happen on March 28, 2030, one month before the midpoint of the “time of Jacob's trouble.” (And yes, the scriptures *do* give us enough data to pin the date down that closely, if we take the Torah Code seriously.)

The difference between flourishing and withering is a function of how much water is available—water being a metaphor for the restoration and refreshing provided by God's Spirit in one's life. Bildad (one of Job's “miserable comforters”) asked, **“Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds [*chatsir*] flourish where there is no water? While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God. The hope of the godless shall perish.”** (Job 8:11-13) Bildad's observation was well taken, though he was incorrect in attributing Job's troubles to “godlessness.” The fact is, we're *all* like grass; we can *all* expect to wither and die for our sins—not just those who “forget God.” Our temporal circumstances, the relative prosperity we enjoy (as individuals) in our moral bodies, have little or nothing to do with our relationship with Yahweh. But it's not as if Bildad was *wrong*. David, in fact, agrees with him: **“Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.”** (Psalm 37:1-2)

That being said, we must all remember our own mortality, and live our lives accordingly. “Wrongdoers” aren't the only ones whose bodies “fade like the grass.” Physically, we were not designed to last. It is as the Psalmist says: **“Remember how short my time is! For what vanity You have created all the children of man! What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?”** (Psalm 89:47-48) No one can deliver *his own* soul from the prospect of physical death, but Yahweh can: He is perfectly willing (not to mention able) to deliver our souls from the grave—if they have been made alive (at our request)

with the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. It's the rough symbolic equivalent of "watering the grass."

This train of thought leads us to what may come as an epiphany: there is no point living in fear of anyone on earth, for they are just as just as vulnerable and fragile as you are. Yahweh says, **"I am He who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten Yahweh, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, and you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy? And where is the wrath of the oppressor?"** (Isaiah 51:12-13) It's not just a matter of comparative strength, either. Sure, there are people who are more powerful than you on this earth, and if they decide they want you dead, you might die. But all they can kill is your body; they can't touch your soul—and that's where the *real* life is. Yahweh our Maker presides over the status of our essential life, something that can't be touched, or even perceived, by other mortals.

Paul explains: **"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away [like grass without water], our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."** (II Corinthians 4:16-18) But if the eternal is so much more valuable than the transient, is there any point at all in attending to the issues we encounter in the body? The Gnostics decided there wasn't—which explains why they ran into trouble. Why? Because by God's design, the mortal body (our "outer nature") is the vehicle in which our choices must be made—choices that can (if we choose wisely) lead to the renewal of our "inner nature" through the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit. The body isn't just "along for the ride." It's an essential part of the journey.

Think of it this way: in 1969, we sent men to visit the moon. The rocket ships, orbiters, and landing craft that got them there were essential and necessary to the success of the endeavor—but *they weren't the point*. The point was to get the astronauts themselves there and back safely. If NASA could have figured out how to do that without resorting to complicated machinery and mathematics, I'm sure they would have. In the same way (sort of), God uses mortal bodies to house and transport our souls as we explore this thing called Life. Our journey—from womb to tomb—also has "mission parameters," so to speak: to explore and discover everything we can about our Creator, to come to know Him and love Him, and to pass the "data" along to others, so they can benefit as well. Our bodies are the "spacecraft" in which we're travelling; they're designed to get us there and back again. But our souls are analogous to the astronauts themselves: these are the components of our nature that are expected to continue functioning after the journey is complete. And (if I may stretch the analogy), the thing that allows us to

do that is the air we breathe, the oxygen that keeps us alive—the Spirit of God (not coincidentally rendered *ruach* or *pneuma*—“breath”—in the Biblical texts).

So the Gnostics were wrong. The body *is* good and useful and necessary (not to mention being a marvelous gift from God), even if it isn't the point. Like any vehicle, the safety and well being of those within it depend on its integrity. What we do in the body (and with it) reveals how we feel about the “mission” we're on. Are we serious about it? Do we use the body as a means to reach the goal, or do we act as if it *is* the goal, hanging drapes in the space capsule, as it were—bringing in a Lay-Z-Boy, a big screen TV, and a fridge full of beer? Do we even remember what the goal is?

Shifting metaphors, Paul likened the whole endeavor to building a house. If we're believers, we've already got a firm foundation—Christ. The question is, what are we building upon that foundation? Is it too made to last, or is it as temporary as our own mortal frames—grass huts, so to speak? **“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it.”** That is, he had introduced the Corinthians to Yahshua the Messiah, leaving it up to them to finish constructing the house of faith—their own individual lives. **“Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ....”** There *are* other kinds of foundations, of course, but they're not part of this discussion, for he was writing to believers. Theoretically, one could build upon Muhammad, Marx, Mammon, or Man, but those foundations won't support anything of value—sooner or later, they'll crumble into dust, destroying anything and everything we may have built upon them. Christ is the only foundation that will hold up under stress; He is the only one who can (and did) “pass inspection,” the only one who follows (and fulfills) the Building Code—the Word of God.

