

The Exiles

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The Exiles

The return of Jewry from Babylon under Ezra and Nehemiah is perhaps one of the largest themes of the Old Testament, in terms of the amount of Scripture which relates to it. This is because the whole concept of the ‘Gospel’ as have it in the New Testament is based upon it. The Old Testament (Septuagint) background of the word *euangelion*, ‘Gospel’, is in the Isaiah passages which proclaim the good news of a return from captivity into an Israel which will then be transformed into the Kingdom of God. These passages all have their primary reference to the return from captivity in Babylon; which means that we who have heard and responded to the Gospel are all foreshadowed by the exiles who returned under Ezra and Nehemiah. In this life we are as exiles, separated from all that is near and dear to us, pining for the release, consumed by the aching loneliness of the exile, the sense of loss of connection. It’s a sobering parallel. The Hebrew word for “return” is that translated “repent”; repentance is tied up with the image of the returning exiles.

The submission of this study is that the return could have led to the establishment of the Kingdom on earth, replete with a Messiah figure and a temple according to the pattern showed to Ezekiel in Ez. 40 - 48. Parts of many of the prophets looked forward to this time, as did the restoration prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah 40-66. All of these could have had their fulfilment in the return under Ezra, but this was disabled by the poor response to the call to return. Under Nehemiah and then even in Malachi’s time, these Kingdom prophecies could have had their fulfilment, but time and again Judah failed to live up to the necessary preconditions. In all this lies abundant exhortation for us; so much *could* happen but doesn’t, because of our failure to live out and fulfil prophecy...instead, like Judah, we tend to assume that the time for its’ fulfilment will inexorably arrive some day, regardless of our effort.

1 Ezekiel’s Temple: Based Upon Solomon’s Temple

We begin with a consideration of the temple detailed in Ez. 40-48. I would submit that the temple described by Ezekiel was to be part of the re-establishment of the Kingdom of God as it existed in the days of Solomon, and that “the law of the house” was in fact the details of the temple which Judah were to return and build. The details of the temple

were so detailed- Ezekiel was to “mark well...every going forth”- in order to inspire in Judah repentance for how they had abused the previous temple (Ez. 44:5,6). There are many links between Solomon’s temple and that described by Ezekiel. The repeated stress on the cherubim / palm tree decor in both the records of Solomon’s temple and also Ezekiel’s encourages the idea that the prophesied temple was to be seen as a re-establishment of Solomon’s (1 Kings 6:29,32,35; 7:36 cp. Ez. 40:16,22,26,31,34,37; 41:18-20, 25,26). There were “thick planks” upon the porch of Solomon’s temple; and the same word is only used elsewhere in describing how this would feature in Ezekiel’s temple too (1 Kings 7:6 cp. Ez. 41:25,26). Even the “windows of narrow lights” (1 Kings 6:4) were to be replicated (Ez. 40:16; 41:16,26). Solomon’s system of “chambers” was likewise copied (1 Kings 6:5,8,16 cp. Ez. 41:5-11 s.w.). The glory of Yahweh was to fill Ezekiel’s temple as it had done Solomon’s (Ez. 43:5 cp. 1 Kings 8:10). Both temples were to be ready for operation on “the eighth day” after their consecration (Ez. 43:27 cp. 1 Kings 8:66). I suggest that contrary to how it is often presented, Ezekiel’s temple was to be of a similar size to that of Solomon’s. Even the statement that finally, the Lord would be there in the temple, is alluding back to how Yahweh came and dwelt in Solomon’s temple. For of that temple it was true that “the Lord dwelleth at Jerusalem” in that He could bless His people out of Zion, the temple mount (Ps. 135:21).

The following table sums up the similarities:

Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 6-7)	Ezekiel’s Temple (Ez. 40,41)
6:16,17	41:2
6:19,20	41:4
6:31-35; 6:32 AVmg.; 6:34	41:23,24
6:32	41:25
6:20,22	41:22
6:3	40:48,49

7:21	40:49
6:5	41:5,6
6:5	41:6
<i>Tselaot</i> , ribs	41:5 s.w.
6:6	41:6,7
6:8	41:7
6:6,10	41:6
6:6	41:7

Further, Ezekiel himself was to make a 7 day dedication of the altar (Ez. 43:26) just as had happened in Solomon's time (2 Chron. 7:9).

It's easy to assume that the temple was totally destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The fact a new foundation stone was laid doesn't actually mean that the entire structure was razed to the ground. Jer. 41:5 refers to 80 people coming to offer offerings and perform some kind of worship there even after the Babylonian destruction. There's ample historical reference to the essential ground plan and some structure still standing even after the Babylonians had effectively destroyed it and rendered it useless (1). This makes it more appealing to consider Ezekiel's vision as a blueprint for the exiles' reconstructing the existing temple, rather than a totally new structure. It's even been suggested that Ezekiel 40-42 was intended as an architectural record of the 'old' temple upon which a new one was to be reconstructed. Zerubbabel is pictured as bringing forth "the premier stone" for the temple (Zech. 4:7). This is a technical term, used in Mesopotamia about "a unit of building material removed from the former temple ruins and then incorporated into the new building" (2). This demonstrates how the projected new temple was a rebuilding of Solomon's temple. The "shouts" with which it was laid (Zech. 4:7) were the "shouts" of the foundation ceremony described in Ezra 3:10-12.

The Size Of The Temple

The confusion has been in deciding whether to take some of the measurements in reeds or cubits (which are much smaller), seeing that the Hebrew text strangely omits the measurement unit. The “oblation” would be about 60 miles square if we measure it in reeds. This area would encroach either upon the Mediterranean or the Dead Sea, and it seems contextually more likely that a smaller area measured in cubits is intended (see map). If measured in reeds, this large area somewhat disrupts the distribution of land amongst the tribes as detailed later in Ezekiel. If the missing measurement unit here is cubits and not reeds, it is likely that it is in the dimensions of the temple itself. The holy oblation described in Ez. 45:1 is to be “the length of five and twenty thousand”. “Reeds” in the AV is in italics. The following verse speaks of *cubits* as the measurement unit. Only the context can decide whether cubits or reeds is meant in many of the Ezekiel passages- although the LXX, RSV etc. give cubits rather than reeds in 42:16 and other passages. If it is going to be thousands of reeds, then it would be over 1 mile square. However, Jer. 30:18 RSV prophesies: “the city shall be builded *upon her own heap*, and the palace shall be *where it used to be*”. And passages as varied as Zech. 1, Ps. 68 and Micah 4 all insist that the temple of the restored Kingdom was to be built *within* the city of Jerusalem. If the temple is 500 reeds square, there will be no room for a city, assuming the city will be of the same size as the previous old city of Jerusalem.

It has been argued that the temple must be large in order to accommodate world-wide worshippers. But the sacrifices offered there are to atone for “the house of Israel”. The temple is primarily for the worship of Israel, “the people of the land”, therefore a large building isn’t required. Ez. 44:9 stresses that no uncircumcised will be allowed to worship in it, although those Gentiles living in the land and who chose to be circumcised would be permitted to. In passing, let it be said that this all sounds far more appropriate to the situation at the time of the restoration, with the Samaritans living in the land, than to the Millennium. “Strangers” who have settled in the land (Ez. 47:22,23) surely refer to God’s willingness to give the Samaritans who then lived in the land a place in the Kingdom which potentially could then have been established. “The people of the land” were to have a part in the new system of things (Ez. 45:16,22; 46:3,9), and yet this very phrase is

repeatedly used concerning the Samaritan people who lived in the land at the time of the restoration (Ezra 4:4; 10:2,11; Neh. 9:24; 10:30,31). God's intention was that they should eventually be converted unto Him; it was His intention that Ezekiel's temple be built at the time of the restoration under Ezra. And yet Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5 criticize the Jews who returned and built the temple for continuing to oppress the stranger / Gentile. Israel would not. Is. 56:6 defines what is meant by "a house of prayer for all nations"- it is for those of all nations who "join themselves to the Lord, to serve him and to love the name of the Lord...every one that keepeth the Sabbath from polluting it, and *taketh hold of my covenant*". The idea that so many people will need to use the temple seems to have been the basis for imagining a huge structure. But the limited clientele implied within Ezekiel means that a large structure would be unnecessary. The altar was to be of similar size, if not a bit smaller, than that in Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 4:1 cp. Ez. 43:13-16).

Assuming a smaller temple, the measurements based around the cubit rather than the reed enable the reconstruction of a rectangular [not circular] temple, based on the pattern of Solomon's. The following diagrams are taken from Peter Southgate, *God's Temple: Past, Present & Future* (Sutton Dawn Ecclesia, 1975). Attention must be drawn to the manner in which this scheme places the altar where the text says it should be, "before the house", whereas the popular view places it, without justification, in the Most Holy Place. Likewise there is no evidence that the temple will be circular. The temple can hardly face East, as we are told it will, if it is circular. And neither is there any reason to think that there will be eleven gates on the West side, as the popular view insists. Only one is mentioned on each side. Ezekiel commanded that the priests were not to wear their holy garments in the outer courts; and yet if as the popular view suggests they wear them in a central area, at the altar, and then go into their chambers on the edge of the temple, they *would* have to wear them in the outer courts. Note too that the holy waters start from the altar- not from the threshold of the house, as the popular view requires. His claim that the city will be built 30 miles away from the temple is another example of pure imagination- not wrong in itself, but if it contradicts the implications of Scripture, we must reject it. Likewise the suggestion that the sons of Zadok refer to immortal priests is evidently a misreading of Scripture- they will sweat, marry, are commanded to not drink wine, have no inheritance (cp. Mt. 22:28-30), can go astray (Ez. 44:10-14) and will minister in the inner

court “and within”. The popular view’s desire to see everything as symbolising things and people on the highest level possible, rather than reading the text as literally as possible, leads to further such problems in thinking that “the prince” is the Lord Jesus. A priest must make an offering for this “prince”, and he offers a bullock for himself as a sin offering, which the priest offers. This surely shouts out against an application to the Lord Jesus. He is subject to death (Ez. 46:17,18); and has a wife and sons (Ez. 46:16) who will succeed him (Ez. 45:8). I mention these problems with the ‘large temple’ view because it seems to have been unquestioningly accepted by many, and the above difficulties with it have gone unanswered.

Much thinking about the temple seems to have gotten confused because of an assumption that Ezekiel’s temple will be in order to observe parts of the Mosaic law. But consider the following studied differences between the two. Clearly the system described by Ezekiel implied a change of the Law at the re-institution of the temple; the temple he speaks of was not in order to obey the *Mosaic Law*:

Sin offering:

- Ez: blood daubed, parts burned outside, day 1-1bull, days 2-7-1 kid, 2 bulls, 1 ram
- Law: blood poured, parts burned inside, day 1-1bull + 2 rams, days 2-7-1bull

Sabbath offering:

- Ez: 6 lambs, 1 ram (gate open)
- Law: 2 lambs

New Moon offering:

- Ez: 1 bull, 1 ram, 6 lambs
- Law: 2 bulls, 1 ram, 7 lambs

Daily sacrifice:

- Ez: 1 lamb (in a.m.)
- Law: 2 lambs (1 a.m., 1 p.m.)

Passover:

- Ez: 1bull, (daily thru 7 days: 7 bulls burnt, 7 rams burnt), 1 kid? (sin offering)
- Law: 1 lamb, (daily thru 7 days: 2 bulls burnt, 1 ram burnt), 1 kid? (sin offering)

Feast of Booths:

- Ez: 7 bulls + 7 rams (burnt daily, 7 days), 1 kid

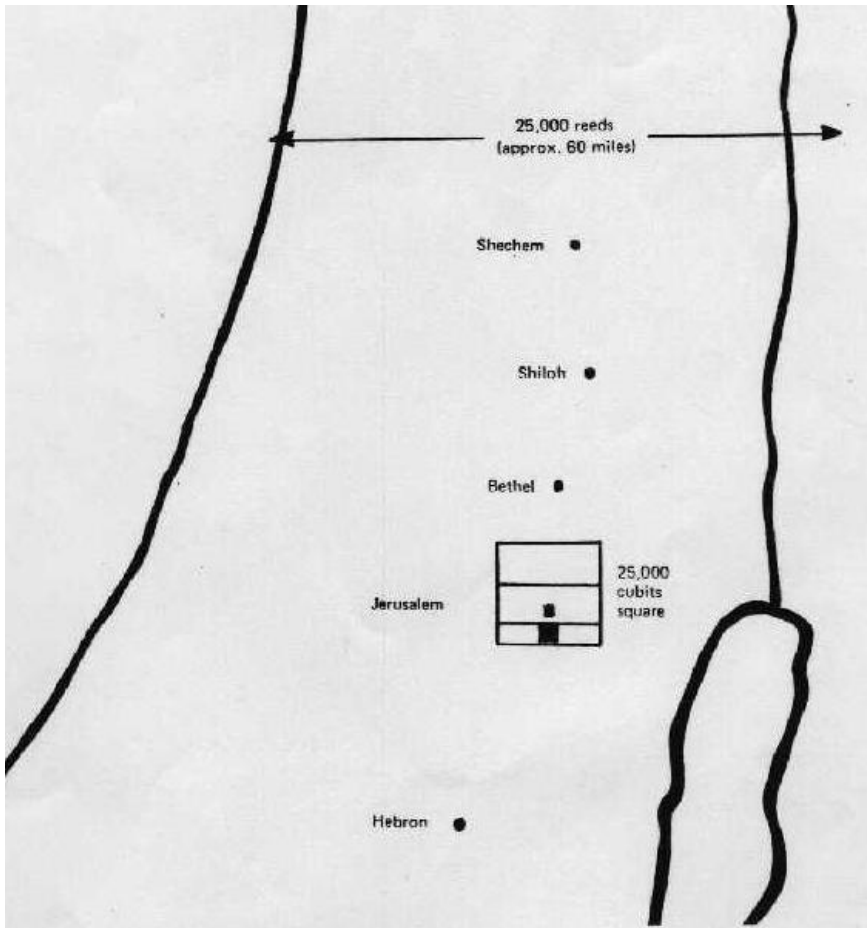
- Law: day 1: 13 bulls, 2 rams, 14 lambs, 1 kid; day 2: 12 bulls, 2 rams, 14 lambs, 1 kid; The number of bulls is reduced by 1 each day...day 7: 7 bulls, 2 rams, 14 lambs, 1 kid

In Ezekiel's system there is:

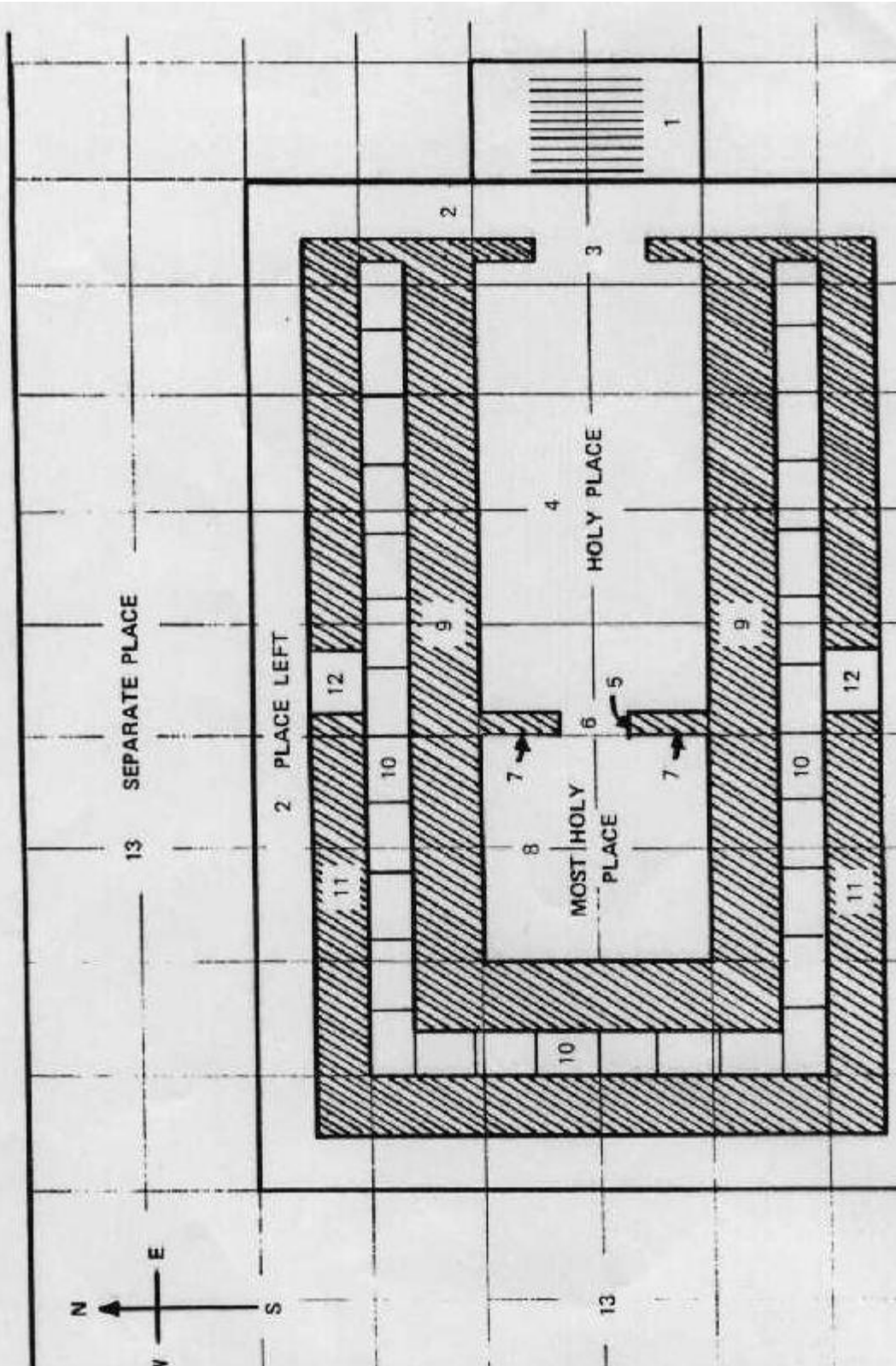
- No Laver (see Ezekiel 36:24-27, John 15:3) ;
- No Table of Shewbread (see Micah 5:4, John 6:35);
- No Lampstand or Menorah (see Isaiah 49:6, John 8:12);
- No Golden Altar of Incense (Zechariah 8:20-23, John 14:6) ;
- No Veil (Isaiah 25:6-8, Matthew 27:51) ;
- No Ark of the Covenant (Jeremiah 3:16, John 10:30-33).

Also, there is no Day of Atonement mentioned in Ezekiel's later chapters. And the altar will have steps leading up to it (Ez. 43:17), whereas this was forbidden in Ex. 20:26. The priests were to live in one specific area near the temple (Ez. 45:4), whereas under the Mosaic Law, the priests were given land to live on in each of the various tribes of Israel. And yet the record of the restoration stresses that the priests lived not around the temple, but in various cities throughout Judah (Ezra 2:70; Neh. 7:73; 11:3,20; 12:44). The commands relating to the rebuilt temple are expanded upon in Zechariah 3. There we read that Joshua the high priest was to be dressed first with the headpiece and then with the rest of the priestly garments (Zech. 3:5). This is the reverse order to the Mosaic commands in Ex. 29:5-7 and Lev. 8:7-9- implying that this was to be a new kind of high priest. Likewise the two onyx stones and the twelve gemstones of the Mosaic breastplate are replaced by a singular stone for the restored high priest (Zech. 3:9). And again, the inauguration of the new high priest in Zech. 3 doesn't feature any anointing, whereas this was a major part of the Mosaic ritual.

The layout of the land of Israel according to Ezekiel 40-48



Plan of Ezekiel's temple showing similarities with Solomon's temple



Overview

Personally I am completely satisfied with the above diagrams, taken [with kind permission] from the publication of Peter Southgate concerning Ezekiel's temple. He demonstrates quite convincingly that the temple prophesied by Ezekiel was of broadly similar dimensions to that of Solomon ⁽³⁾, 500 cubits square (see RSV), and that it's primary intention is / will be for "the people of the land", i.e. Israel (Is. 66:20; Ez. 20:40; 44:9; 46:3,9). However, the purpose of this study is to explore the links between Ezekiel 40-48 and the minor prophets, and the whole record of the restoration of Israel under Ezra and Nehemiah. My thesis is that Bible prophecy is often more conditional upon human response than we may think. God's prophecies are sure of fulfilment from His point of view, but they are dependent upon human co-operation with the Divine will; and this He will not force. Thus the power and intensity of prayer, the effort of the preacher, can all affect how things turn out ultimately—even though God may have prophesied certain things, some of them still depend upon our prayer and freewill effort to come to fruition. This thesis has been developed at some length elsewhere. And so it was with the temple prophesied by Ezekiel. In the same way as Solomon *could have been* the Messiah [as perhaps could men like Eliakim, Is. 22:20-25—the language is later transferred to the Lord Jesus), for all God's foreknowledge otherwise, so the Messianic Kingdom *could have come* at the time of the restoration from Babylon. Indeed, Ez. 43:19 suggests it could have been built within Ezekiel's lifetime, for he was to give the animals to the sons of Zadok to offer in the temple; Ezekiel was to prepare the daily sacrifice (46:13). But due to the Jews' selfishness and lack of spirituality, it didn't happen. This accounts for the many links between the Ezekiel prophecies and prophets like Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. What was theoretically possible, what potentially could have been, simply wasn't—because of their self-centredness and lack of effort. The prophecy of Ezekiel 40-48 was therefore primarily command rather than prediction. This was how it should have been, but the Jews failed to obey it all. They were minimalists, satisficers, rather than rising up to their full potential.

Notes

(1) See R.S. Foster, *The Restoration Of Israel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970) p. 28; John Bright, *A History of Israel*

(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) p. 325; Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (London: SCM, 1983) p. 291.

(2) C.L. & E.M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004) p. 270.

(3) Peter Southgate, *God's Temple: Past, Present & Future* (Sutton Dawn Ecclesia, 1975). Sadly, and to me inexplicably, the size of Ezekiel's temple has been a source of sore disagreement in some sectors of our community. In his well known article *True Principles And Uncertain Details*, Robert Roberts places this matter well and truly in the 'uncertain details' category- and elsewhere, disagrees with aspects of the 'large temple' view propounded by Henry Sulley. The matter should be left as something which is 'uncertain' and not be dogmatized upon. Other studies which have come to similar conclusions as Peter Southgate relating to the size of the temple, i.e. the measurements being in cubits rather than reeds, include Mark Allfree, *Worship In The Age To Come* and Philip Hinde & Ivan Sturman, *Ezekiel's Last Vision*.

2 The Nature Of Prophecy

This raises the question of the nature of prophecy. I suggest that prophecy is often conditional even though the conditions may not be stated or recorded; and that it could even be that some prophecy therefore does not have a fulfilment, because those conditions aren't met. There are other prophecies which will surely come true, but whose initial fulfilment is not possible because of a lack of human fulfilment of the conditions; but when these are fulfilled, then it will come true in principle, if not in every exact detail. There are other prophecies which are simply unconditionally going to come true. If Ezekiel's prophecies about the temple were in this category, all the links with the restoration period would be purely incidental. This is a position I cannot accept.

I wish to suggest that the Ezekiel temple prophecies may be a purely conditional prophecy, which will not now come true in that Israel were disobedient. This would then allow us to be more comfortable with the passages in Hebrews which speak as if the system of sacrifices has finished for all time. It would also enable us to sit more comfortably with the Ezekiel passages which speak of the sacrifices offered in that temple as actually achieving forgiveness of sins (Ez. 45:15,22,25,17). They are not just 'pointing back' as teaching aids to the Lord's work; they are framed as actually enabling, by their blood, forgiveness. It may

be, however, that the Ezekiel prophecies had an intended and possible fulfilment at the time of the restoration under Ezra, but this was nullified by Israel's lack of response; and therefore, at least in principle, the prophecies had their fulfilment delayed until the second coming. This enables the prophecies to fit in with others which speak of some kind of centralised worship system after Jesus returns (e.g. Is. 2:2-4; 56:7) ⁽¹⁾. The lesson that comes out of all this is the extent to which God is willing to work with us, to tailor His purpose according to how far we are prepared to work with Him, and in that sense to allow Himself to be limited by us. There could be no greater inspiration to a maximal commitment to His purpose and His work.

11-2-1 Conditional Prophecy

The idea of conditional prophecy is best expressed through actual examples:

- Samson “shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb to the day of his death” (Jud. 13:7). But he wasn't- he touched dead bodies and his hair was shaven. The prophecy was evidently conditional.
- God told Israel straight in Jud. 10:13: “Ye have forsaken me, and served other gods: wherefore I will deliver you no more”. But they begged Him, and He did. And likewise in Hosea, He said He would give them up completely, but just couldn't bring Himself to do it ⁽²⁾.
- Amos preached the message of coming judgment upon Israel and then due to his prayer, averted it. Days / months later perhaps, he added to the record of his prophecies: “The Lord repented for this: It shall not be, saith the Lord” (Am. 7:1 cp. 3; 7:4 cp. 6). The prophesied sending of fire and grasshoppers upon Israel was recorded, but then averted by Amos' prayer.
- Daniel prophesied in clear enough language that Nebuchadnezzar would surely be driven away from among men and live as an animal. But he goes on to plead: “Wherefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins” (Dan. 4:27), as if to say that no matter how definite and categorical the prophecy of punishment, it was after all conditional, even though the conditions weren't even hinted at within the actual prophecy.