The sure foundation, then, is Yahshua the Messiah. But it remains to be seen what kind of structure we'll build upon Him. **“Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done....”** The “day” of which he speaks is the Judgment Seat of Christ (spoken of elsewhere). The “gold, silver, and precious stones” represent lives that, like Christ our foundation, are built to last. That is, they're things we might do that are calculated to have a positive impact on the world even after we ourselves are gone: witnesses of the truth that can affect future generations, or personal acts of kindness that may be passed on in kind. The “wood, hay, and straw,” on the other hand, are things that—like our own mortal bodies—have no life beyond the here and now. They aren't necessarily “bad” things, you understand—just things that don't contribute anything of lasting value to the

Kingdom of Heaven. It is even conceivable that “straw” and “silver” could sometimes be the *same thing*—but done with different motives.

And remember, Paul was talking to believers here: the question being addressed is not whether they’re saved or lost, redeemed or reprobate. It’s strictly a matter of heavenly rewards. **“If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”** (I Corinthians 3:10-15) The foundation (Christ) will stand no matter what. The issue is how much of what we did with our time will be left standing after the fire of God’s assessment has swept through. Frankly, the amazing thing about all this is that *any of it* has a prayer of survival. If “all of *our* acts of righteousness are like filthy rags,” (see Isaiah 64:6) then the only things that will survive the fires of judgment are what we did in the power or inspiration of Yahweh, things we did in obedience to, and faith in, His word.

Furthermore, no one would *want* to accumulate such “treasures in heaven” so that he could live in luxury, wield personal power, or exude an attitude of pride in the next life. That sort of thing doesn’t really work *here*, and it certainly won’t work there. All of our rewards, after all, will be the “crowns” we cast before the throne of Yahshua, as we proclaim with the twenty-four elders, **“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”** (Revelation 4:11) But there *is* a personal benefit to having received heavenly rewards—having done works that didn’t burn up like straw. It’s described in Yahshua’s parable of the talents. The one who is a good steward will receive the opportunity to serve the Master in even more significant ways, while the faithless servant will serve in relative obscurity. **“His master said to [the one whose works survived the test], ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ... For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”** (Matthew 25:21, 29) No one is more “saved” than anybody else, but those who have served faithfully in their mortality will be rewarded in the immortal state with the sorts of things Yahweh Himself considers valuable. Let’s face it: if we don’t want what God wants, if we don’t like what He likes, we’re going to be miserable in heaven.

It bears repeating that there is no correlation (positive *or* negative) between our “abundance” here on earth and that which we will enjoy in the kingdom. While it is admittedly hard for the rich to avoid relying on their riches, it is equally difficult for the poor to see the spiritual benefit of poverty: his dearth of distraction from God’s miraculous provision. **“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its**

beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits." (James 1:9-11) The rich and poor alike would do well to remember that they—including their temporal situations—are as temporary as the grass. A poor man's poverty need not endure one day longer than his mortal life, nor will a rich man's wealth follow him to the grave (at least in any way he'll notice). Once you've drawn your last breath, all bets are off.

Isaiah compares the life of the godless to grass consigned to the flame: **"As the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame, so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust. For they have rejected the law of Yahweh of hosts, and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel."** (Isaiah 5:24) The sobering thing about this is that he's not talking about the heathen—those idolatrous nations (like Assyria) who didn't know Yahweh as God, who didn't want to, and who declared themselves enemies of His people. He's talking, rather, about Judah, and specifically the inhabitants of Jerusalem (v. 3), who knew Yahweh (by reputation, anyway), had His scriptures, worshiped at His temple, and kept His feasts *religiously*. (Yes, I'm using the word as a pejorative.) All their pretense of Torah observance—going through the motions while living in iniquity, vanity, apostasy, indulgence and injustice (see verses 18-23) as if God neither saw nor cared—would be met with their destruction. Having "a form of godliness" doesn't impress God any more than having counterfeit money impresses a Treasury agent.

That being said, Yahweh doesn't intend to restrict His judgment to His own chosen people. In the end, everyone who has rejected His love will find themselves separated from it. For example, the same prophet writes concerning one of Israel's neighbors, **"My heart cries out for Moab... The waters of Nimrim are a desolation."** In Hebrew, a stark contrast is being presented. *Nimrim* (a brook in Moab, east of the Jordan River) is a place name meaning limpid or flowing—i.e., transparent, fluid, serene and untroubled. (It has the same consonant root that gives the graceful leopard its name—*namer*.) But under God's judgment, it has become dry and barren: **"The grass is withered, the vegetation fails, the greenery is no more. Therefore the abundance they have gained and what they have laid up they carry away over the Brook of the Willows."** (Isaiah 15:5-7) Place names pepper this whole passage. I don't intend to track them all down (though I have no doubt that it would be an illuminating exercise). But I would be remiss if I didn't point out *why* Yahweh is seen punishing Moab, turning its once lush and verdant landscape into a withered wilderness. It is Moab's pride. **"We have heard of the pride of Moab—how proud he is!—of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; in his idle boasting he is not right. Therefore let Moab wail for Moab, let everyone wail."** (Isaiah 16:6-7) Feel free to mentally substitute the name of Moab with any nation that presents symptoms of the same moral affliction—pervasive cultural arrogance in the face of God. Does anyone come to mind?

If Yahweh was willing to wither the “grass” of Moab because of their pride, what will He do in the post-rapture world, whose arrogance (by all accounts) will make Moab’s look downright modest in comparison? John’s apocalyptic vision included three series or types of judgments—seals of authority opened on a scroll, the blowing of trumpets (indicative of alarm or a call to war), and the pouring out of bowls or vials of God’s wrath upon the earth. A careful study reveals that these three series are not strictly consecutive (like successive bites of a banana), but rather overlap to a great degree (more like the layers of an onion), each one describing the course of Tribulation events from a different point of view. But *within* each series, the judgments are apparently presented in chronological order.

It’s significant, then, that the very first “trumpet” judgment speaks of the earth’s grass—and everything it signifies—being put to the torch. **“Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.”** (Revelation 8:6-7) Amid whatever else this might entail, I see thermonuclear war in these verses—“World War III,” if you will. Note that God isn’t necessarily raining fire upon the earth proactively, but is (uncharacteristically) allowing men to freely exercise their own destructive proclivities without any hindrance, restraint, or moderation on His part—something that tells us the Holy Spirit is no longer operating in the earth at this point, which in turn reveals that this won’t happen until after the rapture of the Church has taken place (see II Thessalonians 2:7).

As “trumpets” go, this is *some* wake-up call. The passage seems to be implying that atomic warfare will affect one third of the earth’s land surface. The Greek word for “earth” here is *ge*, denoting the ground, arable land, or the inhabited earth—the abode of men and animals. The total landmass of the earth is about 56,890,000 square miles. Call it a coincidence if you want, but the participants of the Magog federation (Ezekiel 38:1-8), plus the parts of Europe within the prophetically significant old Roman empire, plus Russia, plus the United States (whose participation is implied in Isaiah 18) add up to just short of 19,000,000 square miles—precisely one third of the earth’s land surface. This “world war” is almost surely an escalation of the regional Magog conflict described in Ezekiel 38 and 39—itsself the last of a long line of genocidal Islamic attacks against Israel. It is closely related to the first four “seal” judgments of Revelation 6, which describe the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” as they’re popularly known. One quarter of the earth’s total population—over 1.7 billion souls—will succumb to war, famine, and disease—*thirty times* the horrendous carnage of World War II.

We are told, **“All green grass was burned up.”** Since the “shooting war” involved “only” a third of the geographical surface of the earth, why (or how) is *all* the green grass scorched? This could merely mean that “all” of grass within the affected “one third of the earth” was burned. But it seems to me we should look beyond the literal holocaust and consider the symbology. What does “grass” teach us? It’s that everything in the physical universe—including us—is perishable, fleeting, and impermanent. Nothing in Yahweh’s visible creation—*nothing*—was built to last. It had a beginning, and it will have an end. The only things God made “permanent” are in the realm of spirit—as in, His own nature. We—our souls, that is, the part of us that defines our personal existence—can live forever *if* (and *only if*) we are made alive by the indwelling Spirit of Yahweh. This was the point, you’ll recall, of the fourth (and central) holy convocation Yahweh told His people to celebrate. The Feast of Weeks, a.k.a. Pentecost, revealed how our *souls* were to move beyond being mere “grass”—here today and thrown into the fire the next—by being indwelled by the Holy Spirit, empowered and enabled to dwell forever in the very presence of God. Likewise, the fifth convocation, the Feast of Trumpets, predicts the parallel transformation of our *bodies* from “grass,” impermanent and vulnerable, to the immortal state—one in which we can relate to God in *His* natural state. So when it is prophesied that “all green grass was burned up,” we are being given the ultimate reminder of fallen mankind’s natural vulnerability. *No one* will survive the Tribulation’s horrors without Yahweh’s Spirit.