- If Judah kept the feasts properly, there would be no more invasions (Nah. 1:15). But those invasions were prophesied as definitely going to happen.
- God sent His prophets to appeal to Israel for repentance. They *could have lead to repentance*. But Israel would not. The marriage feast was totally ready and waiting for the Jewish people; they could have had it. But they didn't want it, and so the course of human history was extended. Therefore finally God sent His Son. The Lord Jesus Himself was amazed that no other man had achieved the work which He had to; and therefore He clad Himself with zeal and performed it (Is. 41:28; 50:2; 59:16 cp. Rev. 5:3,4). God knew that salvation in the end would have to be through the death of His Son. But there were other possible scenarios for the repentance and salvation of mankind, which no man achieved. And so, as in the parable of the servants sent to get fruit from the vineyard, there was left no other way but the death of God's only Son.
- The plague upon cattle was clearly prophesied as going to happen at a specified time: "The Lord appointed a set time, saying, To morrow the Lord shall do this thing"; but it was conditional upon Pharaoh refusing to let Israel go (Ex. 9:1,2,5). He *could* have complied, and therefore the plague wouldn't have happened. And yet the prophecy is so specific that it would seem that this conditionality just didn't exist. But it did. Pharaoh had a real choice whether or not to obey God's word.
- David would never want a man to sit upon his throne (Jer. 33:17); and no conditions to this are specified. And yet even within Jeremiah it is apparent that because of the failure of Judah's leaders, there would indeed come a time when there would be "none to sit upon the throne of David" (Jer. 22:30; 36:30). Yet *if* the Jews had done righteousness in Zedekiah's time, then instead of the Babylonians entering the gates of Jerusalem there would have been "kings sitting for David upon his throne" (Jer. 22:4 RVmg.). But this condition is not mentioned in the promises to David in 2 Sam. 7 nor in the apparent blanket statement of Jer. 33:17.
- And God is unashamed about this feature of His dealings with men. Thus He told Eli: "I said indeed that thy house...should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour" (1 Sam. 2:30).

- “O Zedekiah...Thou shalt not die by the sword: but thou shalt die in peace: and with the burnings of thy fathers...so shall they burn odours for thee” (Jer. 34:5) mentions no conditions. But consider the words of Ez. 12:13 about the same man: “My net also will I spread upon him, and he shall be taken in my snare: and I will bring him to Babylon...yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there” [i.e. he would be made blind before arrival]. The surrounding verses give an accurate prophecy of how Zedekiah was captured whilst fleeing from Jerusalem. And the same is said in Jer. 32:4; 38:17. It surely has to be recognized that the ‘prophecy’ that Zedekiah would die in peace was conditional upon his obedience to the word of Jeremiah- even though those conditions aren’t recorded (although they are implicit surely).
- Statements which appear to be prophecy can actually be understood as commands. This is what I submit the ‘prophecy’ of Ezekiel’s temple amounted to. Consider how Hos. 11:12 states that Judah is faithful whereas the ten tribes are not. Yet the rest of Hosea stresses how they were *both* equally wicked (Hos. 4:15; 5:5; 6:4,10,11; 12:1,2); quite apart from Ez. 16 making the point that eventually Judah were more wicked than Israel. Surely “Ephraim compasseth me about with lies...but Judah...is faithful” (Hos. 11:2) must surely be an appeal for Judah *to be* faithful. A statement becomes a command, and this is how Ezekiel is speaking when he speaks about the temple; this is how it *ought to have been*, and the way in which he constantly harks back to Israel’s previous failures confirms this.
- Likewise Moses ‘prophesied’ that Ephraim would “push the people [Gentile inhabitants of the land] together to the ends of the earth / land” (Dt. 33:17). And yet Hos. 7:8 cp. Ps. 106:34-36 criticise Ephraim for *failing* to push the people out of the land. Moses’ prophecies about the tribes sound like predictions; but they were actually commands which those tribes had the freewill to obey or not.
- Philip prophesied by the Holy Spirit about Paul: “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hand of the Gentiles”. They “shall” do this, he said. And many other prophets said the same (Acts 20:23). “And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:11,12).

Those brethren evidently understood the word of prophecy as conditional- its' fulfilment could be avoided by Paul not going to Jerusalem. Indeed, there were prophecies that said he should *not* go up to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4). Yet Paul went, knowing that if he died at Jerusalem then the will of God would be done (Acts 21:14). All this surely shows that prophecies are open to human interpretation; they can be seen as commandment (e.g. not to go to Jerusalem), but it all depends upon our perception of the wider picture.

- If Israel would receive it, John the Baptist was the Elijah prophet. The course of fulfilment of prophecy was conditional upon whether John succeeded in turning the hearts of Israel back to the fathers or not; on preparing them for the great and terrible day of the Lord. Brethren as varied as John Knowles and Harry Whittaker have all recognized in their expositions that the Kingdom *could* have come in the 1st century had Israel received John as Elijah. But they would not. And so another Elijah prophet is to come in the last days and prepare Israel for her Messiah. "If ye are willing to receive him, this is Elijah which is to come" (Mt. 11:14 RVmg.) says it all. The Elijah prophet who was to herald the Messianic Kingdom *could have been* John the Baptist- if Israel had received him. But they didn't, and so the prophecy went down another avenue of fulfilment. It could be that Mal. 4:6 implies that there is still the possibility that even the latter day Elijah messianic Kingdom- for then, their days would be multiplied "as the days of heaven upon the earth / land" (Dt. 11:21). This is surely the essence of the NT idea of the Kingdom of Heaven coming upon earth at the Lord's return.
- Mark Vincent discerns how David thought that the bringing of the ark to Zion could have been its' final homecoming- although Solomon his son let everything down in reality: "[“Arise O Lord into thy rest” in Ps. 24:8 alludes to “Rise up, O Lord” in Num. 10:35]...The words which Moses had to utter each time the ark journeyed through the wilderness would no longer be needed, for the ark had at last reached its final destination. This is why the Psalm says “Arise O Lord into *thy rest*”. David and his people hoped that the ark had come here for ever, and that God would dwell among and reign over His people for eternity. Alas, because of the wickedness of Israel, this was not to be” (*Exploring The Psalms*, Birmingham: CMPA, 2001, p. 144).

- “Now have I chosen and sanctified this house, that my name may be there for ever: and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there perpetually” (2 Chron. 7:16). But this was conditional on Israel remaining in covenant relationship, for if they sinned, He would cast the temple out of His sight (:20).
- There were prophecies about Timothy which had gone before, or “led the way to thee” (1 Tim. 1:18 RVmg.). But Paul had to encourage Timothy to fulfil them, to make them come real and true for him. Likewise the fearful and timid Jeremiah was told “I have made thee this day a defenced city...be not dismayed” (Jer. 1:17,18). He had to live out the potential personality which God had enabled him to have.
- On the other hand, prophecies of judgment can come true at any time if there is the required ‘condition’ of disbelief and disobedience. Hence Paul warns Israel: “Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets, Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish...” (Acts 13:40). The prophecy didn’t *have* to come true for them; but they should “beware” lest it did.
- The entire promises to Abraham and the fathers depended for their realisation upon human obedience: “If ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep with thee the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers” (Dt. 7:12). That covenant was initially given in terms which omitted direct reference to any conditions for fulfilment. But it would be ‘kept’ by God if His people ‘kept’ His ways. The promises that God would multiply the seed of Abraham were conditional also; *if* Israel separated themselves from the peoples of the land, *then* He would “multiply thee, as he hath sworn unto thy fathers” (Dt. 13:17). The strength of God’s grace also makes some of His promises ‘conditional’ in a different sense; thus He had promised Reuben and Manasseh that they could return to their possessions only when the others had possessed the land (Dt. 3:20). This condition never happened- yet they were allowed to return. And our very salvation from death and the consequences of sin is in a sense another example of this kind of thing.
- Along similar lines, consider God’s statement that the whole people of Israel would have been left in the wilderness and now allowed to enter the land, if Gad and Reuben refused to cross the

Jordan river (Num. 32:15). But this would have broken the Divine promise of Num. 14:31 that all those under 20 would enter the land. Even that promise, therefore, had unstated conditions attached to it. And yet God had yet another option- if they refused to go over Jordan, then they would forfeit their land and receive a different inheritance (Num. 32:30). The complexities of these conditions are of course beyond us, because we are seeing only a part of the working of God's infinite mind. The point is, there are conditions attached to God's promises which aren't always made apparent to us.

- God's promise that Israel would never again see Egypt was also conditional, and thus capable of being broken- as He Himself observed in Dt. 28:68: "The Lord shall bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I spake unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again".
- Some prophecies are dependent on prayer for their fulfilment. Take Is. 62:1: "For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness". But this is dependent upon prayer: "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem...ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest *till* he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (:6,7). The prophecy that "I will not rest" was dependent for fulfilment upon the faithful continuing to pray and thereby not giving Him rest. Of course, they pray from their own freewill; there is the possibility they won't pray, and thereby, surely, there's the possibility the statement "I will not rest" is purely conditional on our prayers...?
- The Olivet prophecy spoke of the time being shortened for the elect's sake. And it seems this happened- for 1 Cor. 7:29 RV says that "the time is shortened". Perhaps this is why it was intended that there be 40 years from AD33 [the crucifixion] to the destruction of the temple; but this period was "shortened" by at least 3 years "for the elect's sake". And the situation in the 1st century is evidently typical of ours today in these last days. They were to pray that their flight be not on the Sabbath or in the Winter, i.e. that the abomination that made desolate would not be set up at those times (Mt. 24:20). Clearly prayer affected the exact chronology of events and thereby the fulfilment of prophecy.

- It was solemnly decreed that “seven times” would pass over Nebuchadnezzar, and his portion would be with the beasts of the earth (Dan. 4:16)⁽³⁾. And yet Daniel pleads with Nebuchadnezzar to repent and thereby avoid this experience: “Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue” (Dan. 4:27 NIV). He himself understood his own prophecies as having a fulfilment changeable in accordance with human repentance.
- Hezekiah’s sons were to be eunuchs in Babylon (2 Kings 20:18). But Manasseh wasn’t- because he repented, and because this prophecy was conditional? The condition isn’t recorded, but it doesn’t mean it wasn’t there.
- “Neither will I make the feet of Israel move any more out of the land which I gave their fathers; only if they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them” (2 Kings 21:8). And yet there were prophecies given before this stating that an apostate Israel were to go into captivity, e.g. into Egypt by ships (Dt. 28:68). These prophecies were clearly conditional, although that conditionality isn’t stated within them.
- Amos 4:12 sums it up: “Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel”. Thus God *will* do- but therefore, repent so that it won’t happen. There is an allusion here to God in an Angel coming to meet Moses to slay him, but he repented and thereby changed the purpose / will / intention of God (Ex. 4:24).

”Let mine outcasts dwell with thee Moab”, God pleads in Is. 16:4. But the rest of Is. 16 is about the awful judgment that will fall upon Moab (Is. 16:12,14). The text doesn’t say so, but it’s apparent enough- that if Moab was not merciful to the Jews fleeing the Assyrian invasion, then they would face a like judgment. But that judgment was conditional upon Moab’s behaviour.

- Josiah was prophesied as dying in peace- but he didn’t (2 Kings 22:20). There were unrecorded or even unspoken conditions in this prophecy that we don’t know.

- When Israel left Egypt God “led them on safely, so that they feared not” (Ps. 78:53). But they *did* fear (Ex. 14:10-12). Surely we must read in some conditions here- God’s care for them was such that they need not have feared, but they failed to discern His care and power and therefore they *did* fear.
- “The Lord would not destroy Judah for David his servant’s sake, as he promised him to give him alway a light, and to his children” (2 Kings 8:19). This sounds as if God wouldn’t destroy Judah because He understood His promises to David as implying that this wasn’t possible, in that his descendant must always be reigning on the throne. But because of the increased level of Judah’s sin, eventually God did destroy Judah. His understanding of the promise / prophecy in that sense changed.
- Because of Sarah’s faith, “therefore sprang there...so many as the stars of the sky in multitude” (Heb. 11:11,12). Those promises to Abraham had their fulfilment, but conditional on Abraham and Sarah’s faith. Gen. 18:18-20 says that the fulfilment of the promises was conditional on Abraham teaching his children / seed the ways of God. Those promises / prophecies were “sure” in the sense that God’s side of it was. Rom. 4:18 likewise comments that Abraham became “the father of many nations” precisely because he *believed* in this hope. Yet the promise / prophecy that he would be a father of many nations could sound as if it would have happened anyway, whatever. But it was actually conditional upon Abraham’s faith. And he is our great example exactly because he had the possibility and option of *not* believing in the hope he had been offered.
- When Hezekiah studied the words of Micah, “did he not fear the Lord, and besought the Lord, and the Lord repented him of the evil which he had pronounced against him” (Jer. 26:19). Those words of Mic. 3:12 had their fulfilment annulled or delayed thanks to Hezekiah’s prayer and repentance. Likewise Jonah’s prophecy that in 40 days Nineveh would be destroyed, unconditionally, was nullified by their repentance. One wonders, too, about the prophecy of Ez. 29:10-14: “Behold, therefore I am against thee, and against thy rivers, and I will make the land of Egypt utterly waste and desolate, from the tower of Syene even unto the border of Ethiopia. No foot of man shall pass through it, nor foot of beast shall pass through it, neither shall it be inhabited forty years. And I will make the land of Egypt desolate in the

midst of the countries that are desolate, and her cities among the cities that are laid waste shall be desolate forty years: and I will scatter the Egyptians among the nations, and will disperse them through the countries. Yet thus saith the Lord GOD; At the end of forty years will I gather the Egyptians from the people whither they were scattered: And I will bring again the captivity of Egypt, and will cause them to return into the land of Pathros, into the land of their habitation; and they shall be there a base kingdom". This has never yet had a fulfilment. One wonders whether it was not averted by some kind of prayer or repentance? Or has its fulfilment been delayed [for Ezekiel speaks as if this was soon to come about in his time] until some time around the Lord's return? Notice that at the time of this forty year desolation, a Messiah figure was to arise in Israel- "In that day will I cause an horn of the house of Israel to bud forth" (Ez. 29:21 RV). There are some other examples of prophecies which may not have had a fulfilment in Ez. 26:7-14 cp. 29:17-20.

- The Lord's prophecy that the believer receives fathers, mothers, houses, lands etc. only has its fulfilment insofar as the ecclesia is willing to share these things and relationships with its members (Mt. 19:29). But the condition of the fulfilment was not explicitly stated.
- God Himself recognizes that His own categorical statements can work out a totally different way or even be annulled by human behaviour. Take Dt. 28:68: "The Lord shall bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I spake unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again". This latter phrase meant they would not go back there; and yet, God says, they will go back there.
- In the parable of Mt. 18:32-35, the Lord frankly forgave the heavily indebted man. There was no mention of any conditions. But when that same man refused to forgive his debtor, he was brought back into court, the debt was re-instated and he was eternally imprisoned until he paid every bit of it. The frank forgiveness of the debt, the 'release' from it, was actually conditional on him being forgiving to others subsequently. But that condition wasn't mentioned.
- In Jeremiah's time, "If ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings [an intensive plural for 'the great King'- Messiah] sitting upon the throne of David...he and his servants" (Jer. 22:4). But the gates were to be burnt with

fire, because Israel “would not”. Likewise Jer. 17:20-26: *If they had kept the Sabbath etc. as required, then the temple would have been a joyous centre of worship.* The language is clearly to be connected with other descriptions of the Messianic Kingdom. Lk. 12:49 speaks of how the Lord wished that the fire He came to kindle had already been kindled. This may be an allusion to a common Latin saying at the time: *Nemo accendit nisi ipse ardet*, 'No one can kindle another unless he himself burns'. In this case Jesus is likening Himself to a fire which ignites others; and yet He so wished that someone else had earlier come and been Messiah. Some of the Messianic passages describe Him being amazed that there had been no man, and He Himself therefore dressed for action and did the Messianic duty. It is an essay in His humility that He should have held such a view. It also reflects how there had been previous opportunities for Messiah to come.

- Balaam understood the 'last days' to be when the Davidic dynasty would arise (Num. 24:14 cp. Is. 2:2; Mic. 4:1)- and so I take this as another indication that in some sense, Solomon could have been the Messiah of the 'last days'.

- The vessels of the temple were to be taken to Babylon- so says Jer. 27:22 plainly enough. *But* if the false prophets had repented and prayed, the vessels would not be taken to Babylon (Jer. 27:18). Prayer changes things, even the [apparently] expressly stated intention of God.
- God told Abimelech that he would surely die, with evident allusion to God's judgment of Adam; no conditions were stated. But later, it became apparent that the death penalty was conditional upon his not releasing Sarah (Gen. 20:3,7).
- It was promised to the family of Aaron that the priesthood would be theirs for a perpetual statute (Ex. 29:9). And yet the family of Eli, a descendant of Aaron (1 Kings 2:27; 1 Chron. 24:3), were told that they were to be cut off as they had abused the priesthood. The promise of Exodus was therefore conditional, although the conditions weren't laid down. Indeed, just because of this fact, the Levites often assumed that they were acceptable just by reason of who they were.

- The prophets often make absolute statements, which are then qualified by conditions. Take Am. 5:2: “The virgin of Israel is fallen; she shall no more rise...there is none to raise her up”. This sounds final. She shall no more rise up. But Amos continues later in the chapter: “Seek ye me, and ye shall live [be ‘raised up’]”. And he repeats it three times (Am. 5:4,6,14). And so the prophecies of Ezekiel about the temple may seem definite, but this is not to say that conditions are not built in to their fulfilment.
- The lack of qualifying statements is not only seen in prophecies relating to nations. “Honour the Lord with thy substance...so shall thy barns be filled with plenty” (Prov. 3:9,10) appears to be an unconditional offer of material prosperity in response to human obedience. But this is not always so. There are conditions to this promise; the righteous sometimes suffer. Likewise “There shall no evil happen to the just” (Prov. 12:21). There are no Divine footnotes or conditions or explanations in the actual text in these places. We are left to read these in, from our wider reading of God’s word. And so it is with many other prophecies which seem to be determinate predictions of what will happen; there may well be unspoken preconditions and wider issues in the Divine programme which must be taken account of.
- In the context of the restoration from Babylon, Zech. 8:12 prophesied: “For the seed shall be prosperous; the vine shall give her fruit, and the ground shall give her increase, and the heavens shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things”. But we know that in reality, Judah were not obedient to the heavenly vision of Ezekiel, and therefore Judah’s agriculture was *not* blessed in this way; the vines cast their fruit, and the fruit of the ground was destroyed (Hag. 1:6,11; Mal. 3:10,11). The reason was that Zech. 8:12 was conditional- upon Zech. 8:16,17: “These are the things that ye shall do [i.e. to bring these prophecies about]; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates: And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the LORD”. But Judah abused each other, and didn’t fulfil the conditions for the prophecy.
- Zech. 8:19 is another example: “Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast

of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace". Without loving truth, these feasts would not be joyful to the Jews who had returned. The prophecy was conditional.

- Ps. 2:10 exhorts: "Be wise now therefore, O ye kings"- for then, the implication is, the judgments upon the nations will be averted. "Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them" (Ps. 2:5) is therefore conditional- his wrath "may be kindled" unless the Son is kissed / accepted (Ps. 2:12 RVmg.). Thus God's latter day programme is flexible- for if the Son is accepted, His wrath need not be kindled.
- The principle is summed up in Jeremiah 18. It has been truly commented about this chapter: "Whenever a piece of pottery turned out imperfect the potter would take the clay and make it into something else. God says that this is the principle behind His actions. If He says He is going to build up a nation but the nation disobeys Him the prophecy will not be fulfilled. Equally, if He says He is going to destroy a nation and the nation repents, He will not carry out His intention". Hence if Israel turned from their way, " I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them" (Jer. 26:3). Earlier Israel had known God's breach of promise, the altering of His purpose, in that those who were to enter Canaan actually didn't (Num. 14:34).
- Jehoiakim was not to be buried but his body thrown out to the elements, like an ass (Jer. 22:18,19; 36:29-31); but the idiom of "he slept with his fathers" (2 Kings 24:6) may imply that he had a more normal burial.
- The disciples expected the second coming within a generation of the Lord's death (Mt. 26:18; Lk. 21:32; Phil. 4:5; 2 Tim. 4:6; 1 Pet. 4:7; Rev. 1:3); and note the use of words indicating imminence: 'shortly', 'immediately', 'a little while'. Could it not be that if Israel had accepted Jesus as Son of God, the Kingdom could have come then? Even after His death, had they believed the witness of the apostles and repented for what they had done, the Kingdom could have come then. Of course God foreknew this would not happen; but the disciples looked forward to it as a distinct reality and possibility. This possibility is more fully discussed in Harry Whittaker, *Revelation* Appendix 1. On a more earthly level, Heb. 13:18 seems to imply that the more they

prayed and the more Paul lived honestly, the sooner he would be released from prison: “Pray for us: for we are persuaded that we have a good conscience, desiring to live honestly in all things. And I exhort you the more exceedingly to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner” (RV). Thus prayer can hasten things, given certain preconditions are fulfilled. So it is in our experiences, and so it may be with the Lord’s return.

- Paul told the Ephesian elders that wolves would enter the flock and work havoc. But therefore, he told them, “take heed...” (Acts 20:29,30). His prophecy, certain of fulfilment as it sounded, didn’t ‘have’ to come true. Likewise the Lord categorically foretold Peter’s denials; and yet tells him therefore to watch, and not fall into the temptation that was looming. Peter didn’t *have* to fulfil the prophecy, and the Lord encouraged him to leave it as an unfulfilled, conditional prophecy. He warns him to pray “lest ye enter into temptation” (Mk. 14:38)- even though He had prophesied that Peter *would* fail under temptation.
- Jonah said that within 40 days, Nineveh would be destroyed. There were no conditions stated. But the ‘prophecy’ went unfulfilled because Nineveh repented. The nature of conditional prophecy and the huge value placed by God upon human repentance is reflected in Mal. 2:2: “If ye will not hear, and if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name... then will I send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings; yea, I have cursed them already, because ye do not lay it to heart”. God had already cursed the priests, He had made that statement. But the whole point of Malachi’s appeal was that the priests would repent, and thus the curse that had “already” been pronounced would not come into operation. Note that God isn’t saying: ‘If you don’t repent, beware, I will curse you’. He had already cursed them, but at that late stage, even then, He was willing to change His word- if they repented. It was exactly the same with Nineveh. Indeed, many of the OT appeals to repentance and outlines of judgment to come are of this nature. That judgment had already been decreed. But the power of the repentance appeals is that even so, God is so sensitive to genuine repentance that He is willing to go back on His own word. It’s a great encouragement not only to personal penitence, but to perceiving

the deep significance of the repentance of others, and accordingly framing our personal attitudes and judgments concerning them.

- The tension within Almighty God is reflected in His words of prophecy- He predicts what will happen, but then says there is a way it needn't happen. Thus "When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was discovered" (Hos. 7:1). God set up a situation whereby He would have saved them but then they sinned and disabled His plan.

The Lord stated that the sickness of Lazarus "is not unto death, but for the glory of God" (Jn. 11:4). That sounds like a predictive statement. But it seems to have been conditional. For one thing, that sickness did lead to the death of Lazarus. But notice the Lord's later comment to Martha when her faith wavered in the possibility of immediate resurrection for Lazarus: "Said I not unto you, that if you would believe, you would see the glory of God?" (Jn. 11:40). But the Lord isn't recorded as actually having said that. What He had said was that the sickness of Lazarus would reveal the glory of God. But He had intended Martha to understand the conditionality of that statement- i.e. 'If you can believe Martha, Lazarus can be saved from that sickness and its effects, and thus glory will be given to God'. But again, we see the Lord's grace. She didn't have that faith. She was concerned that even the taking away of the grave stone would release the odour of her brother's dead body. But Jesus didn't say 'Well Martha, no faith on your part, no resurrection of Lazarus, no glory to God this time'. By grace alone, He raised Lazarus. He overrode the conditionality. And so it must happen so often, and so tragically unperceived, in our lives. The concept of conditional prophecy opens up a significant window into the tension facing the Lord Jesus as He approached the cross- indeed, throughout His ministry. So much depended upon Him. If He had failed, so much would simply not have come true as God intended. Rev. 5:5 stresses how the Lamb alone, through His sacrificial death [hence the figure of a lamb] was able to open the seals, and thus enable history as God intended to unfold. Indeed, the sealed scroll can also be understood as the book of life, whose opening was only made possible by the Lord's death. This had as its basis the language of Dan. 12:4, where Daniel sealed the book. Rudolf Rijkeboer comments: "Daniel's prophecy of the seventy year-weeks takes us to the time of the Messiah, but not really beyond. How things would continue would depend on the Saviour, if He was

victorious. That he would be victorious was... by no means a foregone conclusion. It depended totally on the Saviour's own free will... while the scroll remains sealed... that particular future is not going to happen at all!" (4). In this sense we understand that through the cross, the pleasure or 'intention' of God would be furthered by Messiah's 'hand' through His crucifixion (Is. 53:10).