Given a bit of moisture, however, burned grass grows back, and so it will be in the aftermath of World War III. God uses this fact to highlight His real point—that rebellious men, not innocent grass or trees, are the focus of His wrath. We’re still in the “trumpets” series, so the focus is still on waking people up to the danger of their chosen course of action. But now, we’ve moved beyond removing the restraints of conscience or logic from the inclinations of evil men: now we’re seeing *demons* sent in to make God’s point for Him: **“And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth....”** These aren’t literal locusts, but demons who exhibit locust-like traits: a single-minded determination to devour everything in sight—in this case, the pretensions of men. Nor do ordinary locusts sting like scorpions, but God makes it clear that with this plague, physical torment is involved. Logic, provision, and kindness haven’t brought the world to repentance, so because mankind has almost run out of time, Yahweh brings out the only weapon left in the arsenal: pain.

But the grass, this time, is declared “off limits.” No more subtle symbols: it’s time to get real. **“They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or**

any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.” (Revelation 9:1-6) Call me crazy, but I still see reason for hope here. Those on the receiving end of the locusts’ unwanted attentions are *not* described (necessarily) as being hopelessly lost—yet. But neither are they allied with Yahweh—they are not “sealed” by God (as are the 144,000 Israelites of Revelation 7, and perhaps other late-comers to Yahweh’s family as well). The lesson God is teaching them here is not the same as that of the first trumpet—that their mortal lives are as impermanent and vulnerable as grass, with all of the admonitions that fact implies. This time, the message is that there is something far worse than the kind of death they’re expecting—the annihilation or dissipation of the soul once it has left the body. This “fate worse than death” is constant, unending torment, experienced not in the body (which *will* die), but in the soul.

God is warning them—as graphically as possible—not to ally themselves with Satan by receiving the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:17-18). If they do, their souls will be tormented eternally, just as their bodies are now being tortured by these demonic locusts—without the hope of respite or relief that death (as bad as that is) would have offered. The key to the lesson is the duration of their torment: *five months*. Five is the number symbolizing grace: at this point (after the abomination of desolation, I’d guess), the grace of God, provided through the atoning sacrifice of Christ, is still available, but it won’t be for long. Once they embrace the Antichrist’s lie, all hope is lost: the torment (of the soul this time, not just the body) will continue forever. As I said, our bodies are the vehicles in which our choices must be made. The body will perish like the grass, but our choices will live on forever if the soul is indwelt with an immortal spirit—whether Yahweh’s or Satan’s.

Our contemplation of “grass” in scripture presents a contrast. On the one hand, it indicates our mortal predicament: our bodies are not built to last, even under the best of circumstances. But this reality is compared to and contrasted with the life available to us in Yahweh’s love—a life of permanence and significance. David said it best: **“For He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.”** That much we know from experience: nobody gets out of here alive. **“But the steadfast love of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s**

children, to those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments.”

(Psalm 103:14-18) The alternative sounds great, especially when compared to certain death. After all, if God’s love is eternal, then logic dictates that its *recipient* must be in a position to receive it for as long as He’s giving it: *we too* must be made “everlasting.” So we should take a very close look at the three stated conditions that promise to convey to us this “steadfast love of Yahweh.”

First, this everlasting love is for those who “fear” Yahweh. *Fear?* The Hebrew word *yare* can indeed connote fear, dread, or being afraid. But the concept is broader than that. It also means to revere, to stand in awe of, to show reverence, honor, or respect, or to be astonished. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes, “Biblical usages of *yārē* are divided into five general categories: 1) the emotion of fear, 2) the intellectual anticipation of evil without emphasis upon the emotional reaction, 3) reverence or awe, 4) righteous behaviour or piety, and 5) formal religious worship.... In several passages, “fearing” and proper living are so closely related as to be virtually synonymous ideas. It is plausible that this usage of “to fear” as a virtual synonym for righteous living or piety grew out of viewing “fear” as the motivation which produced righteous living.” Although it has become fashionable in Christian circles to stress the “reverence” or “respect” shades of meaning, I would caution against completely ignoring the “being afraid” connotation of the word. We must never forget that Yahweh, though He loves us unreservedly, is powerful beyond anything we can possibly imagine, and He’s not shy about using that power to discipline and chastise mankind—starting with His own children. Let’s put it this way: most English translations are in agreement, wording it **“The steadfast love of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him,”** or something similar, and John Wycliffe’s 1384 translation was not exactly wrong in phrasing it “...on men dredinge hym.” We must not become so “familiar” and “comfortable” with Yahweh we begin to take Him for granted. He is *not* “the Man upstairs.” Our God is *awesome*.

Second, **“The steadfast love of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting...to those who keep His covenant.”** Many covenants between God and man are mentioned in scripture, and their specific terms and conditions vary. But in the end they all boil down to one simple agreement. For our part, we are to trust Yahweh, implicitly and completely. And for God’s part, He promises to abide with us—and ultimately, *in* us. For us to “keep His covenant,” then, we have to (1) know what He said, at least in general terms. You can’t logically trust someone to offer wise counsel or fulfill His promises if you’re putting your own words in His mouth. God *didn’t* instruct us to tolerate falsehood in the name of love. He *didn’t* promise to make us rich, keep us healthy, or help us find our car keys. He *did* vow to provide everything we’d need for life and godliness—the necessities of a mortal life, for as long as it may last—and to see us through the tribulations we’re sure to

encounter in this world. (2) In order to fully trust Yahweh, we must learn *not* to trust ourselves—our own insight, intellect, or ability. In particular, we should realize that we cannot extricate ourselves from our own sin. Atonement is God’s job, and He has chosen to achieve it through His Messiah. Yes, there is a place for good works in this world, but they’re not to be considered “currency” with which we might buy our own salvation. (3) Trust in God requires humility before Him: we must not think of Him as our peer, but rather as the One to whom we owe our very existence—for so He is. This in turn affects our relationships with our fellow man: It is impossible to be arrogant or cruel or unmerciful toward our brothers and sisters if we’re walking in humility before God.

Third, **“The steadfast love of Yahweh is from everlasting to everlasting... to those who remember to do His commandments.”** My first reaction to this is, “*Uh oh*. We’re all in deep trouble.” We *don’t* flawlessly “do His commandments,” nor do we usually remember what they are, even on our best days. As with “keeping His covenant,” we can’t perform Yahweh’s commandments if we don’t know what they are. “Commandments” here are the Hebrew *piqudim*—“precepts, directions, regulation, i.e., a principle instructing to do a certain action, which is to be obeyed by all in the same society of the covenant.” (*DBLWSD*) At the very least, then, David seems to be saying we must know and heed the Torah, and remember (Hebrew: *zakar*—recall or proclaim, with a focus on responding in an appropriate manner) to perform these statutes.

I will readily admit to being more obsessive than the average Christian when it comes to the Torah. I mean, how many other people can you name who have written thousand-page books on the subject, tracking down everything that God told anybody to do in the Pentateuch? Having done so (see *The Owner’s Manual*), I can tell you with a straight face that most of the Torah *can’t be kept* in any literal fashion—especially now that the sanctuary and priesthood are no more. Most of it requires a homogenous, close knit agrarian society (such as bronze age Israel) to even be comprehensible. Then add these disconcerting facts: (1) The Torah was given as instruction to Israel alone, not to any of the surrounding nations; (2) Yahshua, while upholding its validity (see Matthew 5:17-19) made it perfectly clear that the *spirit* of the Law (and not merely the letter) was required—making compliance immeasurably harder to achieve, and impossible to fake; (3) No one (except Yahshua Himself) has *ever* lived his whole life without violating a single precept of the Torah; and (4) Yahshua’s harshest criticisms during His years of ministry were reserved for the people who came *closest* to literal perfection in their outward Torah observance: He actually called them the offspring of Satan! At the same time, he welcomed and encouraged the most blatant of sinners who repented before God in reverence and humility, even though they could fall into sin again.

So clearly, there's more to this than meets the eye. David himself (whose worst moral lapses are recorded in scripture) didn't even come *close* to consistently "remembering to do Yahweh's commandments" in any literal sense. And yet, he joyfully counted himself among the blessed souls who would enjoy "the steadfast love of Yahweh from everlasting to everlasting." Why? How? Part of it has to be the secondary definition of *zakar* (rendered "remember"): it also means "to proclaim, to acknowledge." For all of his mistakes and foibles, it's clear that David honored Yahweh and His law with his whole heart. That is, even though he committed adultery with Bathsheba—and then had her husband murdered to cover up his crime—David would *never* have argued that the Sixth and Seventh Commandments weren't valid, that they had somehow become obsolete, that they didn't apply to him because he was king, or that he hadn't actually violated them because of some Clintonesque technicality. Rather, he would (and eventually *did*) fall on his knees in contrite repentance, acknowledging his sin before the God whom he "feared" in every sense of the word. Actually, David expressed how a sinner such as himself could expect to receive "the steadfast love of Yahweh" in the verses immediately preceding the passage we just read.

David began Psalm 103 by explaining the nature of Yahweh's forgiveness, the removal of our iniquity from us—not *all* of us, however, but only those who "fear" God. The Psalm employs an interesting way of communicating this: it's as if David's body is having a chat with his soul. That is, the part of him that is by nature as impermanent as grass is giving counsel to the component of his nature that can—under the right circumstances—live eternally in Yahweh's love. The human body may be the vehicle of free will, but the soul is in the driver's seat.