The actual date of the Lord's return is conditional on various things- e.g. the repentance of Israel, the spread of the Gospel into all the world, and some level of spiritual development being reached within the brotherhood. This fact, when meaningfully recognized, means that the whole network of 'prophecies' in the sense of descriptions of future events are of necessity flexible and re-schedulable in their fulfilments. For the things upon which the Lord's return are conditional, are all matters of human freewill. It is a function of human freewill as to when Israel repent and when we take the Gospel into all the world. And therefore the prophecies relating to end time events must of necessity be capable of delayed or re-oriented fulfilments. We are not, therefore, wise to preach our views of their possible fulfilments as 'the Gospel'. And this is surely why 'prophecy' in the sense of predicting end time events did not feature in the apostolic witness. The vision will in one sense "not delay / tarry" (Hab. 2:3 RV). And yet the same verse speaks of how it does "tarry". Perhaps in a human sense it delays, but not from God's perspective. "It hasteth toward the end" (Hab. 2:3 RV) could imply that things are speeded up in their fulfilment in the very end time; for the elects sake the days until the second coming are shortened (Mk. 13:20). And yet things are also delayed- the bridegroom tarries / delays, to the point that many realize that the Lord has delayed His coming, and begin to act inappropriately. One reconciliation of these paradoxes could be that some prophecies are speeded up in their fulfilment because of the elect would otherwise lose their faith; and yet other prophecies seem to be delayed in fulfilment because of the unspirituality of others.

Thus it cannot be denied that many Bible prophecies are conditional. However, there seem various types of conditional prophecy, which we will now exemplify.

Notes

(1) However it must be said that all these prophecies are also capable of a symbolic fulfilment, understanding the house of God to be the community of believers, and Gentiles being accepted into it through Christ, thereby offering up “spiritual sacrifices”. Is. 2:2-4 especially must be read in its context. The rest of the chapter, and indeed the whole prophecy, beseech Israel to act as they should as “the house of the Lord” in view of their future glory. Gentiles would come to worship in God’s house, i.e. in the community of His people, and therefore they ought to live the Kingdom life themselves. Thus following straight on from the prophecy of how Gentiles would come to “the house of the God of Jacob”, there is an appeal in 2:5 for the “house of Jacob” to walk in God’s ways themselves.

(2) This is discussed in more detail in ‘Bible Paradoxes’ in *From Milk To Meat*.

(3) The LXX has “seven seasons [i.e. Summer / Winter] shall revolve over him”- meaning he was to suffer for the tell tale three and a half years, of which Daniel further speaks in his prophecies of the 1260 days suffering of Israel- as if their punishment was a sharing in that of the Babylon they had so come to love.

(4) Rudolf Rijkeboer, *Jesus' Last Message* (Voorburg, Holland: De Broeders In Christus, 1998) p. 39.

2-2 Bible Prophecy And Human Response

Prophecies that will not come true because they depended upon human response which was not forthcoming

Some prophecies simply won’t come true because they refer to what God had potentially prepared for His people, but they disallow Him from giving them what He had intended.

- Thus Eli was told of “all the wealth which God would have given Israel”, which his behaviour had now disallowed (1 Sam. 2:32 AVmg.). Knowing this, women like Hannah clearly hoped and prayed that their sons would be Messiah (1 Sam. 2:10 = Ps. 89:24); for they perceived that God’s purpose was open to such a thing.

- “The Lord doth build up Jerusalem: he gathereth together the outcasts of Israel” (Ps. 147:2) is alluded to by the Lord in Lk. 13:34, where He how He would fain have gathered together the children of Jerusalem,

“but ye would not”. The words of the Psalm speak as if this is what the Lord God is going to do. But Jesus understood it as being impossible of fulfilment if the outcast children would not allow themselves to be gathered. Likewise the statement that the Lord will build up Jerusalem was made in a restoration context; but again, it was dependent upon the Jews’ obedience for its fulfilment. God was and is potentially ready to work with us.

- Ex. 14:13 could appear to be prophecy: “The Egyptians...ye shall see them again no more for ever”. But it is understood as a command not to return to Egypt in Dt. 17:16- and because of Israel turning back to Egypt in their hearts, they would be taken there again (Dt. 28:68). So we must be prepared to accept that what may appear to be prophecy is in fact commandment, which we have the freewill to obey or disobey. Ez. 43:7 likewise is more command than prediction: “The house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name” (RV). It isn’t saying ‘this is a prophecy that they will not do this’- for they did. Rather is it a plea, a command, that they are not to do this any more.

- Elisha told Joash: “Thou shalt smite the Syrians... till thou hast consumed them”. But Elisha then went on to lament that Joash’s lack of spiritual vision would mean that he *could have* consumed them, but actually he would only win three victories over them (2 Kings 13:17-19). So the prophetic statement that Joash would “consume” the Syrians was only true potentially.

- The Lord’s promise that whatever the disciples asked, they would be given seems never to have been fully realized in them (Jn. 15:16). Likewise the ‘prophecy’ that they would do greater works than done by the Lord, once they received the Comforter (Jn. 14:12), and possibly the promise that they would be taught “all the truth” about “things to come” (Jn. 16:13), were all likewise promises / prophecies whose potential it seems the disciples never fully rose up to.

- The fact Ezekiel gave prophecies- or what sound like prophecies- of a restored temple doesn’t mean that they would come true regardless of Israel’s obedience. 19th century Christians looked at the prophecies relating to Israel’s return to the land and worked to enable them to happen- by financially supporting the Jews etc. It is therefore no mere coincidence that we read that the prophets who ‘prophesied’ of the

rebuilding of the temple helped physically to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:2). They worked for the fulfilment of their prophecies. Likewise Mary was blessed for believing, because therefore and thereby there would be a fulfilment of the things spoken to her (Lk. 1:45 RV). Without her faith, would those things have been fulfilled? She had to do her bit. And this is why she was called blessed. The Lord basically told the disciples to go into the world and preach in order that the prophecies of repentance being preached among all nations would come true (Lk. 24:48). Paul's preaching to the whole world was likewise driven by a desire to fulfil the prophecy that Christ would be a light to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47).

- "The children of Israel shall abide many days without a king, and without a prince..."- but only in that they were represented by Hosea's wife who was to "abide for me many days...not play the harlot...not be for another man" (Hos. 3:3,4). Hosea's wife and Israel as a whole were not faithful- they were all adulterers and "breaking faith" (Hos. 4:2 RV); "your brides commit adultery" (Hos. 4:13 RV). So the statement that Israel "shall abide many days..." was a command, not a prediction- and thus could not come true.

- One wonders why the ten tribe Kingdom was to cease being a people within 65 years of Isaiah's prophecy; yet we note that Ahaz was told in the same context: "If ye [the two tribe Kingdom of Judah] will not believe, surely ye shall not be established" (Is. 7:8,9). Was the prophetic outline of events in Isaiah 7 not conditional upon the faith of Ahaz and the wide reaching repentance of Judah? The demise of Israel happened 15 years later, but perhaps it was somehow possible that it would have been delayed, up to a maximum of 65 years, depending on human response?

- The land promised to Abraham was from the Nile to the Euphrates. Ezra was empowered to teach all "beyond the river" Euphrates the laws of Israel's God (Ezra 7:25). Note how often the phrase "beyond the river" occurs in the records of the restoration. It was made potentially possible for the whole land promised to Abraham to come under Yahweh's dominion- but yet again, Israel would not.

- Jer. 34:2 was surely a conditional prophecy, even though no condition is given at the time: "I will give this city into the hand of the king of

Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire”. But the Jews made some sort of repentance, releasing their slaves...and the Babylonian armies retreated (Jer. 34:21,22). Then they enslaved their brethren again- and, v.22 says, only because of this did the Babylonian armies return and burn Jerusalem. Thus the initial prophecy of burning with fire was conditional. And the Jews realized this and therefore repented. In similar vein, “the king of Babylon shall certainly come and destroy this land” was capable of not being fulfilled, if Judah would only have repented (Jer. 36:3,7,29).

- Israel “will dwell in a place of their own, and move no more” (2 Sam. 7:10). But this was a conditional, even though the condition wasn’t stated at the time: “Neither will I remove the foot of Israel from off the land which I have appointed for your fathers; *if only* they will observe to all that I have command them” (2 Chron. 33:8 RV).

- Ex. 4:16 states of Aaron that “he shall be thy spokesman unto the people”. But the plans / intentions for Aaron seem not to have worked out- for Moses ended up doing everything in reality. “It shall come to pass that he shall be to thee a mouth” (RV)- but it didn’t so come to pass. Aaron flunked it. The statement was evidently conditional.

- When we read that those who were to die in the land due to the Babylonian invasion would not be buried “neither shall men lament for them” (Jer. 16:6), this sounds like a prediction. But actually it’s a command- for Jeremiah was told “Neither go to lament nor bemoan them” (Jer. 16:5). But he did lament them- and God didn’t ignore that, but rather inspired the record of the book of Jeremiah’s Lamentations! Likewise God told Jeremiah not to pray for the people, but when Jeremiah insisted on doing so, God did in fact hear him. So we must be careful to discern what is prediction and what is command or intention. And even then we have to recognize that God’s purpose is to some extent open-ended- if men and women wish to walk with Him but don’t strictly follow His preferred intentions, He may still walk and work with them in the extension of His purpose.

- The temple vessels “shall be carried to Babylon, and there shall they be until the day that I visit them” (Jer. 27:22) sounds clear enough- but actually Jer. 27:18 states that prayer should be made so that those vessels would not be taken to Babylon! There was a real, meaningful

possibility God would hear such prayer if it were fervent enough. And yet He speaks as if the vessels will definitely be taken to Babylon. Clearly even that dogmatic statement was bound by conditions which weren't directly stated in the same breath as the apparent prediction.

- The concept of conditional fulfilment of prophecy leaves us with the exciting prospect that God is willing to change His stated purpose in accordance with human behaviour. God's plan of salvation was, apparently, through a seed of David, i.e. a man of Judah. But in 1 Kings 11:38, God is willing to end the Davidic succession and transfer the promises to David ("I will build thee a sure house") to Jeroboam, a man of Ephraim. This is all reminiscent of how God was prepared to destroy Israel and make of Moses a greater nation- and he too was not of the line of Judah but of Aaron.

The way conditions are not stated within the actual prophecy is similar to how blanket statements are made in Scripture, and yet there are exceptions to them. Thus Jn. 1:11 says that "his own received him not", but v. 12 makes it clear that some of them did receive Him. Reflect too how the Lord sought to kill Moses in Ex. 4:24. If He had done so, all His previous statements about delivering Israel by the hand of Moses would not have come true. God only didn't kill Moses because Zipporah intervened. She did this purely of her own freewill and according to the depth of her spiritual vision. Thus the earlier prophecies about delivering Israel by the hand of Moses actually had at least one major, though unspoken, condition: If Moses himself remained faithful. "But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue" (Ex. 11:7) was in fact conditional on Israel remaining indoors. But that condition isn't then stated. Even the old covenant, which was in a sense "eternal", was made with Israel "upon all these conditions" (Ex. 24:8 RVmg.). It was eternal, potentially, because it had conditions. But the conditionality of it isn't always brought to the fore when, e.g, we read of the sabbath as being an eternal ordinance.

Refinement In Babylon

It seems that God intended the 70 years in Babylon to be the time when the Jews would come to a fullness of repentance whereby they would be able to return, rebuild the temple, and usher in a Messianic Kingdom. Ps. 126:1,6 speak of how the Lord would bring back the returnees to Zion

(RVmg.), and thereby he who went forth into captivity weeping, bearing the precious seed of the next generation as little children, would in that sense return to Zion with joy, bringing his sheaves with him. Jer. 24 speaks as if the “good figs” were to be those who went to Babylon and through that experience there became “good figs”. Micah speaks of the same process. Zion was to be plowed and Jerusalem become heaps, which happened in the Babylonian invasion. But then afterwards- 70 years afterwards- the temple was to be rebuilt, “the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains” (Mic. 3:12; 4:1). “In that day...will I assemble her that halteth, and I will gather that has been driven out...and I will make her that was cast off a strong nation: and the Lord shall reign over them in mount Zion from henceforth even for ever...the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem”. A Messianic Kingdom could then have come. This whole situation would be brought to pass because the daughter of Zion was to “go forth out of the city” of Jerusalem “and come even to Babylon; there shalt thou be delivered [RV rescued]: there shall the Lord redeem thee” (Mic. 4:10). How was the travailing daughter of Zion to be delivered / rescued in *Babylon* after having been taken captive there from Jerusalem by the Babylonians? Surely in that there, God intended a spiritual revival of the people, there they would hear Ezekiel’s appeal to repent, which if responded to would enable them to build the temple which he had described (Ez. 43:10,11) and thus usher in a Messianic Kingdom.

But there are several reasons to believe that this intended Divine programme didn’t work out- due to the lack of human response. For one thing, the majority of the Jews chose to remain in Babylon. They didn’t return when they had the chance. And there is extra-Biblical evidence that they soon arose from their weeping by the rivers of Babylon, and wholeheartedly adopted the surrounding Babylonian beliefs and values. Further, in Esther’s time, a decree was made to “destroy...and cause to perish” the Jews throughout the provinces of Persia / Babylon (Esther 3:13; 7:4). This phrase uses the two Hebrew words which we find together three times in the list of curses to be brought upon a disobedient Israel (Dt. 28:20,51,63). There evidently is a connection. And yet by her wonderful self-sacrificial mediation, Esther brought about the deferment and even annulment of those justifiable curses. God’s prophetic word was again changed- due to a mediator, who of course pointed both backwards to Moses, and forwards to the Lord Jesus.

2-3 Tyre in Ezekiel 26

Ez. 26:3-14 speaks of how Babylon will surround and destroy Tyre. But this never happened- it was done by Alexander and the Greeks much later. So, did the prophecy just go unfulfilled? Ez. 29:17-20 explains that because the King of Babylon laboured so hard to take Tyre- even though he never actually succeeded- God would give him the land of Egypt as a reward. For me, this doesn't mean that the word of prophecy failed. Rather does it mean that God is open to a rethinking of plans and futures in accord with human response. Although all the conditions for Tyre's fall and Babylon's victory against her aren't given, evidently there must have been such unrecorded conditions; and they weren't fulfilled, hence Tyre was spared destruction by the Babylonians, and yet they were 'rewarded' for their part in the situation.

The following comment from Ted & Bev Russell expands upon this: "The prophecy about Tyre, (in Ez. 26) indicated that the place would be scraped of her dust and made like the top of a rock, a place for spreading of nets, plundered for the nations, cast out, devoured with fire, (Hosea, Amos and Zechariah also), and *never rebuilt*, (Ez. 26:21)(11th year). However, later in Chapter 29, (27th year), we learn that Nebuchadnezzar and his soldiers would be given the land of Egypt, because they laboured strenuously and long against Tyre, so long that the soldiers had rubbed heads and shoulders from their leather helmets and armour, (verse 18), but they did not overcome Tyre. So instead God would give Nebuchadnezzar the land of Egypt, for wages. " Spoil and pillage from Egypt will be the wages that My servant will take from Egypt, instead of the reward I promised you at Tyre" , (verse 17, 18, 19). Nebuchadnezzar was " God's servant" , and even though he did a great service for God, in punishment at Tyre, (verse 18), God changed the terms and conditions of his labour. He would not conquer Tyre, but he was given Egypt instead! Tyre was NOT laid bare, and NOT never rebuilt. It thrived and still thrives. It had its ups and downs, with different conquerors, of course. To the best of my memory the peninsula that they built into the sea to defend themselves is not there now, but the seaside town is. It lays nets out, as a fishing town, but it is not bare. We have photos of us there. We know it was there in NT times (Peter). Is it that God changes His mind? Did someone, (of whom there is no record), plead successfully for Tyre, like Lot did unsuccessfully for Sodom? Or is it that He tells us something, only a piece of the future at a time, and

then we get a fuller picture later on? The prophesy goes on and on about Tyre's destruction, and one has to be quick to see the change of circumstance in a few verses in Ezekiel 29! The complete destruction of Tyre has been used to show that the Bible is true, by some undiscerning folk, in past lectures, in our time, (with lantern slide pictures of destruction there). Once world travel was easily available and people more readily saw Tyre, that mistake is not made now. The point, (that the Bible is true), is better made elsewhere.

We do not need to question God's prophesies. We can believe Him each time, and believe the changes He makes, as well. In this prophecy do we know a reason why God changed his mind about utter and complete destruction of Tyre? It does indicate that we don't know everything, that we don't need to, and that God does not tell us. He decides what is best. Certainly the Bible record keeps us on our toes! For then " They shall know that I am the Lord" , Ez. 29: 21".

Ted & Bev Russell

To this I would add a comment from Is. 23:1,2,4,15,18. These verses seem to imply that if Tyre had howled in repentance and then been silent and ashamed, she would be 'forgotten' 70 years and then become devoted to Yahweh. This never happened. Yet the 70 year period is of course analogous to Judah's 70 years in captivity, also without repentance.

2-4 Delayed Prophecies

Prophecies that are delayed / rescheduled in their fulfilment

Some prophecies were delayed / rescheduled in their fulfilment. Others have their intended fulfilment changed into another form. Is. 40:2 speaks of how Jerusalem's "punishment is accepted" (RVmg.), referring to how Lev. 26:43 had said that the land would lie desolate until her punishment was fulfilled. This passage could have come true when Judah returned from captivity. But it didn't. It is applied to the preaching of John the Baptist in the 1st century; but again, Judah would not hear. And so once again the land lay desolate again, until now the time has arrived for the final Elijah prophet. God is seeking to fulfil His word, but He will not force the hand and hearts of men and women. Therefore prophecies are

delayed in their fulfilment, as mankind is given yet more opportunities. The briefest attention to context will show that Isaiah 40 follows straight on from the account of Zion's salvation from the Assyrian in Hezekiah's time. The command to cry unto Jerusalem that her warfare is finished (Is. 40:2) is clearly following on from the historical account of Jerusalem's salvation from Sennacherib's invasion which we have just read in Is. 37-39. The voice in the wilderness [potentially Isaiah?] preached that all flesh was grass, referring back to how the nations around Jerusalem had been "as the grass of the field" during Sennacherib's invasion (Is. 37:27 cp. 40:6). The voice crying in the wilderness to prepare Messiah's way therefore was intended to occur after the defeat of Sennacherib. But Hezekiah messed up, and his people turned to materialism and idols. And thus the prophecy was rescheduled to fulfilment in John the Baptist; but again, Israel would not hearken. If Israel would have received it, John would have been the Elijah prophet; but overall they didn't, and so the whole prophecy is again rescheduled to be fulfilled in the Elijah prophet of our last days. Micah 5 speaks of Messiah being born and being smitten upon the cheek at the same time as Jerusalem is besieged and Judah has been invaded by the Assyrians. Whatever minor fulfilment this may have had in Hezekiah, it was pathetically incomplete- he wasn't born in Bethlehem, and he wasn't smitten upon the cheek with a rod. I read all this as meaning that Messiah could have been born and then suffered in such circumstances- but it didn't happen. The prophecy was fulfilled in essence, although in a different context and in a different way, in the Lord Jesus. Likewise Is. 9:6 speaks as if the birth of Messiah would be at a time of deliverance from Israel's invaders; yet Is. 9:13 RV implies this would only happen if they were obedient: "Yet the people hath not turned / repented".

The Lord Jesus / bridegroom "tarries", the same Greek word translated 'delay' in "my Lord delayeth his coming". The Lord does delay His coming- the man's mistake was in acting inappropriately because of this. God's judgments likewise "waited", or delayed, in Noah's time (1 Pet. 3:20)- presumably for the 120 year period of Gen. 6:3. In a similar way, the judgment on Nineveh preached by Jonah also delayed- it came in the end, but their repentance meant that it delayed at that time.

In the first century, all things were ready for the Supper- supper time had come. But the start of the supper has been delayed 2000 years by Israel's rejection of the invitation to participate (Lk. 14:17).

There are some types of prophecy which one surely has to accept as only being capable of fulfilment given certain freewill behaviour by God's people. Take Jer. 12:14-17: "Thus saith the Lord against all mine evil neighbours [e.g. Babylon], that touch the inheritance which I have caused my people Israel to inherit: Behold I will pluck them up from off their land, and will pluck up the house of Judah from among them [which He did at the restoration]. And it shall come to pass, that after I have plucked them up, I will return and have compassion on them: and I will bring them again, every man to his heritage, and every man to his land [the lists in Ezra and Nehemiah shew how the Jews from each part of the land were enabled to return to their original cities]. And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my Name...then shall they be built up in the midst of my people". But the Jews mixed with the people of the land, they didn't teach them the Name, and so the prophecy didn't come true- they weren't built up in the midst of Israel as intended. Prophecies like Is. 19:18,24 were thereby disabled from fulfilment at that time- "In that day there shall be five cities in the land of Egypt that...swear to the Lord...in that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria". Is. 2:2-4, Zech. 8:21-23 etc. speak of how Gentile nations would desire to learn the ways of God and come up to a temple in Zion for this purpose. Could it not be that these passages are to be read in the context of Jer. 12:14-17- that all this was only possible if at the time of the restoration the nations had learnt God's ways from the Jews? In this case these passages are not to be taken as 'proof' that there has to be a future temple built in Zion.

Yet there are other types of prophecy which are not fulfilled because in wrath, God remembers mercy. The statement that Adam and Eve would surely die in the day they ate the fruit is surely an evident example. For, they didn't. Or consider 1 Kings 11:13: "I will give one tribe to thy son". But Solomon's son was given two and a half- Benjamin and half of Manasseh, in addition to Judah, David's tribe.

In the context of the returning exiles, Daniel was aware that the 70 years of desolation had to be fulfilled, and yet he asks God not to defer the promised restoration (Dan. 9:2 cp. 19), as if he understood that the predicted revival of Israel could still be delayed by God on account of their unpreparedness, even though it was prophesied. Daniel understood from Jeremiah's prophecies that Jerusalem's fortunes would be revived

after the 70 year period was ended. Yet he goes on to ask God to *immediately* forgive His people, as if Daniel even dared hope that the period might be shortened. Daniel lived into the reign of Cyrus (Dan. 6:28), and so he would have witnessed “the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem” (Dan. 9:25; Ezra 1:1). But it seems to me that whilst the prophecy of the 70 years came true in one sense, the Jews didn’t respond as they should, and so the time of Zion’s true freedom in the Messianic Kingdom was delayed. Daniel had been petitioning the Father to not delay beyond the 70 year period in doing this. But in another sense, the prophecy was re-interpreted; Daniel was now told that there was to be a “seventy weeks of years” (Dan. 9:24 RSV) period involved in order to gain ultimate forgiveness for Israel as Daniel had just been praying for. The 70 years had become “seventy weeks of years”. The command to rebuild Jerusalem was given in the first year of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1); but Daniel must have watched in vain for any sign that Zion’s glad morning had really come. And so it is recorded that in the third year of Cyrus Daniel was given a vision that confirmed to him that “the thing was true, but the time appointed was long [Heb. ‘extended’; the word is also translated “greater”, “more”]: and he understood the thing” (Dan. 10:1). What was “the thing” that was true, which Daniel sought to understand? Surely it was the vision of the 70 years that he had sought to “understand” in Dan. 9:2. The Hebrew “dabar”, translated “thing”, is usually translated “word”. He was comforted that the word of prophecy would come true; it was “noted in the scripture of truth” (Dan. 10:21). It was just that it had been extended in its fulfilment; “for yet the vision is for many days” (Dan. 10:14). And this was how he came to “understand the thing / word”. The essential and ultimate fulfilment of the 70 years prophecy would only be after a long time, involving 70 “weeks of years”. Thus Daniel came to “understand” the vision (Dan. 10:1); hence he was so shocked, depressed and disappointed that the fulfilment would not be in his days. But he is set up as a representative of those of us in the very last days who shall likewise “understand” (s.w. Dan. 12:10) the very same prophecies which Daniel studied. Daniel is described as both understanding, and also not understanding (Dan. 10:1; 12:8). Surely the idea is that he understood the principle of deferment and the outline meaning of the prophecy; but he didn’t understand the details. And so perhaps it is with us who will, or do, likewise “understand” as Daniel did.

2-5 Prophecies With Changed Fulfilment

Prophecies whose intended fulfilment was changed into something else

An example of prophesy having an intended fulfilment that was not only rescheduled but changed in its application is to be found in Am. 9:11: “In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof, and I will raise up his ruins”. “That day” is defined in v.8 as the time when Judah was destroyed from the face of the land (by being taken into captivity in Babylon), and scattered among the nations (v.9). This came to pass in their scattering amongst the 127 provinces of Esther 3:8. The words of v. 11 are therefore a prophecy of how the temple was to be rebuilt and the gaps in the wall closed. “They shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof” (v. 14) could have come true at this time; indeed, it was intended to. But the Jews who returned were disobedient to Ezekiel’s vision of the temple, and did not fulfil the prophecies. So the fulfilment was not merely rescheduled until a later date. Acts 15:16 cites Am. 9:11 as now having a spiritual fulfilment- in the raising up of Jesus. Thus God’s word is not falsified even if the initially intended fulfilment does not come about due to human failure.

Daniel 9 contains the account of Daniel reflecting upon Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years captivity for Judah, after which there would be a glorious restoration. This prophecy didn't seem to be coming true, and so Daniel prayed to God, confessing Israel's sins- as if he realized that there was a conditionality to the prophecy, which Judah had failed to fulfil. The response to him is the prophecy of the *70 weeks* in Dan. 9:24-27, a prophecy culminating in the final tribulation and then the coming of Christ. This sounds as if Jeremiah's prophecy was indeed conditional, and those conditions weren't met; and therefore the prophecy was given a reapplication and redefinition.