So he says, **"Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name!"** Half-hearted, lukewarm religiosity isn't going to cut it. David is advising his soul to go "all in." This relationship with Yahweh is to be the all-consuming center of our lives—the thing to which everything else plays second fiddle. **"Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's...."** Let us not skim lightly over this list, for it describes the awesome "benefits" we can expect to receive when we "fear Yahweh."

First and foremost, He "forgives our iniquity"—He atones (i.e., covers) our sin. This is a key point, for our sin is that which separates and estranges us from God in the first place. It has been that way since the very beginning. Reconciliation between God and man is the whole point of God's plan of salvation.

Second, He “heals our diseases.” Since the body is speaking to the soul here, let us especially contemplate the “diseases” that plague the *inner* man—grief, sorrow, bitterness, strife, anxiety, envy, and so on.

Third, he “redeems our lives from the pit”—not sheol (necessarily) but *shachat*: the sort of hole, trap, or dungeon used to capture and hold wild beasts (or men). It’s not that Yahweh causes us to avoid this pit, you understand; we’re *already* snared in it, caught by our own sins. Truth be told, we were *born* there. But Yahweh redeems us from the place: He buys our freedom from the one who enslaved us.

Fourth, Yahweh “crowns us with love and mercy.” This crown isn’t the *nezer*, the royal or priestly diadem, but the *atara*—a more general word, often used figuratively to indicate the bestowing of honor, blessing, or authority. Such a crown might (like the Greek *stephanos*) consist of nothing more intrinsically valuable than a wreath or garland of flowers. On the other hand, Yahweh Himself (in the person of the Messiah) is prophesied to become “a crown” like this to His people, the remnant of Israel (see Isaiah 28:5). So the “steadfast love and mercy” with which God-fearing believers are to be “crowned” will, in the end, be personified by God Himself.

Fifth, Yahweh “satisfies those who fear Him with good,” resulting in renewed strength. The eagle, you’ll recall, represents “the lord of the heavens,” ultimately, Yahweh Himself. So this “satisfaction” occurs the moment we are empowered and indwelt by His Holy Spirit—the prophetic outcome of the Feast of Weeks (a.k.a. Pentecost). And our “youth will be renewed”—*physically*—when we experience the ageless nature of our immortal resurrection bodies on the ultimate Feast of Trumpets.

David wasn’t through describing Yahweh’s game plan. **“Yahweh works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed....”** We tend to think of “the oppressed” as a subset of humanity who have gotten the short end of the stick in this world. But in reality, the word (*ashaq*) includes all of us, for we have all been mistreated, disadvantaged, tormented, or cheated. You may protest, “No, I’m doing alright, thank God. Nobody’s oppressing me at the moment.” Are you sure about that? If you’re a child of Adam’s race, you were born with a nature that *ensures* you’ll fall short of God’s perfect standard. Actually, we’ve all been cheated, defrauded, and held in bondage by Satan, whether or not we’re aware of this oppression every waking moment. We are besieged by our own fallen humanity. The good news is that Yahweh “works righteousness and justice” on our behalf, terminating our oppression.

How does He do this? **“He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the people of Israel.”** As I’ve said ’til I’m blue in the face, the Torah isn’t designed to be a legal

code defining the good behavior required to reconcile us to Yahweh (although it does reveal how God expects us to comport ourselves). It is, rather, a preview, a prophecy, of how Yahweh intended to redeem man from our fallen state and restore the fellowship between us. Of course, this is far easier to see from this side of Calvary. But just because our race became estranged from our Creator, it doesn't follow that *His* character changed in the process. He is still the same loving, merciful God He always was. If He is angry with us, it is only because He longs for our love—a love that most of us stupid humans, like stubborn and petulant children, refuse to give Him despite all that He has done for us. **“Yahweh is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will He keep His anger forever....”** Did you catch that? His *love* is steadfast, enduring, and permanent, while His *anger* is as impermanent as the grass—it springs up for a season, and then dies off, for it is not really the essence of Yahweh's nature. His wrath, in point of fact, is merely an artifact—and a temporary one at that—of His love: it's grief with longing, not vindictive rage.

As strange as it sounds, God's love compels Him to be “unfair”—to show us mercy when none is due: **“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.”** If He did, He'd have to kill us all, and He'd be back where He was before He began the whole process of creation—alone and unloved (if only because there were no beings in existence capable of loving). **“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so Yahweh shows compassion to those who fear Him.”** (Psalm 103:1-13) At the risk of sounding like I'm contradicting scripture (which I'm not), I'd like to point out that Yahweh's love and compassion is not *only* for those of us who “fear Him.” He died for all of humanity *while we were yet sinners*—before we had any idea of what sort of trouble we'd gotten ourselves into, and certainly before we learned to honor God. David is right, however, in that God's love and forgiveness is only *accessible* to those who fear Him. For everyone else, the Gift—though purchased, wrapped, and delivered—just sits there unopened: they refuse to receive and enjoy it. Having opened the wonderful Gift myself, I find this attitude incomprehensible.

As I said, grass presents a study in contrasts. As vulnerable and impermanent as it can be, it is also quick to respond to the waters of God's revitalization. And as we have just seen, the reverence—the “fear”—of God is the handle on the faucet of restoration. It's the primary factor that determines whether our “grass” will be dry and barren, or lush and green.

Consider a couple of passages from the prophet Isaiah. They present radically different destinies for the same places (but at different times)—in or near the land of promise. First, **“The land mourns and languishes. Lebanon is confounded and withers away. Sharon is like a desert, and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves. ‘Now I will arise,’ says Yahweh. ‘Now I will lift myself up; now I will be exalted. You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble. Your breath is a fire that will consume you.”** (Isaiah 33:9-11) The historical setting is the invasion of Israel by Assyria—something Isaiah saw with his own eyes. The northern kingdom (Ephraim/Israel) had turned its back on Yahweh from the moment of its break from Judah. Now, some two hundred years later, Yahweh’s patience with Israel is exhausted. He says, basically, “Okay, you’ve refused my water, so you’re dead grass—dried out stubble ready to burn because of your rebellion.” But although Assyria would be the torch in Yahweh’s hand, look who actually “sets fire” to Ephraim: not Assyria, and not even Yahweh, but *Ephraim itself*. “Breath” here is a loaded word. It not only indicates what they have said and the way they have lived before God in the intervening centuries. The word is *ruach*—the same word translated *spirit*. It would not be improper to translate this, **“Your spirit is a fire that will consume you.”** God doesn’t have to lift a finger to judge mankind. Our own spirit is enough to condemn us.

The tone is quite similar in the next chapter (Isaiah 34). It concerns itself with judgment upon “the nations” (verse 1), beginning with Edom. Those familiar with the broad sweep of prophecy will recognize the events portrayed here as the Battle of Armageddon—including Yahshua’s starting point in the Edomite city of Bozrah (v. 6; cf. Isaiah 63:1-6). Although “grass” *per se* isn’t mentioned, we see Edom (Southern Jordan) being described as a barren, toxic landscape reminiscent of the scorched “stubble” that Israel became at Assyria’s hand—made so, it seems, in order to be a constant nearby reminder to restored Israel, throughout the Millennium, of what happens to nations who defy Yahweh. **“And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched. Its smoke shall go up forever.... Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses.”** (Isaiah 34:9-10, 13)

But during the same timeframe—the thousand-year reign of Yahshua—the story is completely different for restored Israel. (Israel, you’ll note, is *upwind* of smoldering Edom, the prevailing wind blowing from west to east. I wouldn’t want to be living in Iraq or the Persian Gulf region, *downwind* of Edom.) Isaiah 35, in marked contrast with the two previous chapters, speaks of “grass” that is perennially lush, green, and well watered because God (as King Yahshua) lives and reigns there: **“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.”** What the Israelis have done with the Negev since 1948 is nothing short of mind-boggling, but it’s nothing compared to the verdant glory the land will witness during the Messiah’s Millennial kingdom. **“The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,**

the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.” Remember, these areas (usually spoken of as the “garden spots” of the Levant) were specifically singled out in Isaiah 33 for devastation under the Assyrian onslaught. **“They shall see the glory of Yahweh, the majesty of our God....”** In case you missed it, the “glory” and “majesty” of Yahweh is found in Yahshua alone. His physical presence, sitting on the throne of Israel, will be what returns the Land to a state of verdant splendor.

So Isaiah offers his beleaguered nation (and us as well) some welcome encouragement as we live through the bad times that must precede the return of Christ: **“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you....”** Note that our strength and courage consists of trusting in God to right the wrongs—not in us executing vengeance on the evil world ourselves. *Payback* belongs to Yahweh alone.

“Then [i.e., when He has saved us—after His second coming] the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water. In the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.” (Isaiah 35:1-7) It’s hilariously ironic, from where I sit. Mankind tries with all its might to make the world a better place. We try our very best to heal disease, safeguard the environment, control nature, and ensure peace—mostly without deference to the God who made us and the world in which we live. We regulate ourselves into virtual slavery in the name of “the greater good.” But everything we do only seems to make matters worse. The only thing we seem to be *really* good at is making weapons of war so we can kill each other more efficiently. But in these ancient scriptures, the truth mocks our feeble efforts: all we ever had to do to achieve our fantasies of “a perfect world” was to honor the God who built it for us. Would that really have been so hard?