There’s another reason why some prophecies aren’t fulfilled- and it’s simply one word: grace. God doesn’t always bring the prophesied punishments upon His people because in wrath, He still remembers His gracious mercy, that undeserved favour which is His characteristic. This to my mind is the real explanation of why the prophecy that in the day Adam ate of the fruit, he would die...never came true, in that sense. The

curses for disobedience outlined in Dt. 28 and 29 never came totally true; hence the prophecy that disobedient Israel would be poor and unsuccessful in business during their dispersion never really came true, and instead God had blessed them through His grace. The whole land of Israel was to become “brimstone and salt and burning, that it is not sown, nor beareth, nor any grass groweth therein, like the overthrow of Sodom...” (Dt. 29:22-25). It’s no good even reasoning that this will come true in the future; these were to be the punishments that would come when Israel broke covenant and went into dispersion. They’ve been in this position for many centuries, but still the full extent of the prophesied cursing hasn’t come about. And yet God keeps His word; and yet His grace is such that He can chose not to keep some of the punishments. This is a paradox of grace, beyond our human explanation in trite, logical, expository terms.

2-6 The Nature Of Prophecy

Thus we have seen that God’s conditional prophecies are in three groups:

Prophecies that will not come true because they depended upon human response which was not forthcoming

Prophecies that are delayed / rescheduled in their fulfilment

Prophecies whose intended fulfilment was changed into something else.

In which of these groups we place Ezekiel’s prophecy of the temple I leave to the reader to decide. Harry Whittaker and George Booker suggest the whole prophecy has been given a spiritual fulfilment in Jesus. Others see it as simply being delayed in fulfilment until the second coming. And yet it is equally possible that the whole prophecy is command rather than prediction; it was what potentially could have been possible.

If there is genuine freewill, it is apparent enough that God’s purposes must be to some extent conditional. If the Lord had failed in the wilderness temptations, “there was the possibility that the purpose of God would have been circumvented” , as Frank Birch expressed it. All this explains why the fulfilment of prophecy can only be perceived at the

time of fulfilment- it is impossible to know in advance how it will be fulfilled. It isn't a time-line of future events which we are to discern.

Taking this idea yet further, it is also true that some prophecies are fulfilled according to the acceptance of men, and therefore have their fulfilments in different ways at different times. Thus for those who received it, Malachi's 'Elijah' prophecies were fulfilled in John the Baptist, for those who accepted him (Mt. 11:14). The implication is that for those who didn't, those prophecies weren't fulfilled. When the Lord stood up and read from Isaiah, He commented that "this day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Lk. 4:21). He didn't mean that His reading those words in a synagogue had fulfilled them. He speaks of "your ears" as standing for 'your correct perception / understanding' in Mt. 13:16. What He was surely saying was that for those of them who perceived who He was, Isaiah's words were ringing true. For those who rejected Him, of course, they weren't fulfilled, and therefore their complete, universal acceptance / fulfilment would be delayed until a future day; just as it was with the 'Elijah' prophecy.

Moreover, a study of how OT prophecies were seen as 'fulfilled' in the NT reveals that not every detail of the original prophecy had to have a specific fulfilment for it to be understood as 'fulfilled', nor is the context of the prophecy necessarily relevant to its fulfilment. The way Matthew especially sees fulfilments of prophecy in 'out of context' ways is proof enough of this. And James' use of Amos in Acts 15 is another example. The ideas and images of the OT prophets are interpreted in a certain light in the NT which is judged to be their 'fulfilment'. Thus Ezekiel prophesies a latter day invasion of Israel by a power using horses and swords. This need not have a literal fulfilment to the letter; but the essence will come true. And the later chapters in Ezekiel must be seen likewise. The above examples show beyond doubt that prophecy is conditional. Whilst it cannot be denied that *some* prophecies have turned out to have a 'continuous historic' fulfilment, it must also be understood that we cannot think that all prophecy is going to have a sequential fulfilment, having predicted a series of prearranged events which are bound to occur at certain dates. This just cannot be so, because its fulfilment depends upon the response of men- the clay in the hand of the potter. This is why there could be more than one possible outcome to 'prophecy'. Dean Brown has pointed out two such examples:

“Was there a fixed date for the departure of Israel from Egypt? (read Gen. 15:13; Ex. 12:40-41; Acts 7:17, 25, 30). Was the son of Jacob from which Messiah was to come fixed? (we all know that Jesus is of Judah, but consider Joseph the type of Christ; Joshua the son of Nun of the tribe of Ephraim the son of Joseph, who was a type of Christ in many ways including being the prototypical " prophet like me from among your brethren; the prophecy concerning Judah in Gen. 49:8-12 with that concerning Joseph in Gen. 49:22-26 and also the incident of the blessing of Ephraim in Gen. 48:8-22; especially consider Ps. 78:67-68 and context)”.

It should also be born in mind that “the teaching of Jesus [is] that the purpose of prophecy is that we shall be able to recognize the signs when they appear, not that we shall be able to predict the future”, as Cyril Tennant put it:

- “I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe” (Jn. 14:29).

- The disciples did not expect Jesus to enter into Jerusalem “sitting on an ass’s colt” in fulfilment of Zech. 9:9. But when He did, then soon afterwards, all became clear to them- that He had fulfilled this prophecy (Jn. 12:16).

- Likewise with prophecies such as “the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up” in Ps. 69:9, and even the Lord’s own prophecies of His resurrection. When it happened, “his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture (Ps. 69:9), and the word which Jesus had said” (Jn. 2:17-22).

Indeed, it seems to me that we have quite over-emphasized the ‘predictive’ aspect of prophecy. We need to read Is. 43:9,12 with perhaps more care: “Let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew us former things?...I have declared, and have saved...”. The wonder of Israel’s God was not so much that He declared future things in a way that could be understood before they happened, but rather that He ‘declared’ the meaning of past events. There is a certain enigma to Israel’s history, both as history, and also sociologically, psychologically, indeed in every way. It is that enigma which is declared in God’s word, enabling Israel to make sense of what

happens to them by their reflection, *after the event*, upon God's word. Likewise it seems that only once the events have happened can we look back with true understanding into God's word and understand. This was in fact the case with a number of the predictions of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 2:19; 3:14; 11:50; 21:18). They would have remained enigmas, until after the event. And then, all would have been so clear.

Broken Promises?

God stated in passages like 2 Kings 8:19 that He would not destroy Judah at the hands of her enemies for the sake of His eternal promise to David; but later, He did bring the destructions which He said He could not bring for the sake of the promises to David. Surely the conclusion is that He reinterpreted and reapplied that promise, in such a way as not to break it, and to uphold His own integrity on all counts; remaining both the faithful covenant God, and the God who judges sin. In this sense, God's word can 'change' or be "revoked". Thus God says that in the case of Damascus, He will not "revoke my word" (Amos 1:3 RVmg.)- implying that He *can and will* "revoke" His word at times.

It is also possible for God to 'change His mind'- there are around 40 examples in Scripture of this (the destruction of Nineveh, e.g.). When David wanted to build a temple, Nathan the prophet initially said "Yes, go ahead; for the Lord is with you"; and then came back to David and said "No, God says you're not to do it. God will build *you* a house" (2 Sam. 7:1-4). The usual assumption is that Nathan spoke too quickly, assuming that it was God's will that David should build the house; and then had to backtrack. And that may be so. But surely there is the possibility that Nathan spoke *both* times from God; but God changed His mind. The fact God can change His mind inevitably impacts the nature of the prophetic word spoken in His Name.

3 Command More Than Prediction

The will of God is not always determining of human behaviour in absolute terms; otherwise the will of God would exclude human freewill. "This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication" (1 Thess. 4:3); but Thessalonians still had the freedom to commit fornication. The will of God here refers to the wish / desire of God. But the fulfilment of God's will is of course up to the freewill of

the individual. Which is why we pray for God's will to be done in our lives; not in the sense of 'OK well get on and do what You are going to do anyway', but rather of seeking for strength to personally do God's wish in our lives. And as we mature, our will and the Father's become closer. We ask what *we* will and it is done; and therefore and thereby we ask for the Father's will to be done.

This leads us to the thesis that some of the Bible's 'prophecies' are command more than prediction. The Lord Jesus criticized the Jews for trading in the temple because "Is it not written, My house *shall be* called of all nations the house of prayer" (Mk. 11:17). We can easily read this as meaning that one day, a 'house of prayer for all nations' was to be built in Jerusalem. But in that case, why should not the Jews trade in the temple there and then, well before this was to happen, say, 2000 years later? The Lord surely means that the prophecy that the temple "shall be called..." a house of *prayer* was a command more than a prediction. It "shall be" a place for *prayer* and not *trading*. The 'fulfilment' of this statement was dependent upon them praying there and encouraging all nations to pray there; yet they could limit the fulfilment of the 'prophecy' by stopping Gentiles praying there, and by discouraging prayer there because of their trading policies. Thus the Lord saw the prophecy as more of a command than mere prediction. 'Prophecy' really means the speaking forth of God's word, rather than the foretelling of the future. The prophecies of Ezekiel about the temple can be understood more as command than as simple prediction. This is how Israel were to behave and how they were to rebuild the temple. Another example of this is in the way God prophesied that Israel would not return to Egypt; but this was actually a command not to return there (Dt. 17:16), and He Himself quotes this when prophesying that if they sin, then He would bring them "into Egypt again...by the way whereof I spake unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again" (Dt. 28:68). Prophecy was therefore commandment in this instance, but as such it could be nullified by disobedience. It is tempting to see the temple prophecies in this way. Remember that 'prophecy' means to speak forth God's word, rather than to predict the future.

Another example is found in Dt. 2:4,6: "Command thou the people, saying, Ye are to pass through the coast of your brethren the children of Esau...and they shall be afraid of you...ye shall buy meat of them for money....ye shall also buy water of them for money". This all sounds

like definite prophecy. And yet when Israel came to these people and tried to pass through, and offered them money for bread and water, they were rejected by them (Num. 20:16-21; Jud. 11:17). The condition- that Edom had the freedom to reject them- isn't mentioned, but it nonetheless stood. Prophecy is an imperative to action- it isn't just a fascinating study of how predictions have been matched with reality. 19th century Christians understood prophecies about the return of the Jews to their land as meaning that they ought to give money and material help to enable this to happen- they didn't just passively connect the prophecies with their fulfilment. Likewise Jehu understood the prophecies about the destruction of the house of Ahab to mean that he must get on and do the work of destroying them (2 Kings 10:10,11,17- note v. 11 "so..."). Paul noticed the prophecy that Christ was to be the light of the whole world and saw in this a commandment to him to go and preach Christ world-wide (Acts 13:47). He read "...for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider" (Is. 52:15) as a prophecy which required him to fulfil it, by taking Christ to those who had not heard (Rom. 15:21). "Thou shalt drive out the Canaanites, though they have iron chariots, and though they be strong" (Josh. 17:18) was prophecy, but it was actually a command, not a prediction. For those tribes proved too strong for lazy, minimising Israel. And so in that sense the 'prophecy' wasn't fulfilled. Israel failed to be inspired by it. They waited for its fulfilment rather than went out to fulfil it. And we can do likewise. Right at the start the Lord had told Joshua: "There shall not any man be able to stand before thee"; and yet He goes on to stress that this was dependent upon Joshua's personal obedience to the Law (Josh. 1:5-9). One wonders whether the fact this didn't ultimately come true is some sort of reflection upon Joshua's lost intensity of devotion...?

The idea that some prophecies are more command than prediction helps make sense of the prophecy of Ez. 40-48. When we read "my princes shall no more oppress my people...the shekel shall be twenty gerahs...ye shall offer an oblation" (Ez. 45:8,12,13), the emphasis needs to be placed upon the word "shall". This was a command to the elders of the people- made explicit in passages like Ez. 45:9: "Let it suffice you, O princes of Israel: remove violence and spoil...ye shall have just balances". By failing to be obedient, God's people effectively disallowed the fulfilment of the 'prophecy' that could have come true if they had been obedient to it.

4 The Contemporary Relevance Of Ezekiel's Temple

Ezekiel shewed Judah the general picture of the temple; if they were obedient, then God promised to give them more details so they could build it in reality (Ez. 43:10). There is a congruence between the style of address found in Ez. 40-48 and the earlier part of the prophecy. This is because Ezekiel is addressing the same audience- those who had heard his criticisms and appeals for repentance were the same group who were now being commanded to build a temple according to the dimensions given. Thus "Thou shalt say to the rebellious house..." (44:6) is the same rubric used earlier (2:5; 3:26; 12:2,25; 17:12; 24:3). The new temple was "to make a separation between that which was holy and that which was common" (Ez. 42:20 RV)- alluding back to Ezekiel's earlier lament that Judah had not made that very separation (Ez. 22:26). Time and again, the new system is described in terms which allude to the bad practices in the old system- e.g. the stress of Ez. 42:4 etc. that the doors of the new chambers were "toward the north" connects with how Ezekiel had earlier seen women weeping for Tammuz "towards the north" in the temple (Ez. 8:14; Ez. 9:2). Ezekiel himself was to provide the sons of Zadok with a bullock for a sin offering (Ez. 43:19), as if he himself could have been present in the work of the building and dedication of this temple. Ezekiel himself, as a priest, was to inaugurate the altar by sprinkling blood upon it and making an offering (Ez. 43:20-25). Ezekiel's temple prophecies are described as "the law of the house" (Ez. 43:12). They were a law, a commandment to be fulfilled. This explains the commandment style of the instructions, e.g. 44:2: "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened". Some of the commandments about giving the Gentiles inheritance amongst the tribal cantons (47:23) are understandable in the light of the fact that the Samaritans were living in the land at the time of the restoration.

The description of Ezekiel's Temple was to be given to the captives in Babylon by Ezekiel, to lead them to repentance and to assure them of what could be if they repented. Then when the invitation to leave Babylon and return came in the time of Ezra, they ought to have been motivated to return to the land and build the temple which Ezekiel had explained to them. But sadly most of them weren't very deeply motivated at all; they wanted to build a temple, but not to the extent Ezekiel had outlined. Consider in this light Ezek 43:10-11: "Thou son of

man, shew the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them measure the pattern. And if they be ashamed of all that they have done, shew them the form of the house, and the fashion thereof, and the goings out thereof, and the comings in thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the laws thereof: and write it in their sight, that they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them". *Then*, when the temple was built, they were to be obedient in all the ways in which they hadn't been obedient in the past, with the result that they were now sitting in captivity (44:24). This was the tragedy felt by Ezra, when he realized the exiles were not living as they should be: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God; for our iniquities are increased" (Ezra 9:6). Israel would only be able to build the temple properly if they were "ashamed of their iniquities" (Ez. 43:10). And Ezra knew they weren't. And thus he sought to take upon himself that shame, believing that God would accept *his* shame on behalf of the people. Note in passing how he speaks of blushing before God. You only blush in someone's presence. And this was how close and real Ezra felt his God to be.

"My princes [in this new temple system] shall no more oppress my people" as they did in the recent past (Ez. 45:8 cp. Jer. 22:3; Ez. 18:7,12,16; 22:7,29; Zeph. 3:1, where the same Hebrew word for "oppress" is found). Thus there was to be repentance for the 'oppression' which Ezekiel had earlier had to criticize Israel for. They were to have "just" balances (Ez. 45:10), as opposed to the "unjust" [s.w.] balances which they had in the lead up to the captivity (Jer. 22:13, AV "unrighteous"). In the past, they had brought strangers into the temple; but in the new system, they were not to do so (44:7 cp. 9). The statements that "they shall put on other garments: and they shall not sanctify the people with their garments...neither shall any priest drink wine, when they enter into the inner court. Neither shall they take for their wives a widow, nor her that is put away" (44:18-23) may all be hinting that these things *were* done by Israel before the captivity; but they were not to be done in the new temple ⁽¹⁾. They are commands rather than simple predictions. Yet the tragedy is, the Jews did, e.g., trade on the Sabbath in Nehemiah's time, when this was exactly the reason they went to Babylon in the first place (Am. 8:5). They went into captivity because the princes and priests oppressed the people (Jer. 21:12; 22:3,17); in the new temple, this was not to be so (Ez. 45:8). And

yet, in Nehemiah's time the princes of the people did again oppress them, e.g. through making them mortgage their lands to them. This is the tragedy of Israel's refusal to learn... The intention was that they would "bear the punishment of their iniquity...*that* the house of Israel go no more astray" (Ez. 14:11).

"Moreover the prince shall not take of the people's inheritance by oppression, to thrust them out of their possession; but he shall give his sons inheritance out of his own possession: that my people be not scattered every man from his possession" (Ezek 46:18). This and the surrounding verses are admittedly hard to understand if they really are to be literally fulfilled in relation to Jesus at His second coming. But it is so understandable within the framework of interpretation here advocated. They had gone into captivity for these kind of abuses, and they were to return and rebuild the temple after the pattern of Solomon's, repent of their sins, and live righteously, and they would have the possibility of bringing in the Messianic Kingdom. But they chose to be satisfied with a semi-revival, a quasi repentance- just as we can be so easily. And Nehemiah records how the princes *did* oppress the people, taking their land / possessions away from them.

Mic. 7:11-13 RV outlines the basic thesis that we are presenting in this study. "In the day that thy walls are to be built [the restoration under Nehemiah], in that day shall the boundary [of Israel] be far removed [the boundaries of Israel would be extended, as noted in several prophecies of the Kingdom]. In that day shall they come unto thee from Assyria [Babylon] and the cities of Egypt...even to the river [Euphrates- i.e. all of scattered Israel, including those who went down to Egypt with Jeremiah 70 years beforehand, would return to the land]...*Notwithstanding*, the land shall be desolate". Despite all this being made potentially possible ("notwithstanding..."), the wonderful Messianic Kingdom was disallowed from coming into existence at that time because of "the fruit of their doings" (Mic. 7:13). Neh. 7:4 obliquely comments on the tragedy: "Now the city was large and great: but the people [who returned from Babylon] were few therein, and the houses were not builded". When "the time to favour Zion" came, at the end of the 70 years, God's servants Israel were to "take pleasure in her stones, and favour [even] the dust thereof"; and then, "when the Lord shall build up Zion, he shall appear in his glory" (Ps. 102:13-16). But the few Jews who returned chose not to live in Jerusalem, preferring to carve

out for themselves farmsteads in the countryside (Neh. 11:1), and the strength of those that shifted the rubble in Jerusalem decayed...they saw her dust and scattered stones as a nuisance, and didn't take pleasure in them (Neh. 4:10). And so the Lord could not then appear in glory.

It was Ezekiel, as he sat with the exiles in Babylon, who was to divide the land by lot unto the various tribes (Ez. 48:29). The tragedy of all the details recorded in Ezekiel 40-48, and the very reason for their being preserved to this day, is to show us to what great extent God has prepared potential things for His people, and yet they can be totally wasted if we don't respond. In fact according to Mic. 4:10, it was God's purpose to exile His people to Babylon, "and there shalt thou be delivered; there the Lord shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies". And yet they preferred to side with their enemies and to prefer non-deliverance from Babylon. The tragedy of it all is almost unthinkable, and yet this is what we do if day by day we chose the things of this world against the deliverance from this world which there is in Christ.

The Relevance Of Malachi and Haggai

All this explains why Malachi and Haggai so bitterly complain at the way the priests didn't serve God properly in the restored temple. They offered blemished sacrifices, when it had been prophesied / commanded in Ezekiel that Israel were not to do this (Mal. 1:8). The priests married divorced women (Mal. 2:14-16), even though Ez. 44 commanded they should not do this. They were to use just measures (45:9-14), unlike what they had previously done. But they robbed God in their sacrifices in the restored temple (Mal. 3:8). The priests were to shut the gates (Ez. 44:2; 46:2,12); but they refused to do this unless they were paid for it (Mal. 1:10). The abuses against "mine altar" of Mal. 1:7,10 refer to the much-mentioned altar of Ez. 40-48, which was to be used in a way unlike the previous abuses of the pre-captivity period. Judah had made no difference between clean and unclean, and therefore had gone into captivity (Ez. 22:26); and therefore the temple was a command / prophecy to divide the clean from the unclean in the whole way the building was designed and was to be built and operated (42:20). It was a "law" that the top of the house be "holy" (43:12). Even within Ezekiel, Israel are criticized for oppressing the stranger / Gentile who lived with them (22:7,29); and now they are told that in the new temple system, the

stranger must be generously given an inheritance in the land, he must be counted as actually belonging to one of the tribes (47:23).

It could be pointed out that the temple which Cyrus commanded the Jews to build in Jerusalem was of different (smaller) dimensions to that of Ezekiel (Ezra 6:3,4). Two possibilities arise here. Either Israel chose to listen to the words of man rather than those of God through Ezekiel; or (more likely) God reduced the dimensions, knowing that this was within the capability of Israel to achieve. In any case, Israel were encouraged by Divine prophesy in the work of building according to the pattern which Cyrus had given (Ezra 6:14). God is so eager to work with men that He will work with us on our lower level, even if it is a level lower than what we are capable of. And so we should treat our weaker brethren.

God likewise had redefined the boundaries of the land in accordance to what Israel had the strength to subdue; He made account for their weakness. Thus Ephraim were given some cities within the inheritance of Manasseh (Josh. 16:9), presumably because Manasseh wouldn't drive out the tribes living there. And the Lord seems to have alluded to this by saying that *we* will be given cities, the number of which depends upon our zeal to possess them. God had clearly promised: "Your God, he shall expel them from before you...and ye *shall* possess their land, as the Lord your God hath promised unto you" (Josh. 23:5). But this promise was conditional upon them making the effort, even though that condition is not specifically mentioned. Ultimately, God will "enlarge all the borders of the land" (Is. 26:15 RV) because Israel will finally rise up to the spiritual ambition He desires of them.

All this helps make sense of the fact that there are many details in Ez. 40-48 which seem very hard to apply to a future Kingdom under the rulership of Jesus. The offering of animal sacrifices in order to gain forgiveness seems to flatly contradict the teaching of Hebrews concerning the one time nature of the Lord's offering. The existence of animals who will have been "torn" by other animals (Ez. 44:31) seems hard to square with the Kingdom prophecies of Isaiah 9 and 11 about the animals living at peace with each other. The language used about "the prince" also seems impossible to understand about an immortal being [see later]. Indeed the whole style of Ez. 40-48 would appear to be relevant to Ezekiel's own time- note how the borders of the land are

described as “Sibraim, which *is* between the border of Damascus...on the north northward *is* the border of Hamath” (Ez. 47:16,17 RV). Even the idea that Jerusalem will become the city where “the Lord is there” (Ez. 48:35) must be connected with Ezekiel’s early use of the phrase to describe how the Lord “was there” in the land of Israel before the Babylonian invasion (Ez. 35:10); all these details could have come true in Ezekiel’s time. Yet they have been given a deferred or re-interpreted fulfilment because of Israel’s unwillingness to allow them to come true for them.

Notes

(1) If we insist that every part of Ez. 40-48 is going to have a literal fulfilment in the Millennium, then we have to accept that Jesus will accept divorce and remarriage in His Kingdom- it’s just that the priests won’t be able to marry divorcees, but others will. And this ought to exercise the minds of those who so strongly refuse to fellowship divorced and remarried folk. The Lord will accept it amongst the mortals in His Millennial Kingdom- if we are going to apply these passages literally to that time. This is not to mean that the sin of divorce is in any way minimised. My point is simply that the tolerance and restorative fellowship of the Lord ought to be reflected in our judgments.

5 The Restoration: Potential Kingdom Of God

There is reason to think that it could have been possible for the Messianic Kingdom to have been established at the time of the restoration, and the temple prophecies would fit perfectly into this context. Thus Ezekiel emphasised that the sons of Zadok were to organize priestly work in the temple (Ez. 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11); and it was surely not incidental that Ezra, the leader of the initial restoration, was one of the sons of Zadok (Ezra 7:2). He was in a position to fulfil those prophecies, although the bulk of his brethren seem to have precluded this. Ezra was enabled to “beautify” the temple (Ezra 7:27), the very same word used in Is. 60:7,9,13 about how God would “glorify” [s.w.] His temple with merchandise from throughout the Babylonian empire- all of which was willingly offered by Cyrus and Darius. Ez. 40-48 stress the “gates” dozens of times; and Nehemiah’s

account likewise stresses many times the attention he paid to setting up the “gates” [s.w.], as if he saw his work as fulfilling Ezekiel’s words. Ez. 40:42 speaks of the vessels to be used in the temple [AV “instruments”] with the same word used for the temple vessels which were brought up out of Babylon back to Judah, in fulfilment of several of Isaiah’s ‘Kingdom’ passages (Ezra 1:6-11; 8:25-33 cp. Is. 52:11; 66:20).

Earlier Ezekiel had prophesied in 28:25,26: “Thus saith the Lord GOD; When I shall have gathered the house of Israel from the people among whom they are scattered, and shall be sanctified in them in the sight of the heathen, then shall they dwell in their land that I have given to my servant Jacob. And they shall dwell safely therein, and shall build houses, and plant vineyards; yea, they shall dwell with confidence, when I have executed judgments upon all those that despise them round about them; and they shall know that I am the LORD their God”. They were gathered back [although they resisted this in that many preferred to stay in the soft life of Babylon], but they hardly dwelt safely or confidently in their land. They planted vineyards, but received a poor harvest due to their lack of attention to God’s house; their enemies destroyed their fruits, and their vine “cast her fruit before the time” (Hag. 1:6; Mal. 3:10,11). Haggai and Malachi criticised Israel for this, saying it could be rectified by their obedience: “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Mal. 3:10). Yet in Nehemiah’s time, Judah refused to pay tithes properly; but even then, if they had thoroughly repented, the Kingdom conditions were still possible. Such was God’s desire to continue working with His hopeless people.

And Nehemiah did his very best to bring the potential Kingdom of God about by urging the people to repentance and conformity to God’s will, such was his perception of what was going on; that the coming of God’s Kingdom was being limited by the apathy of his own people. No fewer than 24 times in Ez. 40-48 are we told that the temple was to be built by ‘measure’ (e.g. Ez. 40:3,5,10,21,22,24,28,29); and the same word occurs frequently in describing how Nehemiah gave various groups of Jews their own ‘measure’ in the work of rebuilding Jerusalem (Neh. 3:11,19,20,22,24,27). He arranged for 12 gates to be built in the wall, as

Ez. 48:31-34 had commanded there to be. He built ‘miphkad’, “the Muster Gate” (Neh. 3:31 RSV), the “appointed place” [s.w.] of Ez. 43:21. As he ‘measured out’ the work of rebuilding Jerusalem, he must have been conscious of the Kingdom prophecy of Jer 31:38-40: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the city shall be built to the LORD from the tower of Hananeel unto the gate of the corner. And the measuring line shall yet go forth over against it upon the hill Gareb, and shall compass about to Goath. And the whole valley of the dead bodies, and of the ashes, and all the fields unto the brook of Kidron, unto the corner of the horse gate toward the east, shall be holy unto the LORD; it shall not be plucked up, nor thrown down any more for ever”. It *could* have been fulfilled, this could have been the potential Kingdom of God, and he set about to seek to fulfil it; but those places were not kept “holy unto the Lord”, and therefore the Jews were to be again plucked up and thrown down.

Is. 60:7 prophesied that God would “*glorify the house of my glory*”. But this was in fact a conditional prophecy, capable of fulfilment through the freewill efforts of the returning exiles. For they were empowered by Artaxerxes “to *beautify* [s.w. “glorify”] the house of the Lord” (Ezra 7:27). All their efforts to glorify / beautify the house, therefore, would have had God’s special and powerful blessing behind them. But was the house ultimately glorified? No- for Israel would not. They got sidetracked by beautifying their own homes, building “cieled houses” for themselves (Hag. 1:4). The word for “cieled” occurs in 1 Kings 6:9; 7:3,7 to describe the roofing of the first temple- which they were to be rebuilding, rather than building their own houses. The glory would have entered the house of God’s glory as it did at the inauguration of the first temple (2 Chron. 7:1-3). Ezekiel prophesied that ultimately the glory would fill the temple as it had done then (Ez. 43:4,5). But God’s prophecy of this in Is. 60:7, that He would glorify His house, meant that He was prepared to work through men to glorify it. The fulfilment of Ezekiel’s vision of the cloud of glory entering the temple again could have been fulfilled if the exiles had done what Artaxerxes empowered them to do- to glorify the house of glory. And so the fulfilment was delayed. The glory of the temple the exiles built was tragically less than the glory of the first temple; and so it would only be in the last day of Messiah’s 2nd coming that the house shall truly be filled with glory (Hag. 2:3,7,9). And the lesson ought to be clear for us, in the various projects and callings of our lives: it becomes crucial for us to discern God’s

specific purposes for us, and insofar as we follow His leading, we will feel a blessing and power which is clearly Divine.

The Potential Kingdom Of God Made Possible

The latter chapters of Ezekiel stress how Israel were to “inherit” the land; yet the same word is used in other restoration prophecies, about Messiah causing Israel to “inherit” the land again after their return from “the north country” (Zech. 2:12; 8:12; Is. 49:8; Jer. 3:18). When Judah returned from the “north country”, then Jerusalem would be the universally recognized “throne of the Lord” (Jer. 3:17,18). The Kingdom could have come when Judah returned from Babylon. It was therefore potentially possible for the returning exiles to inherit all the land outlined in Ez. 47:13-21 and share it out between the 12 tribes. But they grabbed every man for himself, his own farmstead, his own mini-Kingdom. They had no interest in the wider vision, nor in subduing extra land; and the majority of the Jews didn’t even want to inherit it; they preferred the soft life of Babylon, the Kingdom of men rather than the Kingdom of God. And thus the Kingdom made possible was never actually fulfilled at that time. Indeed, the whole exile and return need never have happened- the prophecies of this need not have come true in the way they did, for even before the Babylonian invasion, Judah had been offered the prospect of eternally remaining in their land, if they repented (Jer. 7:7). And after it happened, Jeremiah commented: “Your prophets...did not expose your sin to ward off your captivity” (Lam. 2:14 NIV). It could have been ‘warded off’ by the peoples’ repentance. Note how Jeremiah, himself a prophet at the time, so wishes to take the blame upon himself for not pleading more powerfully with the people. Perhaps we will have similar feelings when the time of tribulation breaks forth in the very last days.

Is. 40:5 had called out to a Zion about to be restored that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed”. In other words, the temple ought to have been a re-establishment of Solomon’s, with God’s attendant acceptance of it also. However, this didn’t happen. Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory of Yahweh filling the temple (Ez. 43:5), as if to show that this, in line with Haggai’s words, was what *could* have happened at the restoration. However, it’s fulfilment must now await the future. Daniel’s prophecy that there would be a time of trouble for Israel, followed by a resurrection and judgment, may have had a potential fulfilment in Haman’s persecution. The LXX of Esther 5 includes her prayer, in

which she says that Haman was seeking to hinder the work of the temple. This would explain why initially the Samaritans persuaded the Persians to make the work cease, but then (humanly inexplicably) another edict is given for it to resume. The people were delivered (Dan. 12:1), as they were by Michael the Angel manipulating Esther. But the resurrection, judgment and Kingdom didn't follow, because Israel weren't ready for it. Then those who turned many to righteousness- i.e. the priesthood, in the primary context- would be rewarded (Dan. 12:3). But Malachi and Haggai repeatedly criticised the priesthood at the time of the restoration for being selfish and not teaching Israel (Mal. 2:7). Daniel and Jeremiah were heartbroken that there had to be such a delay to the full fulfilment of the Messianic restoration of the Kingdom.

Ezekiel 20 gives the clearest outline of the sequence we are suggesting. Verses 3-33 describe Israel's sins up to the captivity; then there is the pleading with Israel in captivity (:35 = 17:20), with the intention that there in Babylon Israel would repent (:43). Then they would return to their land, build a temple and offer acceptable sacrifices (:40-42): "For in mine holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel, saith the Lord GOD, there shall all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, serve me: there will I accept them, and there will I require your offerings, and the firstfruits of your oblations, with all your holy things. I will accept you with your sweet savour, when I bring you out from the people, and gather you out of the countries wherein ye have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you before the heathen. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel". The idea of God 'accepting' Israel is found in 43:27; when the temple was built and the sacrifices offered, "I will accept you". If Judah resumed building the temple according to Ezekiel's plan, "I will take pleasure" in it, God offered (Hag. 1:8). They should be more committed to building the temple "that I may appear in my glory" (RSV). The glory of Yahweh as described at the end of Ezekiel could have appeared in Haggai's time- but this wonderful possibility was held back by Israel's petty minded, self-satisficing laziness. The same word is used in Ez. 43:27- *then*, when the temple of Ezekiel was built, Yahweh would "accept / take pleasure in" His people and temple. But because they built and served Him with such a mean spirit, He did not "accept" them at that time (Mal. 1:10,13 s.w.). Note how Hag. 1:8 describes the need to go up onto the mountain and build the temple- as if to recall attention to Ezekiel's opening vision of the temple as built on a mountain. But Judah

would not, and therefore the Kingdom blessings of corn, new wine and oil, as well as fruitfulness on the mountains, were all withheld (Hag. 1:11). These are all aspects of the promised Messianic Kingdom (e.g. Joel 2:19,24; Jer. 31:12). The very same sequence of words occurs in Neh. 5:11; 10:37,39; 13:5- instead of giving those things to Yahweh, the Jews stole them from each other, and jibbed about paying them as tithes to Him. And thereby they precluded the possibility of Yahweh richly blessing all His people with those very same things in a Kingdom setting. As with all those who are rejected from God's purpose, they effectively rejected themselves from His Kingdom by their behaviour, rather than Him rejecting them Himself.

The language of Israel's return from captivity as found in Isaiah and Ezekiel all has evident reference to the second coming and the final establishment of the Kingdom. It isn't just that Israel's return under Ezra and Zerubbabel was a type of that final homecoming. It could have been the Kingdom- had they obeyed the prophecies. It was all about a potential Kingdom of God. But they were too caught up with their own self-interest, with building their own houses rather than God's; and so it was all deferred. Using the prophetic perfect, God had prophesied that at the time of the restoration, He would come and dwell in rebuilt Zion (Zech. 8:3)- just as Ezekiel's prophecy had concluded: "The name of the city from that day shall be, The LORD is there" (Ez. 48:35). Clearly, Ezekiel's prophecies could have been fulfilled at the restoration; God was willing that they should be. But human apathy and self-interest stopped it from happening as it could have done. When the foundation stone of the temple was laid, there should have been excited acclamation: "Grace, grace unto it" (Zech. 4:7). But instead the old men wept when the foundation was laid, knowing that the temple was nothing compared to what it ought to be (Ezra 3:12). The glory of the restored temple was prophesied as being far greater than that of the former (Hag. 2:9); Is. 60:17 alluded to this in prophesying that "For brass [in Solomon's temple] I will bring gold, and for iron [that was in Solomon's fixtures] I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron". But it simply didn't happen, because God's people were satisfied with a small, inglorious temple so that they could get on with building their own "cieled houses" (the same word is used in describing how the temple of Solomon was "covered", or cieled, with cedar). And the old men wept at the fact that the glory of the new house was *less than* that of the earlier one. They would not even shut the doors of the temple

without expecting payment (Mal. 1:10); and this is surely conscious reference to how Ezekiel's temple necessitated the doors being shut at various times (Ez. 44:1,2; 46:1,2,12). They partly fulfilled some parts of the prophecy, but demanded payment for it! Other translations suggest that Mal. 1:10 really means that there was nobody to even shut the doors of the temple; there was nobody willing to fulfil Ezekiel's prophecy / command about the temple doors being shut.

Isaiah 45 is as clear a prophecy as any could wish. God categorically stated that Cyrus would be raised up by Him in order to release the captives in Babylon, and to enable the building of Jerusalem (45:12); all because God had formed the land [AV "earth"] of Israel to be inhabited and not to be left without His people dwelling upon it. And this happened; the captives were released (although most preferred to stay put in Babylon), and the building of Jerusalem was enabled (although the work was not done very enthusiastically by Judah, and they preferred to build their own houses rather than Yahweh's). But the prophecy goes on in Is. 45:13-17: "I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts. Thus saith the LORD, The labour of Egypt, and merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine: they shall come after thee; in chains they shall come over, and they shall fall down unto thee, they shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee; and there is none else, there is no God...They shall be *ashamed*, and also *confounded*, all of them: they shall go to confusion together that are makers of idols. But Israel shall be saved in the LORD with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be *ashamed* nor *confounded* world without end". But the Egyptians and Ethiopians didn't come and fall down before Judah, as the Queen of Sheba had before Solomon. Nor did they accept Yahweh as the only God, and ditch their idols. Instead, the returned Jews worshipped the idols of Egypt, and married their women (Ezra 9:1). And thus Israel *were* ashamed and confounded in the future. The same Hebrew words for "ashamed [and] confounded" occur in Ezra 9:6, where as a result of Ezra realising that Judah had married the local women and broken covenant with Yahweh, he admits: "I am *ashamed* and *blush* [s.w. 'confounded'] to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased...". The words of Is. 45 could have had their fulfilment in the time of Cyrus; the surrounding nations could have come and worshipped

before Judah, and the whole earth quit their idols and look unto Yahweh as a just God and a saviour. But Judah would not. Judah in the new temple would not “defile” Yahweh’s Name any more (Ez. 43:7,8); but they were lazy to keep the uncleanness laws, they *did* defile Yahweh by touching dead bodies and then offering the sacrifices (Hag. 2:13,14 s.w.), just as Israel previously had been defiled by touching the dead bodies of their kings and then offering sacrifices (Ez. 43:7); but now, Judah thought they were above God’s law, and therefore did exactly the same things which had caused the temple to be destroyed in the first place. The promise that Yahweh would dwell in the new temple was conditional on them not touching dead bodies (Ez. 43:9); but Hag. 2:13 makes it apparent that they did this very thing at the time of the restoration.

Amos 9:11-15 is another example. The words are most comfortably interpreted when read as referring to the restoration of Judah and the “remnant” of the ten tribes to the land under Ezra: “In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt. And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the LORD thy God”. “I will *raise up*” uses a Hebrew word very commonly featured in the records of the restoration, when the people were exhorted to “rise up and build” (Ezra 1:5; 3:2; 10:4,15; Neh. 2:18,20). The statement that they would “close up the breaches thereof” is exactly the language of Neh. 6:1, which records that the walls were rebuilt so that there was no breach [s.w.] therein. It was after the Babylonian invasion that Zion was “fallen” and ‘ruined’ (s.w. Jer. 31:18; 45:4; Lam. 2:2,17). “I will build it” is exactly the theme of the records of the return from Babylon (Ezra 1:2,3,5; 3:2,10; 4:1-4; Neh. 2:5,17,18,20; 3:1-3, 13-15; 4:1,3,5,6,10,17,18; 6:1,6; 7:1). Surely Amos 9 is saying that at the rebuilding at the time of the restoration, God’s people could have

ushered in the Kingdom age of agricultural plenty and victory over their Arab neighbours. But they intermarried with Edom, and suffered drought because they didn't fulfil the requirements to rebuild Zion correctly. But the words of Amos were still to come true in some form- they are given an application in Acts 15:17 which may appear to be way out of context, i.e. to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus words which could have had a plain fulfilment at the restoration were given a delayed fulfilment; but they were not fulfilled in a literal sense, but in a spiritual one. And so it is with prophecies like Ezekiel 38, and the temple prophecies of Ezekiel. They will be fulfilled in spiritual essence, but probably not in strict literality, although they *could have been* had God's people been more 'fulfilling' of them.

Ezekiel's prophecies should have been an inspiration to Israel, that they might be obedient and live out these things as a reality before them, and thereby see other prophecies come true in their own experience. They could have entered upon an upward spiral of spirituality. The form of the house, the very description of it by Ezekiel, should have inspired them to feel that they had had enough of sin. Ez. 44:5,6 asked them to "mark well the entering in of the house, with every going forth of the sanctuary. And thou shalt say to the rebellious, even to the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; O ye house of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations". These words are picked up from the LXX by Peter, and applied to all of us in 1 Pet. 4:3: "For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles". The temple vision should have made them ashamed of their sins (Ez. 43:10,11). It should have motivated them to live the Kingdom life in their lives: "describe the Temple to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them match their lives to its pattern". But they didn't. It may have been partly due to lack of familiarity with the text of the prophecy- Ezekiel would have preached it to them, but many of them were too busy with the Babylon life to reflect upon it. Those who returned to the land may well have done so not so much in order to get on with conformity to Ezekiel's vision of the Kingdom, but for other reasons- their family and friends were going back, they felt some vague conscience that they ought to, perhaps their own experience of Babylon life hadn't been positive and they vaguely hoped for something better... and so when they got there, they simply weren't interested in serious conformity to the prophecies about restoration. And in principle, our own lives and apparent commitment before God can be just the same. It

is evident that they didn't reflect upon the real implications of the prophecies which they must all have vaguely known. And these weaknesses must serve as the basis for our own self-examination: are we familiar with the text of Scripture, and more so, are we really meditating upon the personal implications for us? The people were warned that the temple had been destroyed because of their previous "abominations", and that the rebuilt temple was not to feature any such abominations (Ez. 43:8; 44:6,7,13). "let it suffice you of your abominations" they were told- and then told not to allow the uncircumcised into the temple, as they had been doing Ez. 44:6,9). This sounds as if the prophecy of Ezekiel was more command than prediction- to those of his own day. But they returned, and committed the abominations [s.w.] of the Gentiles (Ezra 9:1,11,14) and married their daughters; to the extent that Malachi commented upon this: "Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination [s.w.] is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god" (Mal. 2:11).

Ez. 48:31-34 envisaged the 12 gates of Jerusalem being named after the 12 tribes of Israel. But it seems no accident that twelve separate gates of the city are mentioned in the restoration record- but they weren't renamed after the tribes of Israel. Here are the names of the city gates in Nehemiah: valley (Neh. 3:13); horse (Neh. 3:28); east (Neh. 3:29); Miphkad (Neh. 3:31); water (Neh. 8:16); dung (Neh. 12:31); fountain (Neh. 12:37); Ephraim, old, fish, sheep and prison gates (Neh. 12:39). No wonder some wept when the rebuilt temple was finally dedicated- the pattern of Ezekiel's vision hadn't been followed, even on such basic matters as the names of the twelve gates of Jerusalem.

6 The Potential And The Reality

6-1 The Weakness Of Judah Under Nehemiah

There could even be the implication in the Hebrew of Neh. 1:3 that the majority of those who initially returned to Judah then returned back to Babylon- for Nehemiah speaks of "The remnant that are left of the captives there in the province" [of Judah]". We shouldn't underestimate the seriousness of the famine conditions in Judah as described in Neh. 5. The sheer lack of food led the Jews to sell their children and land to their

was directly a result of their lack of zeal to rebuild and care for God's house. What a far cry from the prophecies of plenty and huge harvests which had been made. So much potential was wasted. Neh. 5:8 records Nehemiah's comment that the wealthy Jews were victimizing the poorer Jews just as Babylon once had, and now Nehemiah needed to redeem them from slavery just as God had redeemed His people from servitude in Babylon. God's deliverance of His people simply hadn't been responded to. Tragically, it would appear from Neh. 5:15 that Zerubbabel, the potential Messiah of Israel, had acted in this oppressive way too.

What Was Prophesied About The Restored Temple And Kingdom

There were to be "holy chambers" in the temple for the Levites (Ezekiel 46:19 and very often in Ezekiel 40-48). The uncircumcised Gentiles were not to be brought into the sanctuary (Ezekiel 44:7). It was God's intention that when Judah returned from Babylon, the uncircumcised would not come into Zion (the temple), and the Kingdom would be established (Isaiah 52:1,11). There was to be no Canaanite in the house of Yahweh (Zechariah 14:21).

Sacrifices were to be without blemish (Ezekiel 43:23)

What Actually Happened

Tobiah the Ammonite was given a chamber in the temple for him to use as an office for undermining God's people (Nehemiah 13:7-9).

They offered blemished animals (Mal. 1:8), because they wanted the nicer meat and more money for themselves-petty materialism stopped the

Kingdom experience being realized.

The house was not to be profaned (Ezekiel 44:7)

Judah profaned the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:17,18), and profaned the temple by their marriage with Gentiles and their “weariness” with the temple ordinances (Mal. 1:12; 2:10,11). They got bored with the things of the Kingdom, and so they had no part in it.

The covenant was not to be broken; the temple had been destroyed before because of breaking covenant with Yahweh (Ezekiel 44:7).

Judah broke covenant [s.w.] with Yahweh at the time of the restoration by marrying Gentiles and worshipping their gods (Ezra 9:1,14).

Ezekiel 42:20: “He measured it by the four sides: it had a wall round about, five hundred reeds long, and five hundred broad, to make a *separation* between the sanctuary and the profane place”. This reflected the difference between God’s people, His “sanctuary” (Psalms 114:2), and the surrounding world.

But Judah did not ‘separate’ themselves from the surrounding tribes but instead married them and worshipped their idols (s.w. Ezra 9:1 “The people of Israel...have not separated themselves from the people of the land, doing according to their *abominations*...for they have taken of their daughters for themselves”). The same word for “abominations” occurs in the same context in Mal. 2:11: “Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he

loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god". Yet it had been emphasised that the temple system Ezekiel described was to be free of all the "abominations" [s.w.] previously committed by Israel (Ezekiel 43:8; 44:6,7,13).

In fact, the account of Judah's separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by 10:11 likewise; then they separate (10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Nehemiah 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God's law (Nehemiah 10:28). There was a powerful logic-either separate from the world around, or be separated from the people of God (Ezra 10:8). It's a separation- one way or the other.

Judah were to keep the charges of God relating to His

Nehemiah, seeking for Israel's obedience to Ezekiel's vision,

house (Ezekiel 40:46; 44:8,14-16).

tried to get them to “keep the charges” (s.w. Nehemiah 7:3; 12:9,45; 13:20). But soon, Judah complained that there was no benefit to them from having kept the charges (Mal. 3:14 s.w.). Partial obedience discouraged them from any further effort, because the fullness of blessing can only come from a way of life conformed to God’s Kingdom vision and life. This is why people get disillusioned with religion and lose even the true faith- because they seek for immediate benefit as a result of keeping a few highly specific aspects of God’s law, rather than willingly devoting their way of life to the realisation of His vision.

The Levites were not to marry divorcees or Gentiles (Ezekiel 44:22)

They did just this (Ezra 9:1; Mal. 2:11-16).

The Levites were to teach Judah and to make others *discern* between good and evil (Ezekiel 44:23). The sons of Zadok were chosen because they had been faithful previously.

They should have done this, but instead “ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi” (Mal. 2:7,8). The sons of Zadok were descendants of Eleazer and Phinehas (1 Chron. 6:3-8), and Mal. 2:5 alludes to this: “My covenant was with him of life and peace: and I gave them to him for the fear wherewith he feared me, and was afraid

before my name” (cp. Ex. 32:28). But Mal. 2:6-8 go on to show that the sons of Zadok, as the descendants of Phinehas, had not lived up to their pedigree; they were making men “stumble at the law”. This shows the connection between the Ezekiel prophecies and Malachi’s commentary on their failed fulfilment in the hands of men like the sons of Zadok.

The Levites were to judge justly (Ezekiel 44:24).

But Zechariah 7:9; 8:16 [s.w.] had to exhort them to stop judging unjustly.

“They shall come near to my table” (Ezekiel 44:16).

They did, but they despised it (Mal. 1:7,12), they found it such a weariness.

The Levites were to touch no dead body (Ezekiel 44:25)

But they did (Hag. 2:13).

Tithes were to be paid to the Levites (Ezekiel 44:30).

Nehemiah’s record and Mal. 3:8 make it clear that this didn’t happen, due to petty selfishness.

The princes would not oppress the people (Ezekiel 45:8); “Moreover the prince shall not take of the people’s inheritance by oppression, to thrust them out of their possession” (Ezekiel 46:18).

But they did (Nehemiah 5:1-5; Zechariah 7:10; Mal. 3:5).

The princes were to give the rest of the land to the people

But they made their poor brethren mortgage it to them so

of Israel (Ezekiel 45:8)

that effectively they took it for themselves (Nehemiah 5:3).

Ezek 45:9: “Let it suffice you, O princes of Israel: remove violence and spoil, and execute judgment and justice, take away your exactions from my people”.

Nehemiah 5 records that Judah did the very opposite, and Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi all record social injustice as being the order of the day at the time of the restoration.

Ezek 45:25: “In the seventh month, in the fifteenth day of the month, shall he [the prince] do the like in the feast of the seven days, according to the sin offering, according to the burnt offering, and according to the meat offering, and according to the oil”.

Zechariah 7:5 criticised the Jews for keeping this feast only externally, but not “unto me”. Hag. 2:1 records how on the 21st day of the 7th month- i.e. once the seven day feast that began on the 15th had finished- Haggai was sent to rebuke “the prince”, Zerubbabel, for being so slack in fulfilling Ezekiel’s vision. Even by the time of Nehemiah 8:14-17, it was so that the feast of the 7th month had not been kept by Judah since the time of Joshua. They subconsciously switched off to Ezekiel’s words; just as we can all do. They reasoned that “the time” of which he spoke hadn’t come- even though the temple had miraculously been enabled to be rebuilt, for no human benefit at all to Cyrus (Isaiah 45:13 “not for price nor reward”). They felt that all the prophecies were “marvellous” in the sense of something incapable of concrete fulfilment in their experience

(Zechariah 8:6). This is why Hag. 1:2 rebuked them for saying “the time is not come...that the Lord’s house should be built”. They didn’t want the prophecy to be fulfilled, because it would mean ‘going up’ from their ceiled houses- both in Babylon and in the farmsteads they had built in Judah- to build the temple.

Ezek 46:3: “Likewise the people of the land shall worship at the door of this gate before the LORD in the Sabbaths and in the new moons”.

“The people of the land” hung around the gates of the city on the Sabbath in order to do some trading of goods (Nehemiah 13:19,20).