A bit later, Isaiah repeats himself, more or less: **“But now hear, O Jacob My servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says Yahweh who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob My servant, Jeshurun [i.e., “upright one”] whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit upon your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams.”** (Isaiah 44:1-4) This is one of literally hundreds of prophecies promising the eventual repentance and restoration of Israel as a nation—a biological family (i.e., not some allegorical stand-in, like the church). It is hinted here (and flatly stated elsewhere) that the plot of Land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob four thousand years ago will be where this national blessing will be poured out.

Taken together, these promises have, throughout most of history, looked extremely unlikely. Not only has Israel (as a nation) spent only a few hundred years *total* of their long history in amicable, reverent fellowship with their God, they have spent far more time living in exile outside the Land than within it. Any other people group would have been absorbed into their host cultures millennia ago. (Met any Hittites, Philistines, or Amalekites lately?) The history of Israel in exile is absolutely unique in the annals of cultural anthropology. So prophesying that the children of Israel—all twelve tribes—will be regathered into their own land, will turn to Yahweh their God in repentance, will accept Yahshua as their Messiah and king (after two thousand years of rejection), and will be restored both literally and figuratively to a state of verdant, prosperous enthusiasm, **“springing up among the grass like willows by flowing streams,”** is not exactly an intuitive call to make. But Yahweh has said this so many times and in so many ways, He must bring it to pass, or be called a liar.

Strangely enough, before Israel experiences restoration like well watered grass in Yahweh’s front lawn, they will *themselves* be a source of refreshing among the nations where they have waited in exile all these years. Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, writes: **“Then the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples like dew from Yahweh, like showers on the grass, which delay not for a man nor wait for the children of man.”** (Micah 5:7) In other words, Israel will prove to be a blessing to the nations among whom they find refuge in exile. When one considers the contributions Jews have made to the gentile world, the pogroms and persecutions that have plagued them over the past two thousand years look positively idiotic. The nations that have blessed them have been blessed, and the nations that have cursed them have been cursed, just as Yahweh promised in Genesis 12:3.

How have we been blessed? Jews living among gentiles have been at the forefront of health care, discovering antibiotics and the structure of antibodies, exploring the origin and spread of infectious diseases, inventing Streptomycin, Valium, the cardiac pacemaker, the defibrillator, and contraceptives, developing the first polio vaccines, and identifying the first known cancer virus. Physics? Jews determined the speed of light, established energy’s equivalence to mass (making nuclear power possible), discovered laws of thermodynamics, and ascertained the structure of atomic nuclei. And how about the cultural props that have shaped life in our everyday world? Sons of Abraham invented the laser, color photography, videotape, instant (Polaroid) photography, holography, stainless steel, the microphone, the sewing machine, denim jeans, traffic lights, the teddy bear, the ballpoint pen, nuclear weapons (oops), lipstick, and my personal favorite, the television remote control. Basically, our civilization would be considerably less civilized had it not been for the contribution of “the remnant of Jacob in the midst of many peoples like dew from Yahweh.”

Once Israel turns back to Yahweh as a nation, and receives her Messiah at His second coming, the healing will begin immediately—to both the land and the people. **“For thus says Yahweh: ‘Behold, I will extend peace to her [Jerusalem] like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream....”** Jerusalem has known little but strife since the days of David and Solomon. It has been the subject of no fewer than 118 conflicts in its long and turbulent history—captured 44 times, besieged 23, and completely destroyed at least twice. To this day, it is the bone of contention (or as Zechariah put it, a “cup of trembling”) between Israel and Islam. And in the near future, it will be the ultimate military objective of both the hordes of Magog and the armies of Armageddon.

All of this serves to make Yahweh’s Millennial promises that much more remarkable. **“And you [Israel] shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her [i.e., Jerusalem’s] hip, and bounced upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you. You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice. Your bones shall flourish like the grass. And the hand of Yahweh shall be known to His servants, and He shall show His indignation against His enemies.”** (Isaiah 66:12-14) Every time Zion has “dried up and blown away” like dead grass because of her idolatry, Yahweh has preserved a remnant with which to start over. And even though Israel has been a “valley of dry bones” (see Ezekiel 37) for the past two millennia, God has promised to breathe new life into her. But the restoration we see prophesied here, the comfort, rejoicing, and renewal of Israel, can happen only when Yahweh at last becomes “known to His servants.” Against all odds, it *will* happen. So David writes: **“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of Yahweh’... to give thanks to the name of Yahweh. There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!”** (Psalm 122:1, 4-6)

And it won’t end there. The peace of Jerusalem will spread outward to the whole world, restoring the vulnerable grass of mankind’s mortal existence until it becomes the lush, green paradise that Yahweh desired for us all along. That’s why Peter could admonish us, **“Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.”** (Acts 3:19-21) The “times of refreshing” we crave can’t be conjured up by our own efforts. They will come from Yahweh, through Yahshua, to those of us who fear God—or they won’t come at all.