Ezekiel 42:13: “Then said he unto me, The north chambers and the south chambers, which are before the separate place, they be holy chambers, where the priests that approach unto the LORD shall eat the most holy things”

The same words are found in Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65- it wasn’t possible for the priests to eat of the holy things [signifying God’s acceptance of His people], because there was no record of their genealogy. Their names were not written in the “register” in fulfilment of Ezekiel 13:9: “neither shall they be written in the writing [s.w. ‘register’, Ezra 2:62] of the house of Israel”. Only if a priest stood up with urim and thummim could they eat of the holy things. These were two engraven stones carried in a pouch in the breastplate which

flashed out Divine decisions (see H.A. Whittaker, *Samuel, Saul And David* for an excellent study of this). Zechariah 3:9 prophesies that Joshua the High Priest would have the engraven stone with seven eyes- the urim and thummim. It would thereby have been possible for a priesthood who had lost their genealogy record during the sacking of the first temple to eat the holy things, and thus fulfil Ezekiel 42:13. In a restoration context, Isaiah 66:21 had prophesied that Yahweh would regather Judah, "And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the LORD". This implies, surely, that He would accept some as Levites who could not otherwise prove they were. Zechariah 6:11,13 speaks of Joshua being crowned with the High Priestly mitre and 'bearing the glory', i.e. carrying the urim and thummim in the breastplate. But all this was *conditional* on Joshua's obedience: "This shall come to pass, if ye will diligently obey" (6:15). Because Joshua failed, he didn't have urim and thummim, therefore no decision could be given about who was an acceptable priest, and therefore the 'Kingdom'

prophecy of Ezekiel 42:13 was left unfulfilled. So much depended upon that man. And likewise, the eternal destiny of many others depends on us. Isaiah's prophecies of the restoration feature "the servant"- who was a symbol of both the people and a Messianic individual. His success was bound up with theirs. Thus Isa 65:9: "And I will bring forth a seed [singular] out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor [singular] of my mountains: and mine elect [plural] shall inherit it, and my servants [plural] shall dwell there". His obedience would enable the peoples' establishment as the Kingdom.

There were to be gate openers
(Ezekiel 46:12)

There were gate openers, but they demanded to be paid for their services, or [so modern versions] they were nowhere to be found (Mal. 1:10). The difference in the translations reflects the Hebraism: if you won't serve for nothing, then you haven't served.

Baruch's Window Into The Mindset Of The Exiles

Although the Apocryphal book of Baruch isn't inspired, it gives a significant window into the mindset of the exiles in Babylon. Baruch 1:10 mentions how the attitude was that the majority wanted to send funds to support the 'good work' going on in Judah- but didn't want to return there themselves. Like the book of Esther, this indicates that the exiles had soon quit languishing by the rivers of Babylon, and had

quickly acquired wealth and some degree of prosperity. Inspired prophecies had warned them of the fall of Babylon, and their need to flee out of it and return to Judah. And yet Baruch 1:12 records the exiles praying “that we may live long under the protective shadow of [the] king of Babylon”. This is in sad contrast to Daniel’s prophecies that the sheltering tree of Babylon was to be cut down! There ought to have been an urgency about the need to flee from Babylon. Zech. 2:10 speaks of the need to “flee” and “escape”- the language of crisis. And the call “Ho!” means quite literally “Hey!!”. The urgency to flee was spiritual rather than physical- for there’s no evidence that when Babylon fell to the Persians, the Jews were punished. Indeed they appear [from Esther] to have prospered even more. Hence the urgent appeal was to flee from the spiritual crisis which they faced in Babylon. And yet they didn’t perceive the danger, just as so many today don’t. For the call to leave Babylon is applied in New Testament passages like 2 Cor. 6 to our call to leave the world in which we live. The urgency of ‘fleeing’ from Babylon was understood by Nehemiah, when he referred to those who had returned to the land as those who has “escaped” from Babylon (Neh. 1:2)- even though they had returned with every blessing from the authorities. He perceived as few did the vital danger of remaining in the soft life of Babylon. Ezra likewise had referred to the Jews in Babylon as those “in bondage... bondmen” (Ezra 9:9)- when historical records, as well as the book of Esther and the fact Nehemiah the Jew was the king’s cupbearer, show that the Jews were very far from being servants in Babylonian society. Yet Ezra perceived the spiritual poverty and servanthood of remaining in that affluent society.

The exiles asked for ‘deliverance’- but they redefined ‘deliverance’ as meaning being allowed to live prosperously in the land of their captivity (Baruch 1:12 cp. 2:14), rather than being delivered from Babylon and returning to Judah. In a way, the book of Esther shows how God heard this prayer. But the book of Esther therefore has a sad ending, with the Jews prosperous, loved and respected, and even further away from returning to the land. Indeed, Baruch 2:21 records them misquoting Jer. 27:12 about the need to obey the King of Babylon during their captivity, and understanding this as meaning they were to remain in Babylon! Baruch 6:2 is perhaps the most serious example of misquoting and wilfully misunderstanding God’s word. Here, Baruch [as Jeremiah’s scribe] changes the prophecy of Jer. 29:10, that Israel were to be 70 years in Babylon and then return: “When you reach Babylon you will be

there many years, a period seven generations long, after which I will bring you back". The 70 years are turned into seven generations. This was precisely the mindset spoken against in Haggai 1:2, whereby the Jews reasoned that the time had not yet come to rebuild the temple. "The time" referred to the time spoken of by Jeremiah- but Baruch had re-interpreted the 70 years as meaning seven generations. And yet all this was done with a surface-level reverence for God's word- the exiles considered themselves blessed because they had God's law (Baruch 4:4). Indeed, much of Baruch is a condemnation of idols and a demand to worship Yahweh.

Summing up, the book of Baruch reveals the following mindset:

- Wealth and prosperity amongst the exiles
- A feeling that they could buy favour with God by giving materially to those who were obedient and returning to Judah
- A re-reading / re-interpretation of Bible prophecies in order to justify their lack of obedience
- A love of 'Babylon', a desire to remain there, and a reasoning around the clear prophecies about Babylon's doom and the need for God's people to leave her
- A desire to pray to God, worship Him, make a big noise about rejecting idols, retain their identity as God's people, and yet a refusal to live up to the responsibilities this entailed.

And we have to ask how relevant all this is for us...?

Jonah

We have commented elsewhere about the way in which the righteous remnant were actually persecuted by the other Jews in Babylon, according to the testimony of the later parts of Isaiah. One significant problem which they had right from the start was that they insisted that the captivity was unfair, it was not their fault, they were righteous and were being unfairly punished for the sins of their fathers. Ezekiel 18 addresses this at length with them. God's intention was that His exiled people would "declare all their abominations among the nations whither they come", i.e. the 127 provinces of Babylon (Ez. 12:16). Note how confession of personal failure and testimony to God's forgiveness is actually a powerful witness to unbelievers. But instead, Ezekiel had to reason against the Jews' insistence that they had *not* sinned, and were

being unfairly punished for their fathers' sins by an unjust God (Ez. 18). And so likewise it happens with us all too often that the potential witness which we could make simply isn't made. Jeremiah complained that the false prophets refused to expose Judah's iniquity, and made up all sorts of other reasons for her exile (Lam. 2:17). The purpose of Jonah, a book which according to Jewish tradition and the Talmud was written up in the exile, was perhaps to appeal to the Jews not to be so self-righteous and exclusivist. Jonah seems to think that "the presence of the Lord" is only in the land of Israel- and by going to Gentile territory he was somehow freed from his obligations. Jonah's falling into a "deep sleep" (Jonah 1:5) invites the Hebrew mind to compare other incidents of prophets having contact with God in association with "deep sleep" (Ps. 76:7; Dan. 10:9; 1 Kings 19:5)- the point being that no, God hasn't finished with Jonah. And likewise Judah had left the land, but God was still eager to work with them. And Jonah's having to 'own up' to being Jewish connects with how Mordecai uses the same word "Jew" to 'own up' to the Persians (Esther 3:4). Jer. 51:34 describes Babylon as a sea monster gulping down Israel into his stomach- using the same Hebrew words as in Jonah. Jonah's experience is thus presented as that of Judah in captivity. And yet Jonah's psalm from the fish's belly has evident connections with Messianic prophecies of the crucifixion of Jesus (e.g. Ps. 69:16). Through the whole experience, of sin, failure, rebellion, fleeing from the land, God so worked that Jonah came to know the spirit of Christ crucified. And so God sought to teach Israel; and so He [quite amazingly] works through our own sin and failure to bring us to know His most essential spirit. Ezekiel was up against the idea amongst the captives that Yahweh had forsaken the land (Ez. 8:12). Hence his visions of God's cherubim-angels, present both in the land as well as amongst the captives by Chebar in Babylon (Ez. 10:20). It was the same message as the lesson of Jonah- who likewise thought that Yahweh somehow only operated within the land of Israel.

Haggai's Criticisms

Haggai's criticism of the returnees is more understandable if we understand that most of them were the poor, who hadn't 'made it' in Babylon. It would be fair to infer that only the poor Jews returned from Babylon. The record in Ezra 2:64-70 speaks of 42,360 people returning, along with 7,337 servants and 200 singers, making a total of 49,837. And yet only 8,100 animals went with them to transport them. This

means that many would have walked. They carried 5,400 vessels for use in the temple- so the picture could be that their more wealthy brethren laded them with goods, but only the poor returned. Further, the list of towns of origin in Ezra 2 suggests it was mainly those who had originally lived in peripheral villages who returned, rather than the inhabitants of Jerusalem and larger cities.

Haggai's prophecy can be dated quite precisely- it was given August-September 520 BC. This was harvest time. And at this very labour intensive season, where all hands had to be on deck out in the fields, the prophet called for a dedication of labour to building up God's house. Yet Judah were too concerned with their own harvests than the harvest of God's glory. They were asked to do something counter-instinctive- to take time out from harvest, and spend that time on building up God's house. And they failed the challenge. But it wasn't that they were simply lazy. Hag. 1:8, a prophecy given 18 years after the decree of Cyrus, orders the people to go up into the hills of Judah and get wood with which to build the temple. And yet according to Ezra 3:7, the decree of Cyrus 18 years earlier had resulted in cedar wood being brought from Tyre and Sidon, enough for the temple to be built. Where had the wood gone? Is the implication not that the leadership had used it for their own "cieled houses" (Hag. 1:4)? It all seems so petty minded. But this is what we are tempted to do, time and again- build up our own house and leave God's house desolate and in a very poor second place. And even worse- Hag. 1:9 records that the people expected "much" harvest, and were disappointed at the poor yields in Palestine. This would confirm the suggestion that many of those Jews who did return from Babylon were amongst the poor in Jewish exile society, and returned in home for personal betterment- rather than because they wished to obey the call of the prophets and establish God's glory in the land. That's a sober warning for all of us who may go through an external appearance of zeal for our God, whilst having very selfish and human motives underneath. Why, e.g., does a young woman so zealously attend church? Is it to worship God and build up His family... or because she perceives it as a potential meeting place with 'Mr. Right'? And so the examples could be multiplied. The poor harvests were because 'the heavens withheld their dew' (Hag. 1:10)- exactly the language of 1 Kings 8:35, which said that in such case, the people were to repent and pray towards the temple in Zion! But they didn't want to build that temple, they wanted rather to build up their own glory and homesteads. All things could've worked so

wonderfully together for good; but they didn't want to participate in the program God had arranged, and so instead a downward spiral kicked in.

It should be noted that according to Hag. 1:1, the prophecy of Haggai (at least chapter 1) was specifically directed to two men- Zerubbabel, and Joshua the High Priest. Haggai's words are full of implication that these men could have achieved so much, and yet chose not to rise up to their potentials. Hag. 1:9 takes on particular significance when read in this light: "My house lies desolate whilst you run about, each man [i.e. Zerubbabel and Joshua] to his own house. It was those two who preferred to dwell in their "cieled houses" whilst God's house lay desolate (Hag. 1:4). The reference to "cieled houses" would be only relevant to the upper classes- it would hardly be applicable to all the returned exiles. If this line of interpretation is correct, then we can understand these two men as focusing more on their own homes than on God's house, and fulfilling the great potential possible if it had been built according to Ezekiel's specifications.

Even amongst those who returned to the land, only a minority wished to take their spiritual possibilities seriously. The returned exiles are called "this people" (Hag. 1:2; 2:14) or "the people of the land" (Hag. 2:4), but only "the remnant of the people" (Hag. 1:12- AV "the rest of the people") actually responded to the call of the prophets like Haggai who encouraged them in the work. Hag. 2:16,17 gives very precise commentary on the state of the harvests in Judah after the return- grain stores were 50% below the norm, and the amount of wine produced was 60% less than *expected*. Remember that Haggai was addressing the returned exiles. Surely these figures were well known to the people- for they had presumably worked them out, and Haggai is quoting their figures back to them. Notice how the people had worked out the yield of wine which they *expected*. The implication would seem to be that they returned to Judah expecting material prosperity, good harvests and personal wealth; hence their bitter disappointment when they didn't get it. This, then, would appear to have been their motivation for the return- rather than obedience to the words of the prophets or a desire to see God's Kingdom established in His land.

Idolatry Amongst The Returned Exiles

The valley of dry bones vision in Ez. 37 depicted Israel in captivity as bones waiting to come together and return to the land as a great army. Jer. 8:1 and other passages earlier in Ezekiel (Ez. 6:5; 24:4) had described both Judah and Israel as dry bones. The feeling of those bones was that "our bones are dried and our hope is lost" (Ez. 37:11). Judah in captivity felt that they had no "hope", that God had cast them off, and that they were unable to have a full relationship with Him outside the land. However, it seems that this was a rather convenient piece of theology for them- they were doing well in Babylon, and despite the opportunity to return to the land, they largely chose to remain in Babylon.

Zechariah's vision of the flying scroll indicates the extent of Judah's weakness. The size and proportion of it was unreal for a scroll- "twenty cubits long and ten cubits wide" (Zech. 5:2) is about 10 metres by 5 metres. This disproportion was obviously to draw attention to something- and we find that the size of the temple porch / entrance in Solomon's temple was exactly of this size (1 Kings 6:3). And yet the scroll is described as entering into "the house of the thief" (Zech. 5:4). Nehemiah records how the poor returnees were abused and effectively thieved from by the wealthy. And the Lord Jesus lamented how God's house had become "a den of thieves". But there's another reference to this 20 x 10 cubits size. The cherubim over the ark were ten cubits high and their wings were 5 cubits long, and one wing pointed back, whilst the other pointed forward, to touch the wing of the other cherub. Thus each cherub occupied a space 10 cubits high and 10 cubits across; and the two cherubim over the ark thus occupied a space 20 cubits long and 10 cubits wide- exactly the size of the flying scroll. The fact the scroll 'flies' invites us to make another connection with the cherubim, flying / hovering as it were over the ark. Yet this shekinah glory is changed in the vision into a curse. This is how *very* displeased God was with what was being done by those who returned- His presence and glory were no longer there, only a curse upon them. Effectively, the returnees had turned God's temple into a parody of the Babylonian temples. The winged pseudo-cherubim carry an "ephah" (Zech. 5:6). The Sumerian word for one of the Babylonian ziggurats, a shrine to a goddess, was *e'pa*, the same Hebrew word as translated "epha" (1). The foreign woman in the vision wishes to return to Babylon and build a house /

temple there. The woman is simply called "wickedness". Is there not here a hint that the essence of Judah's failure was in their marriage to foreign women, perhaps even their own wives were from Babylon and wanted to return there. Marriage to Gentiles is stressed in Ezra 10 and Neh. 13:23-27 as the epitome of Judah's sin. Even the four sons of Joshua the High Priest had married Gentiles (Ezra 10:18). The Hebrew word translated "wickedness" is *harisha*- an anagram of 'Asherah'. She is presented as a goddess- in that the foreign women are always associated with the idols they served. We know that the first temple was destroyed because of the Asherah entering the temple (2 Kings 23:4-7; 1 Kings 15:13). And it seems Judah never learnt that lesson. The two female winged creatures who remove the ephah to Babylon (Zech. 5:9) are surely parodies of the Angel cherubim. The glory of God was simply not there. Note how the Angel 'comes forth' (Zech. 5:5), and then the winged women are described as 'going forth' with the same Hebrew word (Zech. 5:9).

It has been said that Judah rejected idolatry on their return from Babylon. I submit that this and other Biblical evidence is different. They mixed pagan thinking with their form of Judaism, and although physical idols were rejected, the results of this idolatry by the early returnees influenced Judaism permanently. Thus Zech. 6:1 pictures Yahweh's cherubim, Angelic chariots coming out from between two bronze mountains. In the ancient Near East there was the common idea that the sun god appeared each morning in his chariot from between two mountains (2). Zechariah's point [as is the point of Psalm 19, which uses the same images] is that it is the God of Israel who is the God of the sun, and not Shamash or some such similar deity of men's imagination. But the exiles clearly needed this reminder; we remember how only a generation or so before, Ezekiel found them worshipping the sun god in Yahweh's temple. And earlier, Josiah had removed the "chariots of the sun" from the temple mount (2 Kings 23:11). Yet it seems that the Jews' desire to mix Yahweh's temple with the sun god was still just as strong even after the exiles returned. Note how Zech. 6:10 still calls the returned community "the exiles"- as if to suggest that they still had the mentality with which they went into captivity. The temptation to mix flesh and spirit is simply very powerful, and recurs daily in our lives in various forms. In those temptations we face what the exiles faced- a desire to appear faithful to God externally whilst doing exactly what they wanted, influenced by the world around them. In Zech. 7:1-6 we have

the record of the delegation from Bethel, who come to enquire whether they should keep fasting for the temple to be rebuilt, as they had done for the last 70 years. God's answer is that they hadn't really fasted for Him. They'd fasted, publicly appearing to love the temple and the idea of a restored Kingdom... but in reality they had not done it *for God*, but somehow for themselves.

The exiles were reminded that the Babylon where they lived had wasted God's people, and thus she was to be wasted (Ps. 137:3,8 AVmg.). But human beings are so fickle. Because life was easy there, the captives came to prefer Babylon to the distant Zion. They wept, initially, when they remembered Zion- and yet according to Ez. 8, back there in Zion there were awful abominations and idolatry being committed in the temple of Zion. Their weeping was mere nostalgia; their refusal to sing the temple songs was mere stubbornness, there was no genuine commitment to Yahweh's way. And it was because of this that God confirmed them in their desire to stay in Babylon. He had elsewhere predicted that He would stop them returning "to the land whereunto their soul longeth to return" (Jer. 22:27 RV). And He did this by confirming them in their desire to remain in Babylon.

Idolatry In Babylon

So much of later Isaiah is taken up with mockery and criticism of the Babylonian gods and the Marduk cult. The book of Esther, with Mordecai as the joint hero, named as he was after Marduk, demonstrates how caught up were the Jews with the Babylonian gods. Ezekiel repeatedly reveals the idolatry of the captives. Isaiah was therefore an appeal for the Jews to quit the Marduk cult and believe in the radical prophecies about the overthrow of Babylon. The situation is analogous to how the New Testament is full of references to the Roman imperial cult of empire worship. So much of the Bible is like Isaiah and the New Testament- a radical, counter-cultural call to see our present world for what it is, and to perceive that the ways of God simply can't be mixed in, watered down or compromised with the way of this world.

Alexander Heidel analyzed the recovered Babylonian poem to Marduk *Enuma Elish*, discovering phrase after phrase in it which recurs in Isaiah- with reference to Yahweh exclusively (3). The similarities are exact, and impressive. Without doubt, Isaiah was developing a major

theme in his later writings- that the true Israel of God must not have any part in the Marduk cult, and must understand all the claims made for Marduk as being untrue, and solely appropriate to Yahweh God of Israel. Consider some of the claims made for Marduk (exact references given in Heidel):

- “Marduk is King alone” (cp. “*Your* [Israel’s] God reigns as King!”, Is. 52:7)
- “None among the gods can equal him”
- Marduk killed Tiamat in the waters and cut him in pieces [applied to Yahweh in Is. 51:9,10]
- Creator of the stars (cp. Is. 40:26; Is. 45:12).
- Marduk is without comparison (cp. Is. 40:18,25 etc.)
- Marduk was, and no other (cp. Is. 45:5,6 etc.)

There are also mocking allusions to Marduk, showing Yahweh’s supremacy over him. Marduk was formed- but Yahweh had no god before Him and will have none after Him (Is. 43:10). Marduk had a counsellor, Ea, called in the inscriptions “the all-wise one”. But Yahweh has all wisdom and has no such counsellor (Is. 40:13,14; Is. 41:28) (4). All this reference to the Marduk cult was in my opinion not merely a pointless mockery and poking of fun at the Persian culture. It was a very real appeal to the Jewish exiles to quit it, to come out and be separate; remember again and again that Mordecai [and perhaps Esther too] had adopted names reflective of the Marduk cult.

Grace And Impenitence

The exiles were warned time and again to flee from Babylon back to the land, so that they wouldn't share in the destruction of the city. There's no record they did so; and yet by grace, God seems to have preserved them from perishing or even suffering as a result of the Persian takeover of Babylon. Indeed, they prospered under the Persians. The voice of the faithful remnant pleaded with the other exiles after the fall of Babylon: "Babylon is fallen...forsake her [as they had been told to do *before* Babylon fell, Jer. 51:6], and let us go and return to our own country... and let us declare in Zion the work of the Lord" (Jer. 51:8,10). God's patient grace to the Jews in Babylon was amazing.

Isaiah urged the Jews to return to the land by saying that God had forgiven them, and on this basis He appealed for them to both 'repent' and 'return' to the land. The two terms are related. Thus He showed His grace; forgiveness preceded, not followed, repentance. Is. 44:22 is clear about this: "I have swept away your transgressions like clouds [therefore] return to me, for I have [already] redeemed you". God was angry with their sins, but kept no record of them- hence He could comfort Judah that there was actually no documentary evidence for their divorce (Is. 50:1) and therefore she could return to Him. As Paul put it, the goodness of God leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4). And we are asked to show that same "goodness" of God to others, being "kind [s.w. 'goodness'] one to another... forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). We too are to show this grace of forgiveness-before-repentance; but perhaps in no other area has formalized, institutionalized Christianity failed worse. *If XYZ shows us she's repented of her divorce, then we'll forgive her and accept her in fellowship [as if, in any case, we are the ones who need to forgive her].* These are graceless and yet terribly common attitudes. The Greek word translated "goodness" is rendered "gracious" in 1 Pet. 2:3- newly converted babes in Christ taste of this gracious goodness, and it leads to repentance.

Time and again in the context of the restoration it is emphasized that God would return to His people if they returned to Him (Zech. 1:3; Mal. 3:7). And they didn't return to Him- most chose not to return to the land, and those who did for the most part did not return to their God in their hearts. The whole basis of Israel's covenant relationship with God was that if they were exiled from the land for their sins, they must repent and *then* God would return to them (Dt. 30:1-10). Yet God graciously states to the exiles: "I am returned unto you" (Zech. 1:16; 8:3). Here was grace indeed. Passages like Ez. 36:24-31 therefore speak as if God's grace to the exiles was effectively a new covenant- which has in essence been extended to us. Having stated the conditionality of His 'returning' to His people, and recognizing they hadn't fulfilled their part of the conditions- God all the same returns to them, such was and is His almost desperate desire for relationship with His beloved people. This is a lesson for us in our relationships with others- to continue our acceptance and 'return' to them, even if they don't fulfill their part of the deal. For this, day by day, is how our God deals not only with us but with His weak and wayward people as a whole.

It's apparent that Judah in captivity weren't repentant; and yet God granted them His forgiveness so that they might repent. Indeed, the Jews were bitter with God. They claimed that they were suffering unfairly as a result of their fathers' sins (Ez. 18:2), and that Yahweh was unfair (Ez. 18:25)- when He was showing them a grace so wonderful that all that is within us fights against perceiving it! The lack of perception of God's grace was terrible- and yet many of us have lived for decades doing just the same! Some of the comments of the Jewish religious leaders during the captivity are preserved for us in the Babylonian Talmud. It's interesting to see the development of their commentaries upon the prophets (5). Hosea clearly taught that he represented God, and Israel were likened to a prostitute, unfaithful to Him. Time and again, Hosea appeals for Israel to "return", the same Hebrew word being used about 'returning' to the land of Judah. But Israel would not. And they obviously found Hosea hard to grapple with. And so the Talmud condemns Hosea for marrying a promiscuous woman (6). By so doing they were refusing to let the prophetic word bite as it was intended to; their interpretations, like many false exposition today, was intended to justify them. And thereby they effectively condemned the God who loved them so freely. Even those who did return were impenitent. The sins of those who returned are styled "the transgression of those that had been carried away" (Ezra 9:4). Yet those who returned to the land weren't mainly the generation who had been carried away. The intended confusion is surely to suggest that those who returned committed the same sins as had led Judah into captivity a generation earlier. And Ezra comments on this fact in his subsequent prayer (Ezra 9:7).

Reasoning back from the addresses to the captives in later Isaiah, it appears they thought that Yahweh was a God who just operated in the land of Israel. The captives felt they couldn't sing the songs of Yahweh in a Gentile land (Ps. 137). They thought that now they were outside His land and far from His temple, they were forgotten by Him (Is. 49:14,15), their cause ignored by Him (Is. 40:27) and they were "cast off" from relationship with Him (Is. 41:9). Hence Isaiah emphasizes that Yahweh is the creator and the God of the whole planet, and His presence is literally planet-wide. Likewise there is much stress in those addresses on the fact that Yahweh's word of prophecy will come true. Remember that there had been many false prophets of Yahweh just prior to the captivity who predicted victory against Babylon and prosperity (Lam. 2:9,14; Jer. 44:15-19). And the 70 years prophecy of Jeremiah appeared to not be

coming true, or at best was delayed or re-scheduled in fulfilment [even Daniel felt this, according to his desperate plea for fulfilment in Daniel 9]. And so there was a crisis of confidence in the concept of prophecy, and Yahweh's word and prophets generally. Isaiah addressed this by stressing the nature and power of that word, and urging faith in its fulfilment and relevance.

Notes

- (1) C.L. & E.M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004) p. 296.
- (2) See C.L. & E.M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004) p. 319 for documentation.
- (3) Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
- (4) Other such examples are given at length in Norman Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983) pp. 73,74.
- (5) See H. Freedman, *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed* (London: Soncino Press, 1938).
- (6) See *Peshita 87b* in the Babylonian Talmud; and H.L. Ginsberg, 'Hosea, Book of' in G. Roth and C. Wigoder, eds, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Macmillan, 1971) Vol. 18 col. 1011.

6-1-1 Esther In Weakness

The Significance Of The History Of Esther

Context: The Paucity Of Judah's Response

Separation from Babylon was made the harder by the Babylonian and especially later Persian policies of making subjugated people like the Jews become useful contributors to the empire. They didn't stay long weeping by the rivers of Babylon. Likewise it was Persian policy to allow each nation their own temple, and to even encourage them in this- hence the decree to rebuild Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem. Darius did similar things to areas of Egypt which he conquered. But all this had a price tag attached- people like the Jews were to come to see themselves as essentially Babylonian or Persian, and they were to give up all idea that their god or the culture was the absolute truth. And tragically, the Jews wilfully became part of this policy. There were specific commands in Isaiah for the Jews in captivity to leave Babylon and return to the

land. God confirmed those who wished to obey in their choice- for Cyrus made a decree commanding them to return! But so many still remained. Significantly, Artaxerxes gave Ezra authority to rule the entire “province Beyond the River” (Ezra 7:25). The boundary of the land promised to Abraham reached to “the river”- and Ezra was being given power over all that area. And yet there is no evidence that Ezra actually did do what Artaxerxes enabled him to do- i.e. to establish rulership under his command over that area. But potentially, the full restoration of the Kingdom promised to Abraham was made possible. Despite the King’s decree that the Levites should accompany Ezra from Babylon, not one Levite came with Ezra (Ezra 8:15- the references to ‘Levites’ later in the record must refer therefore to Levites that had remained in the land after the deportation of the majority of Judah). Last minute recruiting efforts by Ezra in Casiphia produced only 38 Levites (Ezra 8:31)! They even delayed their departure from Babylon for 12 days in order to desperately try to persuade some Levites to come with them. This was how poor Judah’s response was. Indeed, it appears that only 1,700 men returned to Judah with Ezra⁽¹⁾. Even generous readings of the text would give only between four and five thousand⁽²⁾. And even when some Levites did return under Nehemiah, they weren’t given their tithes and went off to live on farmsteads as subsistence farmers, resulting in the restored temple scarcely operating (Neh. 13:10,11). Despite the repentance for marriage out of the faith in Ezra’s time, Nehemiah closes with the same problem having recurred. Nehemiah had to close the gates of Zion on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:19) to stop Sabbath trading going on- a sad contrast with the command in Is. 60:11 that her gates should be open *continually* in order that the Gentiles may enter in with their tribute to Yahweh. But now, the Jews were buying from the Gentiles in those very gates, which now had to be closed.

Not only were the Jews disobeying the specific commands of God to return to the land, but they were judging themselves as separated from God by voluntarily remaining in Babylon. They would’ve known the material of Dt. 28, which stated that Israel would only be separated from their land as a result of their being under judgment by God. By *choosing* to remain in captivity away from their land, they were in effect judging themselves as unworthy of being God’s covenant people dwelling in His land. And this is what condemnation is all about- people living out and choosing their condemnation by their behaviour in this life.

It could be argued in fact that Mordecai was the Mordecai referred to in Ezra 2:2 and Neh. 7:7- one of the first of the exiles who returned with Zerubbabel. Are we to conclude from this that Mordecai lost his youthful zeal, and perhaps returned to Babylon and assumed a pagan name? According to non-Biblical tradition, Zerubbabel also returned to Babylon. Esther 2:5 mentions Mordecai as being descended from Shimei, the man who cursed David in 2 Sam. 16:5; and Kish- the father of apostate king Saul (1 Sam. 9:1,2). Perhaps these references are to suggest that Mordecai was from a poor spiritual background. Another window into the weak mindset of Mordecai is given by his lament: "An innocent people is condemned to death!" (Esther 4:1 LXX). Passages like Ezekiel 18 reason with the exiles that their insistence upon their innocence was so wrong, and that they were quite wrong to feel unfairly treated by God, being punished for their fathers' sins. Passage after passage in Ezekiel reveal how the prophets sought to convict the exiles of their sin, and the weakness and guilt of Judah in captivity. But it seems Mordecai for one didn't accept that. Note that when we read of Ezra and Nehemiah confessing that "we" have sinned (Ezra 9:7; Neh. 1:5-11) they are accepting the truth of Ez. 18- that they, the Jews in Babylon, had sinned along with their fathers and were not somehow separate from them in their guilt.

It would seem that the events of Esther were towards the end of the 70 year captivity period; for the Jews are described in Esther 3:8 as being "scattered" throughout Babylon. It's also apparent that the Jews were no longer sitting weeping by the rivers of Babylon, but had become influential and wealthy throughout the empire- hence Haman's desire to kill and plunder them. The vast sum he offered to the King for permission to do this was presumably on the basis that a percentage of the plunder would be given to the King; for Herodotus estimated Haman's offer to approximate to two thirds of the annual income of the Persian empire. The only way he could realistically have offered this would've been on the basis that the Jews were wealthy and he would totally plunder them. Hence when the whole plan was reversed, the Jews were allowed to plunder their enemies (Esther 8:11). They certainly didn't take any wealth with them into captivity; they must have experienced meteoric prosperity and success in all their business dealings. Hence their desire to materially support the exiles who wished to return, but most of them were too caught up in the good life to heed

the call to come out from Babylon. And we, faced with that same call in these last days, must enquire whether we're not the same.

The Jews In Babylon

The events of Esther, which appear to have happened some time between Ezra chapters 6 and 7, reflect how the Jews had so quickly assimilated into Babylon. 'Esther' in Persian means 'star' and appears a reference to Ishtar. The name 'Esther' is also possibly derived from the Persian *stara*, or 'star', the Babylonian goddess of love. Even her Hebrew name Hadassah means 'myrtle', a tree which is native to Babylon, not Israel [although the Jews apparently brought myrtle trees back to Palestine with them]. Likewise 'Mordecai' is a form of the Persian god Marduk. The complete absence of God's Name in the book perhaps indicates how they had forgotten the Name of their God in Babylon. It's also odd that there is no mention of prayer in the story- when prayer was the obvious recourse of God's people. The omission is so obvious- as if to point out that the Jews were not the prayerful community which they should've been. When we read of Mordecai rending his clothes and putting on sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:1-3), we expect to read of him praying – for prayer accompanies those two things in 2 Kings 19:1-4 and Joel 1:14. Even Esther appears to accept her possible destruction in a fatalistic way rather than in faith- "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). There's a contrast with Daniel, who gathered his friends and gave himself to prayer before going in to the King; she gathered her friends and asked them to fast, but there's no specific mention of prayer. What she did was brave, but it seems to be more human bravery than an act of spiritual faith. The omission of any mention of prayer seems intentional- to highlight that the Jewish community were simply not prayerful as they should've been. The book of Esther was surely to encourage the Jews that despite their weakness, God was prepared to work with them. Esther appears to have slept with ['went in unto'] the King before he married her; ate unclean food (Esther 2:9; cp. Dan. 1:5, 8), and finally married a Gentile. And she didn't tell her husband that she was Jewish for the first 5 years of their marriage (Esther 2:16; 3:7). It's almost certain that she would've acted like a Persian woman religiously in order for this to be the case; she certainly wasn't an observant keeper of the Mosaic law. She's almost set up in contrast with Daniel, who refused to defile himself in these ways and maintained his conscience in the same environment at whatever cost. But

the point of Esther is to show that God was eager to work with such as Esther, He hadn't quit on His people. And of course if Esther and Mordecai had done the right thing and returned to Judah as commanded, the whole situation would never have arisen, and there would've been no Jews left in Babylon to persecute. It seems that the history in the book of Esther is an example of how God sent 'fishers and hunters' to encourage the Jews to return as He commanded them (Jer. 16:16)- but even then, they didn't.

Esther 3:13 implies that Haman's plan to confiscate all Jewish property was because they were wealthy; his offer to pay Ahasuerus 10,000 talents of silver would only have been credible if that sum was obtained by him from the seizure of Jewish property. Herodotus claims that the total annual income of the Persian empire was about 15,000 talents of silver⁽³⁾. Haman personally surely wouldn't have had this amount of wealth- rather was he assuming how much could be gained from seizing Jewish property. The simple conclusion is that the Jewish community had soon left their weeping by the rivers of Babylon, and gone on to become a very wealthy group. The way the Persians rejoiced at the effective annulment of the decree to kill the Jews (Esther 8:17) would indicate that quite quickly, the Jews became popular with the world in which they lived. And for me, the book of Esther has a sad ending- the Jews are even more popular, even richer. Our loving Father gives us as His children what we beg Him for materially- but so often, it's not for our good spiritually. God must be *so* torn- between giving us what we want, what we whine for, what humanly we obviously need and would desperately like to have... and yet knowing that this is not for our spiritual good. We wonder what happened to Esther. Ahasuerus was slain soon after the events of the book of Esther- typically, the wife and supporters of the King would've been slain or persecuted. Was this not another prod from God for Esther and Mordecai to return to Judah? It's simply breathtaking how we are in God's grip. He doesn't give up on us. He works, as Job perceived, visiting us every moment in providential touches and prods, in order to encourage us to walk towards His Kingdom and quit the fake Kingdoms of this world.

Esther: Married To An AntiChrist

It's sometimes said that the book of Esther isn't quoted elsewhere in Scripture. There may not be explicit quotation, but there is certainly

allusion⁽⁴⁾. Ahasuerus sat on his throne, to tell others of "his glorious Kingdom" (Esther 1:4). The very same two Hebrew words occur again in Ps. 145:11,12, where we read [in a Psalm that may well have been written or used by the righteous remnant in Babylon] that it is *Yahweh* God of Israel who has a Kingdom of glory, and who ultimately hears the cry of His people in distress, as Ahasuerus did. The Kingdom of Media and Persia had books in which the good and bad deeds of the citizens were written (Esther 10:2); and so in the one true Kingdom, there are 'books' from which the ultimate King will judge His people. Clearly, the Kingdom of Ahasuerus is being set up as an anti-Kingdom of God, with an antichrist figure ruling it, faking the Kingdom of God. Note how the Assyrians described their Kingdom as a place where men sat happily under their own vine and fig tree- consciously applying the language of God's Kingdom to their Kingdom (Is. 36:16 cp. Mic. 4:4). And sadly the majority of God's people preferred the fake Kingdom to the true and ultimate Kingdom of *Yahweh*, which they had the opportunity to work towards in His land.

Likewise, Ahasuerus is described as reigning over territory from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1)- the very land promised to Abraham, the territory of the intended Kingdom of God. The description of his court and the drinking "according to the law" from the *Yahweh's* own golden temple vessels is all replete with reference to the construction of the tabernacle and Solomon's temple: "There were hangings of white cloth, of green, and of blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and white, and yellow, and black marble" (Esther 1:6,7). And they drank there "the wine of the Kingdom" (Esther 1:7 Heb.). The seven elders who stood before the King's throne (Esther 1:14) may be reflective of the seven spirits before the throne of the true King (Rev. 1:4; 4:5). And of course the claim in Esther 1:19 that the words of the King could not be altered [s.w. transgressed] uses the same Hebrew words as found in the statements of fact that the words of King *Yahweh* cannot be altered / transgressed (Jer. 34:18). And the King's decrees had to be published in every language, to every nation (Esther 1:21)- just as the great commission spoke of the Lord's Gospel being likewise distributed. When the Lord spoke of how He as the true King would give the 'place' of the rejected to those better than they- i.e. those more humble (Lk. 14:9)- surely He had in mind how Ahasuerus gave Vashti's "royal estate unto another that is better than she" (Esther 1:19). This

connection makes Ahasuerus to be an anti-Christ figure. And the point is, Esther the heroine of the story, married the antiChrist and sat with him in his throne. Ahasuerus ‘delighted’ in her, and she sought his delight (Esther 2:14). But at that very time, God had said that He would be ‘delighted’ in His people and in His forsaken land if they returned there (Is. 55:11; 62:4 s.w.). But Esther rather sought the ‘delighting’ of the anti-God, of the fake Kingdom of God, and didn’t return to the land. Indeed, very often this Hebrew word is used about God delighting in His people, and wishing that they would seek to delight Him. But Esther chose to delight an anti-God, the false God, rather than the true One. And we too face such a choice- advertisements and media kid us that if we buy *this* product or *that* service, then we’ll for ever have eternal youth and a smiling face. They’re offering us a false Kingdom of God which is in fact the Kingdoms of men, which are soon to be eternally ended.

Providence And Grace

So the history of the book of Esther reveals God’s grace- because providence is grace, in that we can’t do anything much about it. It is purely God’s initiative. Although Esther was weak spiritually, yet God worked through her to save His undeserving people. The story brings out a number of coincidences which on reflection could only have been from God. The way Haman collapses and it appears he’s tried to rape Esther is one such. Another is the way that Mordecai isn’t rewarded for revealing the plot to kill the King- the King seems to have forgotten about it, overlooked it, and therefore he was all the more inclined to do Esther and Mordecai a real favour when required. This is all especially remarkable when we note that Ahasuerus [or Xerxes] was noted for rewarding loyalty: “Xerxes was very concerned that loyalty to his throne be highly honored. In fact, Herodotus informs us that at one battle, ‘whenever he saw any of his own captains perform any worthy exploit he inquired concerning him; and the man’s name was taken down by the scribes, together with the names of his father and his city’ (8.90).”⁽⁵⁾ It was surely no mere human co-incident that the very morning the King has had a bad night and remembered Mordecai and decides to honour him, that Haman arrives to request Mordecai’s death. Esther 3:7 seems to be saying that Haman decided on his plan to kill the Jews in the first month, Nisan, but his roll of the dice dictated that he execute it in the 12th month: “In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth

year of King Ahasuerus, Pur, that is the lot, was cast before Haman from day to day and from month to month, until the twelfth month, that is the month Adar". This gave the Jews and Esther / Mordecai nearly a whole year to try to get out of the situation. The fact this plan was made around Jewish Passover time [hence the mention of the month Nisan] perhaps suggested to the thoughtful that God would work a similar Passover deliverance as He had from Egypt. Truly when 'the lot is cast into the lap . . . its every decision is from the LORD' (Prov. 16:33)-surely another allusion to the Esther story. And further, we note that the first month was considered by the Persians to be the best time to take decisive actions ⁽⁶⁾. Yet the 'lot' made Haman have to wait a whole year until the 12th month. Again, we see providence, a Divine hand intervening. And that Divine hand intervenes and works even through our own failure.

The way in which Esther 'found favour' with the King also reflects providence, in that she had earlier developed an artless way of 'finding favour' with others (Esther 2:15,17; 5:2). Yet she learnt that art in the unspiritual pursuit of seeking to become Queen of Persia, doubtless at the expense of many religious compromises; for a man like Daniel could never be so universally popular as Esther was (Esther 2:15), on account of his religious conscience. She would surely have been aware of, or at least heard, the condemnations of the Queen of Babylon as recorded in Isaiah. Only recently had Persia overthrown Babylon; and she sought to become the new Queen of Babylon / Persia, who was Divinely condemned for her beauty?

And again we see God's providence working through human weakness in the way that Mordecai refused to bow before Haman. Jews bowed to superiors (Gen. 23:7; Gen. 27:29; Gen. 33:3; 1 Sam. 24:9; 2 Sam. 14:4; 1 Kings 1:16); to refuse to bow before Haman is hard for me to understand as a reflection of some hyper sensitive religious conscience in Mordecai, especially given his evident lack of commitment to his Jewish religion. It seems to me that he did this out of stubborn anger. But it was this very flush of weakness which was used by God to bring about the drama of the situation, in that Haman therefore wanted to destroy him... and that very night, by providence, the King couldn't sleep, and decided that he wished to reward rather than destroy Mordecai... Carey Moore references an interesting possibility about Esther 6:1, "the king could not sleep", or in the Hebrew, 'the sleep of the

king fled'. The suggestion is that “*nadda*, “fled”, should be read as containing the abbreviation for YHWH, “Lord”, that is, *h*, and thus should be read as a *po’el*, namely, *nodah h*, “YHWH made to flee”” (1).

The Vulgate actually translates this verse as “God prevented the King from sleeping”. So we see the reference to God’s hand, to YHWH Himself, in the shadows as it were... providentially stopping a king from sleeping. And this same invisible God is just as passionately active in our lives; perceiving that seems to me to be one of the great art forms of the believing life.

When we read of the Jews fasting in sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:3), we almost expect to hear that they also prayed; certainly a later Jewish audience would’ve expected this. For fasting, sackcloth and ashes are elsewhere associated with prayer (Jer. 14:12; Neh. 9:1; Ezra 8:21,23; 1 Sam. 7:6; Joel 2:12; Jonah 3:8). That’s an impressive catena of passages. The lack of mention of prayer stands out in sharp relief. Surely the reason was to develop a theme- of how God works through the unstated, through the unwritten, through the silently implied... And this literary device makes us as readers and hearers imagine more deeply how much the Jews would’ve prayed to their God, the God they’d conveniently forgotten amidst their prosperity and nominal acceptance of the Marduk cult. Likewise we read that Esther fasted before going in to the King- which, it’s been observed, would’ve made her less attractive to the King but more attractive to God. She finally learnt that human advantage and beauty can’t save.

When Esther’s nerve failed [as it seems to me], and she cops out of making her request by asking the King and Haman to come to a banquet, she finds herself saying: “Let the King come with Haman today” (Esther 5:4). The Hebrew text reads: “*Ybw’ Hmlk Whmn Hywm*”- the first letter of those four Hebrew words spells YHWH, the Name of God which never occurs in the book of Esther. Truly God’s strength is made perfect in human weakness. In that very moment of failure, the cop out, God was revealed in His essence. And He proceeded to work through the element of suspense which her request created... to pique the King’s desire to help, and to raise Haman’s pride at having been invited, so that he would act even more foolishly, leading to his downfall. It could also be noted that Esther’s entire intercession could so easily have been spoilt if Haman had suspected her machinations against him. But he didn’t; he felt very honoured to have been invited by Esther to the banquet, and he

boasted about it. In other words, Esther concealed her true feelings towards him. And where did she learn to do that? Surely in a lifetime of concealing her true Jewish identity and religious feelings, when actually she shouldn't have done so.

In the final sealing of Haman's fate, we again see providence. There are Esther, Haman and the King sitting at a meal. Esther reveals Haman's evil. And then the King goes out, leaving the two of them alone. He'd been drinking- did he go out to the washroom? Haman approaches Esther's couch to beg for mercy, perhaps touching her feet, in a typical Persian way of begging for mercy. And then, he faints. The King returns to the room. And there's Esther lying on the couch with Haman collapsed almost all over her, leading the King to assume Haman was making an advance on the King. As if that wasn't providential enough, there's another point of language that might rather fit in here. In Esther 7:6 we read of Esther denouncing Haman to the King as "this wicked Haman". There's a very fine difference in Hebrew between *hara* ["wicked"] and *harea* ["the lover"- s.w. Jer. 3:1; Hos. 3:1]- so much so that Ehrlich's commentary suggests that Esther actually accused Haman of being her would-be lover by the word she used. I'm not qualified to comment upon which language Esther would've spoken to the King in, and whether the same word play would've been possible. But if it was so- and there are to this day certain basic similarities between all the Semitic languages- then we can again see providence. For she'd have set up the thought in the King's mind, that just possibly Haman was coming on at his wife. And then he goes out to the loo and comes back to the room to find the guy slumped over his wife.

Notes

(1) Carey Moore, *Esther: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) p. 63.

God Works Through Human Failure

Esther was a Jewess; she shouldn't have married a Gentile, Mordecai should never have entered her for the beauty contest! Further, the King was supposed to only marry a Persian; Esther and Mordecai's silence about her Jewishness is understandable if she wanted to win the competition: "If the king was required to take a wife from one of seven

noble families of Persia, as Herodotus asserts (*The Histories* iii. 84), there was every good reason for silence on the subject of descent”⁽⁷⁾. But again, God worked through this- the fact a spiritually weak Jewess was queen was the way to the Jews’ salvation. Note in passing that Esther’s intercession for her people would’ve effectively involved her admitting to the King that she had deceived him by acting like a Persian when actually she was a foreigner. Hence her great human bravery in doing what she did, quite apart from the fact she was asking the King to change an unchangeable law (Esther 1:19; 3:10-11; 8:8). Perhaps another example of God working through Esther’s weakness is to be found in the way she goes to beg the King a favour- but only invites him to a banquet. And then at the banquet she asks him to attend another banquet. This could be read as smart psychology. But my guess is that each time, her nerve failed her, and she bottled out of making her request. But the process of inviting the King to the various banquets only piqued his curiosity. It would’ve been evident from her nervousness that something was distressing her, and likely the whole exercise ended up in him feeling sorry for her and more likely to respond to her. My suggestion is that her nerve failing her each time, lamely ending up asking the King to come to another banquet, actually prepared the way psychologically for him to be far more open to doing her a favour than if she had just burst into his presence and asked for it. Again, our great God worked through human weakness. His way of working, however, was quiet and indirect. Perhaps this is why the Name of God doesn’t occur in the book directly, and yet there are four places where it does occur as an acrostic [a play on Hebrew letters]. God was there, and is there, but in a hidden way that has to be perceived. Significantly, the only other Bible book where the Name of God commonly occurs in acrostics is Lamentations- also written whilst Judah were in captivity (8).

The fact that all these things happened over and above any human ability to influence events, using Jews like Esther and Mordecai who had not been faithful to God’s calling, simply demonstrates how desperate He was and is to work with His people to save and restore them. And this was the lesson which the captives in Babylon needed to learn. And yet on the surface, it seemed that co-incidence was all *against* the Jews- for at the beginning of Ahasuerus’ reign, the Samaritans had written to him, complaining about the Jews and urging him to stop the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4:6). And then, Haman arose, making the Jews out to be dissidents and worthy of destruction... and got an edict made which

commanded the deaths of all Jews throughout the Persian empire. We must remember that this would've included the more faithful Jews who had returned to Judah! Everything looked the worst. But actually, what seemed the worst possible combination of events turned out to be the best. And so it happens month by month in our own lives, if we will perceive it.

Esther And Passover

The LXX, if it can be relied upon here, offers the following translation of Esther 8:9, concerning when the edict to reverse the Jews' destruction was given: "the twenty third day of the first month, which is Nisan". This would mean that the Esther / Haman drama and the destruction of the Jews' persecutor occurred at Jewish Passover time. There are other evident similarities with Israel's Passover deliverance:

- Spoiling of their enemies
- The fear of the Jews falling upon the Egyptians / Persians (Esther 8:17)
- A memorial feast instituted
- Esther 9:26 quotes Ex. 10:6
- What was "seen" in Israel's deliverance (Esther 9:26 Heb.) s.w. Ex. 10:6
- "Every single" Jew to observe Purim (Esther 9:28) = the legislation about Passover
- The 14th and 15th of Adar (Esther 9:27) cp. the 14th Nisan.

What all this means is that God set up the Jews to be able to experience a full Passover-style deliverance from Babylon / Persia. Isaiah's prophecies of the restoration from Babylon are shot through with allusion to the Passover, the Exodus and the wilderness journey of Israel from Egypt to Zion. As Hosea fantasized about waltzing with his faithless wife once again in the wilderness, entering a new covenant with her, having a re-marriage, at which the whole natural creation would share in the joy... so God wished to romance Israel once again in the wilderness, and lead them back to Him and back to the temple in Zion. Is. 49:13 speaks of how the joy of Judah's return to Zion would likewise find a response in all creation breaking out in praise. And so the Haman experience was to set up a situation in which the Jews could heed the prophets' call to leave Babylon and return to Zion. But... they didn't.

It's why the book of Esther has such a tragic ending, in spiritual terms- for the Jews are pictured wealthy, accepted in society, prosperous, self-satisfied, and *remaining in Babylon / Persia*. At best, Judah remained a province of the Persian empire, without the independence and 'head over the nations' status which the prophets had said could have been achieved by the exiles. Thus Nehemiah lamented, with allusion to those prophecies, that the Jews were still servants within their own land, and "its abundant produce goes to the kings whom you set over us" (Neh. 9:36,37). S.H. Horn analyzed the archives of the Murashu sons of Nippur and lists of bankers and brokers in the times of Artaxerxes I and Darius II- and found a quite disproportionate mention there of Jews in prominent positions (9). Even further, Esther's request that the Jews be given even more time to slay their opponents and establish their power, and display the corpses publicly (Esther 9:13) could be read as plain vengeful, graceless, and simply trying to consolidate the temporal dominance of the Jews. Nehemiah being so senior in Babylon is another indicator of how quickly the Jews progressed in Babylon, and how popular they became after the Haman debacle. The lists of names of those who returned to the land (e.g. in Neh. 7) include many obviously Babylonian ones- e.g. Bigvai, Elam etc. Meshezabel (Neh. 3:4) even means 'the god delivers', with evident pagan overtones. Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar likewise were Jews with Babylonian names who were Persian governors. 'Zerubbabel' even means 'offspring of Babylon'. Contrast this with the way Daniel is usually referred to by his Jewish rather than his pagan Babylonian name, which he presumably disliked. When a minority of the Jews sought to return, they refer to Yahweh as "the god of the heavens" (Ezra 5:11)- the very title which the Babylonians used for *their* god. They speak of "the good hand of his God" (Ezra 7:9)- a phrase used in the Akkadian prayer to Marduk (10). Again, we see a contrast with how Daniel unashamedly spoke of his God, rather than seeking to make Yahweh out to be somehow in harmony with the pagan gods of Babylon. Perhaps this is why Isaiah rebukes the idea that Yahweh is somehow like the other gods- His total 'otherness' needed to be understood by the Jews in Babylon for whom Isaiah's prophecies were directed [or, redirected, seeing they were initially relevant to Hezekiah's time, but re-written for the exiles].

The "pangs" of the pain of the Babylonian invasion ought to have been birth pangs which would result in the "daughter of Zion" giving birth to

new spiritual life and then going forth out of the city of Babylon and returning to her land (Mic. 4:9,10). But it didn't happen; they experienced the pain, but it was as if their spiritual rebirth was actually a stillbirth in the end. The idea was that in Babylon, Zion would be "delivered" of her new child, she would "arise and thresh" the surrounding nations (Mic. 4:13), then a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and lead Judah in the destruction of her enemies (Mic. 5:2,5-8). All this never came to pass, because in fact Judah were not spiritually reformed and reborn in Babylon. Mic. 4:10 speaks of how they would be "rescued" in Babylon, or (RV) "redeemed". That seems to me to be a reference to the miraculous deliverance / redemption of Judah from the pogrom of Haman as recorded in Esther. Mic. 5:8,9,14 goes on to speak of how at that time "the remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations [the various nations that comprised Babylon, where the Jews lived]... as a lion among the beasts of the forest... let your hand be lifted up upon your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off... I will destroy your enemies" (RVmg.). This would be a reference to how the Jews defended themselves against their enemies after the demise of Haman and slew so many of them. But this was only a fraction of what could've been; "seven shepherds and eight princes" (Mic. 5:7 RVmg.) could have been raised up, a Messiah could've been born in Bethlehem, and Judah would have become as Babylon then was, "a lion among the beasts" [the lion was a symbol of Babylon]. But they were content with having escaped Haman's pogrom, and Esther ends on the sad note of the Jews prosperous and self-contented in the world which was theirs to conquer- if they had walked in step with God's plans, rather than being such easily contented, materialistic satisficers. Micah 7:11-13 RV seems to comment upon this wasted potential: "A day for building thy walls! In that day shall the decree [of Cyrus, to return and build the temple] be far extended. In that day shall they [the returning Jews] come unto thee [Zion] from Assyria... even to the river [all the places where the Jews were in captivity]... *yet shall the land be desolate*". In other words, the Jews are prophesied as returning, and yet that was a potential prophecy; the prophet foresaw that despite his prophecy and all that it enabled, the possible future it declared for Judah- yet the land would be [relatively] desolate, for most would not return. It's rather like Ez. 36:35,38 prophesying how the Jews would return from captivity and rebuild the waste places of Jerusalem- and yet Hag. 1:4 laments that the temple lay "waste" [s.w.] because the returned exiles were too lazy to rebuild it. The prophecy of Ezekiel was there for the fulfilling- but they chose not to. And how many prophecies

are there which we likewise are too preoccupied and self-centred to reach out and fulfil?

We have to enquire, and enquire deeply, of our own lives- how much potential deliverance has God set up for us, that we refuse to be part of? To what extent has self-satisfaction, comfortable living, the acceptance we have in human society... lead to us failing to grasp the call of God?

Notes

(1) See J. Carl Laney, *Ezra and Nehemiah*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982) p. 126.

(2) See John A. Martin "Ezra" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, Edited by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985) p. 667.

(3) A. D. Godley, *Herodotus: An English Translation* (London: Heinemann, 1963), Vol. 3 p. 95.

(4) Here are two examples:

- The God who has given us His Son will, through His mediation, surely "freely give us all things" in response to our prayers (Rom. 8:32-34). And note how this passage is alluding to the LXX of Esther 8:7: "The King said to Esther, If I have freely granted thee all that was Haman's, and hanged him on a gallows [a cross]...what dost thou yet further seek?", and the King then gives Esther whatever she requests. Note the repetition of ideas: if death on a cross had been granted, then all other things would be freely granted to the mediator / intercessor, for the good of her / His people.
- In Esther's time, a decree was made to "destroy...and cause to perish" the Jews throughout the provinces of Persia / Babylon (Esther 3:13; 7:4). This phrase uses the two Hebrew words which we find together three times in the list of curses to be brought upon a disobedient Israel (Dt. 28:20,51,63). There evidently is a connection. And yet by her wonderful self-sacrificial mediation, Esther brought about the deferment and even annulment of those justifiable curses. God's prophetic word was again changed- due to a mediator, who of course pointed both backwards to Moses, and forwards to the Lord Jesus.

(5) John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 61.

(6) Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) p. 38.

(7) Joyce C. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984) p. 70.

(8) All this said about God working through human weakness, Esther's human bravery stands out. She'd not been called to the King for 30 days- "this is thirty days..." (Esther 4:11 Heb.), she says, as if she took this to mean that she was no longer the number one woman in the King's life. Her approach into the inner court is described in such detail, as if to heighten for us the sense of suspense and risk. Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 11/205) claims that "round his throne stood men with axes to punish any who approached the throne without being summoned". She identified totally with her people- the difficult to translate "My people's as my petition" (Esther 7:3) reflects how totally her petition was theirs, and their petition was her personal petition. The intercession of the Lord Jesus was achieved on the cross, according to Isaiah 53 and other passages. There He identified with us *in toto*. The fear and risk of failure which He faced were not of course a function of coming before an angry God; but rather a result of the awesome power of human sin and weakness which we too face. His bravery, Esther's bravery, are our inspirations in the endless battle against this. But she wasn't merely brave, she was passionate. The hard to translate sentence "My people's as my petition" (Esther 7:3) may reflect the nervous intensity of her words and thinking. When she begs for "your favour", she's using the more intimate second person form of address- whereas in Esther 7:4,8 she addresses the king in the third person, which apparently was the usual form of address to a king in such contexts, even from his queen. Note how in Esther 8:5 she addresses the king as "the king", but the LXX has her addressing him as "you". We are led by this to reflect upon the intimacy between two persons which is achieved by the very act of an inferior begging a superior for a favour; and the element of intimacy between the Father and Son which arises from the Lord's intercession.

(9) S.H. Horn, *Biblical Research* Vol. 9 [1964] pp. 14,15.

(10) Jacob Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (New York: Doubleday, 2004 ed.) p. 58.

6-2 Isaiah's Prophecies Of Restoration

The Possibility And The Reality

Isaiah's lengthy prophecies of the restoration must likewise be compared against the sad reality of what actually happened. The prophecies exude

a wonderfully positive and joyful spirit, which contrasts with the defeatism of the returnees. And one cannot help but wonder whether we as individuals and therefore as a community have really lived the life of joy which the NT promises for those who truly believe. Take Is. 45:20-21 as an example: “Assemble yourselves and come; draw near together, ye that are escaped of the nations [i.e. Babylon and all the 127 provinces of Persia]...Tell ye, and bring them near; yea, let them *take counsel together*”. These are the very words used to describe how the Arab opposition ‘took counsel together’ to frustrate the work of the Jews (Nehemiah 6:7). Yahweh is exultantly saying: ‘Let them do it...let them get on with it, nothing can prosper against you and your work!’. But instead, the Jews took the opposition so seriously. Jer. 31:4 telling speaks of how God would “build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel”. The “virgin” here refers to the temple which was to be built by God, and yet it also clearly refers to the actual people of Judah who returned. In other words, their attitude to the temple was their attitude to themselves. Because they had such a low value of their own worth before God, they treated His work with a similar low value. And there is a great lesson for us here.

Isaiah 54:2 bids the returning exiles to “enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords!”. Yet Isaiah so often uses the idea of ‘stretching out’ the Heavens with reference to His creation of His new Kingdom (Isaiah 40:22; Is. 42:5; 44:24; 45:15; 51:13; 65:17,18). Zechariah 1:6 cp. 12:1 show that to stretch out Jerusalem is parallel with stretching out the ‘heavens’. The ‘singing’ of the heavens refers to Judah’s intended joy at the restoration (Isaiah 49:13 cp. 48:20). Israel were being told to peg out their tent as wide and far as they could; because this would be the extent of their Kingdom. The Kingdom would be as ‘large’ for them as they had vision for in this life.

Is. 51:14, speaking of the call to Judah to leave Babylon, sounds as if they were all willing and eager to leave that spiritually dreadful place: “The captive exile hasteneth that he may be loosed, and that he should not die in the pit”. But the reality was that Judah didn’t hasten to be loosed, they preferred the Babylon life, and didn’t perceive it for the spiritual pit that was killing them which it was. Most of them chose to remain there. So this passage is therefore a prophecy, a command, about how God *wanted* Judah to respond. God ‘stirred up’ the spirit of Cyrus

and also of the Jews who returned (Ezra 1:1,5). Isaiah uses the same Hebrew term to describe how Israel's saviour would be "raised up" [s.w.] - Is. 41:2,25; 45:13. And yet Isaiah pleads with Zion, i.e. the faithful, to indeed be stirred up - Is. 51:17; 52:1 appeals to Zion to "Awake!" - the same word translated "stirred up". But Isaiah tragically concluded that there were so few who would 'stir up themselves' (Is. 64:7). God had given them the potential to be 'stirred up' in their hearts and minds to leave Babylon and return - but they wouldn't respond. And today, the same happens. God is willing to change hearts, to stir up materialistic and complacent spirits - but because we're not robots, we have to respond. And yet, God's grace still shines through. 1 Kings 8:47-50 had predicted that God would give the exiles compassion in captivity *if* they repented. They didn't repent, as passages like Ez. 18 make clear (they blamed everything on their fathers and protested their personal innocence) - and yet still God gave them compassion in the eyes of their captors, through the amazing decrees of Cyrus enabling them to return to their land and rebuild the temple at his expense.

Isaiah 62:6,7 speaks of watchmen [= the prophets, Ezekiel 3:17; Jer. 6:17; Hab. 2:1] set upon Jerusalem's walls as watchmen, keeping no silence [in their prophesying] until Jerusalem was established. For the link between the prophets and standing on a watchtower, see Hab. 2:1. Is this not a reference to Malachi, Haggai and Zechariah prophesying as the basis upon which the newly built walls of Jerusalem would be preserved, and the city develop into the Messianic Kingdom hoped for? Note that the rebuilt Jerusalem of Ezra's time and the latter day Jerusalem are the same thing in Isaiah; the Kingdom could've come then. Watchmen upon the walls were looking for something - for the approach of the Messianic messenger with good tidings of Judah's full return from captivity, of which Isaiah had spoken in Isaiah 52:7,8. But most of Judah preferred to stay in Babylon, took up a collection for the few who did return... and no Messiah could appear with that news. God had promised this - but He asked to be put in remembrance of His promises (Isaiah 43:26), i.e. He asked for those watchmen to be His 'rememberancers', even though He cannot in that sense forget them (Psalms 119:49; Jer. 14:21). In all this we see an exquisite picture of how God works with men, how His promised faithfulness and omnipotence all the same has built into it a requirement for human prayerfulness and response. The reality was that the watchmen / prophets of Israel were blind, ignorant and sleepy (Isaiah 56:10).

Isaiah's restoration prophecies are shot through with references to Abraham, directly or indirectly. Israel / Judah are called by Isaiah to be Yahweh's chosen (Is. 41:8), fetched from the end of the land (Is. 41:9), to act like the seed of Abraham (Is. 41:8)... just like Abraham. But Abraham left Babylonia and journeyed to the promised land- and Judah likewise are bidden make that journey (Is. 44:2). By refusing to do so, they were showing themselves to *not* be the seed of Abraham- they were rejecting themselves from the covenant people. I've shown at length elsewhere that Abraham initially resisted the call to leave Ur, he struggled with the challenge, it took him years actually to truly leave Babylonia behind and head out in faith to the promised land. So the relevance to the Jews in exile was pertinent. It's the same with Isaiah's allusions to Israel's leaving Egypt. The Jews in Babylon were intended to live out the type by leaving Babylon and making the wilderness journey to the land- and God helped them in it. For example, Ezra 6:4 records how God moved the local authorities to pronounce that the residents around the returning exiles should give them silver, gold and goods. This was an exact re-living of how Israel left Egypt with Egypt's gold and silver (Ex. 12:35). Yet most of the Jews didn't want to return, they didn't want to live out the type.

Those who truly waited upon Yahweh would renew their strength; they would “mount up as eagles” (Isaiah 40:31), the s.w. used throughout Ezra and Nehemiah for the ‘going up’ to Jerusalem from Babylon to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:3,5,11; 2:1,59; 7:6,7,28; 8:1; Nehemiah 7:5,6,61; 12:1).

Neh 4:10: “And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall”. Examination of the context shows that they had just had plenty of strength; they lost physical stamina because of their spiritual weakness.

Time and again, Isaiah's restoration prophecies told Judah that they should not fear, as Yahweh would mightily be

But Judah feared the surrounding nations- Ezra and Nehemiah are full of this theme (Ezra 3:3). Nehemiah

with them in their work (Isaiah 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8,11; 54:7,14; 59:19).

refused to be put in fear by the Samaritan opposition because of his faith in Isaiah's promises (Nehemiah 6:14). And Isaiah further spoke to Judah's heart in Isaiah 51:12,13: "I, even I, am he that comforteth you: who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass; And forgettest the LORD thy maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations [s.w. re. the foundation of the temple being laid] of the earth ['heaven and earth' often refers to the temple]; and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy? and where is the fury of the oppressor?". The fact they did fear meant that they had forgotten Yahweh who had re-established their Kingdom.

Isaiah 44:23-28: "Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: *shout*, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in

The same Hebrew words are used about the shout of joy which went up when the foundation of the temple was laid (Ezra 3:11-13). But at that same time, there was a loud sound of weeping from those who realized that what

Israel...that frustrateth the tokens of the liars [s.w. Nehemiah 4:15 re. God frustrating the Samaritan opposition]...That confirmeth the word of his servant [Cyrus], and *performeth the counsel* of his messengers; that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof... That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid". Likewise Zechariah 9:9,13: "*Shout* [s.w.] , O daughter of Zion [and your Messianic king will come]...I will *raise up* [s.w. Ezra 1:5 re Judah's spirit being 'stirred up' to return] thy sons".

Is. 49:6 speaks of the reestablishment of the tribes of Israel and the 'establishing' of the land (Is. 49:8). The intended boundaries of the tribal cantons are given in Ezekiel 48. There was perhaps a renewed awareness of which tribe each captive was from- note the references to Judah (Ezra 10:23), Benjamin (Neh. 3:23), Manasseh (Ezra 10:33) and Joseph (Ezra 10:42; Neh. 12:14).

was being built was simply not the temple which Ezekiel had prophesied, and was not even as glorious as Solomon's. The shout of joy was there, but wasn't discernible (Ezra 3:13). Yahweh "*performeth the counsel*" of rebuilding Jerusalem. But the Samaritan opposition sought to frustrate Judah's "purpose" / counsel (Ezra 4:5 s.w.), and succeeded. Yahweh allowed Himself to be limited within how His people performed His purpose. His 'purpose' is therefore conditional upon those whom He allows to fulfil it.

But the land wasn't laid out again according to tribal boundaries as envisaged in the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel. The few who returned were happy with their little farms, and didn't rise up to a wider vision. And how much potential achievement for us as a community is disabled by our parochial, selfish, self-satisficing attitudes...?

Isaiah 66:20-22: “And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the LORD out of all nations [within the Babylonian empire- see later notes on Joel 3:1,2] upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith the LORD, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the LORD [all relevant to the restoration]. And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the LORD. For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall *remain before me*, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name *remain*”. Ezekiel 44:15 uses the same word: “But the priests the Levites, the sons of Zadok, that kept the charge of my sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from me, they shall come near to me to minister unto me, and they shall *stand before me* [s.w. “remain before me”] to offer unto me the fat and the blood, saith the Lord GOD”.

The returnees were to lift up their voice with joy at Zion’s restoration (Isaiah 40:9)

But Ezra had to confess, using these very words of Isaiah and Ezekiel which he would have been familiar with: “O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot *stand before thee* because of this” (Ezra 9:15). They hadn’t lived the Kingdom life, and therefore the Kingdom prophecies could not come true in them. It makes a profitable exercise to consider all the times that Ezra and Nehemiah allude to the words of Isaiah and Ezekiel ⁽¹⁾. It must have been heartbreaking for them to see the possibility of fulfilment within their grasp, and yet to know that their people didn’t see the wonder of it all.

At the very humble dedication of the temple, the younger people lifted up their voice with joy (Ezra 3:12 same words), but the

older men wept, as the temple was not even as great as Solomon's, and certainly not that commanded in Ezekiel and Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:29-41:1: "To them that have no might he increaseth strength... they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint...let the people renew their strength". This is in contrast to how for the idolater, "his *strength faileth*" (Isaiah 44:12).

But the same word is used in two places about how the strength of the redeemed exiles *did* wax faint. Ezra 10:13: "But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and *we are not able to stand* [lit. 'not strong enough to be'] without". And later: "And Judah said, The *strength* of the bearers of burdens is *decayed*, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall" (Neh 4:10). Both Ezra and Nehemiah encouraged the people not to make such excuses but to get on with achieving what was truly possible.

"Fear not ...I will *help* thee" (Isaiah 41:10).

Ezra was ashamed to ask for *help* against Judah's enemies (Ezra 8:22), the implication being that he wanted that human help but was ashamed to ask for it from the King. He had initially believed those words of Isaiah, but found it hard to maintain that level of faith.

"All they that were *incensed*

Sanballat, Tobiah, the

against thee shall be ashamed and confounded, they shall be as nothing” (Isaiah 41:11)

Ammonites and Ashdodites were “wroth” [s.w. ‘incensed’] against Judah. But they didn’t come to nothing, nor to shame, in that those very groups were the ones who married into Jewry, to the extent that Tobiah even shifted the tithes out of one of the chambers of the temple and set up his office there.

Isaiah 41:15-16 is full of reference to Daniel 2: “Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth: thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff. Thou shalt fan them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them: and thou shalt rejoice in the LORD, and shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel”.

It was as if the prophecy of Dan. 2 could have been fulfilled by Judah and their ‘Messiah’ as the stone- right then.

Isaiah 48:18,19: “O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! Then had thy peace been as a river...thy seed also had been as the sand, and the offspring of thy bowels like the gravel thereof”

The promises to Abraham and the coming of the Messianic seed of Abraham could have been fulfilled; but because Israel chose to be wicked, there was no such peace: “There is no peace...unto the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22).

Isaiah 49:6: “It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my

“But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me” (Isaiah

servant...to restore the desolations [AVmg.] of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles". The Messiah figure was to appear at a time when the cities of Israel were desolate and needed rebuilding, and when the people had been told "Go forth" of Babylon, and Zion's "builders" would hastily work, despite feeling themselves to be "exiles" (Isaiah 49:9,17 RVmg.,21 RV).

49:14). They didn't have the faith to believe that God's grace was enough to really forgive them for the sins that had led them into captivity, and for their apostasy in Babylon, where they had been spiritually "marred" (Jer. 13:7). And so the planned Messiah figure and Kingdom never fully happened. And God laments this: "Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer?" (Isaiah 50:2). Nobody responded to the Divine call for a Messiah.

Isaiah 52:1-2: "Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem: loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion".

But the uncircumcised did come and live in the temple and marry the Jews. And Ezra and Nehemiah covered themselves with sackcloth in mourning because of these things. And thus they showed that this prophecy could not be fulfilled at their time.

The Jews didn't perceive the soft life of Babylon as chains around their necks, and so they didn't loose themselves and leave.

Isaiah 56:1-2: "Thus saith the LORD, Keep ye judgment, and

The salvation of Yahweh's Kingdom could have soon

do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed. Blessed is the man that doeth this, and the son of man that layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil". *If* the Gentiles had come to the temple and kept the Sabbath, "Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall [in this case] be called an house of prayer for all people" (56:6,7). At the time when the outcasts of Israel were gathered back to their land, the Gentiles were to be gathered to God along with them (Isaiah 56:8). The new temple was to be thrown open to the Gentiles to worship in.

come, *if* Judah had 'kept judgment'. But Malachi and Haggai, along with the record of the injustices of the Jewish nobles in Nehemiah, show the lack of judgment / justice amongst the returnees. And the Sabbath was polluted, as Nehemiah recorded, and the Gentiles were mixed with and affirmed in their idolatry, rather than converted and brought to worship in the temple. And so the revelation of Yahweh's salvation and righteousness in the Kingdom was deferred. Isaiah 61 gives a detailed prophecy of the restoration and how it could flourish into God's Kingdom, and then adds in v.8: "For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them"; as if to say that *if* Judah offered with the right spirit and showed justice, *then* the everlasting covenant would be entered with them. But this just didn't happen. They themselves disallowed it. The way Jews and Gentiles ate together at Nehemiah's table (Nehemiah 5:17)

pointed forward to what was almost possible. But in the end, they mixed with and adopted the ways of the Gentiles, and their leadership arrogantly developed a theology that said that dirty Gentiles could never be saved; for salvation, they reasoned, was only for Jews.

Isaiah repeatedly stated that the surrounding nation would come to Zion and share in her joy. Ex. 23:12 had commanded that the Gentile who lived with Israel must keep the Sabbath. *If* the Jews had not done *their* pleasure on the Sabbath, *then* the Messianic Kingdom could have come (Isaiah 58:13,14).

But instead the Gentiles who lived around Jerusalem traded with the Jews on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:16 RSV), they intermarried, and Israel / Zion was *not* a city set on a hill to enlighten the surrounding world; because they preferred to be influenced by the world around them, rather than vice versa.

Many passages in the latter half of Isaiah exult how God has fulfilled prophecy in the decree of Cyrus and the return of the Jews (e.g. Isaiah 44:7,26-28).

But this fulfilment of prophecy turned out to be limited by the Jews' lack of obedience to the prophecies.

Yahweh speaks of the returnees as if they were a new creation, created by Him along with the heavens and earth of the temple which He had stretched out in Zion (Isaiah 43:7; 44:2). Especially evident is Isa 45:11-13: "Thus saith the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, and his

But the Jews acted like the old creation. And the promise of new creation was deferred until the time of Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17). Judah for the most part declined to inhabit / dwell in the new heavens and earth [the same word in Isaiah 45:18 is

Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me [a reference to how He had predicted the 70 years captivity and subsequent restoration]. I have made the earth, and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded. I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways: he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives, not for price nor reward, saith the LORD of hosts". He did not form this new land / heavens of the kingdom and temple of Israel in vain- He created it to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18).

Babylon fell so that Persia would take over the administration of the 127 provinces where the Jews were scattered, and would allow them to return to Judah (Isaiah 43:14). The cup of judgment which Judah drunk for 70 years was passed to Babylon (Isaiah 51:22). This accounts for Isaiah's repeated and detailed emphasis on the coming fall of Babylon for Judah / Israel's sake (e.g. Isaiah 47). Although they had sinned, Yahweh showed His gracious love for

frequently used re. how the returnees *dwelt* in the cities of Judah].

But the majority of Jews preferred to stay in Babylon. Ezra 2:1 may suggest that only a few Jews who lived in the province of Babylon returned (one out of 127 provinces), even though there were significant numbers of Jews in all the provinces, as the book of Esther makes clear (as also does Nehemiah 1:8, which says that the Babylonian captivity fulfilled God's prophecy to scatter Israel amongst all nations). And

His people by bringing down Babylon (Isaiah 48:14). “For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee [Cyrus] by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me “ (Isaiah 45:4). Likewise the iron curtain came down to allow preachers of God’s Truth to take it to those once in darkness. And English has become the lingua-franca of the world, enabling Christian preaching to now penetrate societies literally world-wide.

They should have responded to the decree of Cyrus with real joy, according to Ps 126:1-3: “When the LORD turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The LORD hath done great things for them. The LORD hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad”.

the mighty political and linguistic changes taking place *purely for our sakes* are often ignored by us. Like the Jews in Babylon, we figure that *surely* such huge changes couldn’t have occurred *only* for us. But they do, and have done. Isaiah frequently shows the folly of worshipping Babylonian idols. And yet it seems that it was Judah’s worship of these idols that kept them in Babylon. Isaiah 50:10-11 prophesies the call of Cyrus to leave Babylon and return to the land (Ezra 1:3): “Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God. Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow”. Those who feared Yahweh had none of the light provided by the Babylonian idols; but the majority preferred Babylon’s light to

Zion's.

But their joy wasn't *so* ecstatic. They were happy for those who chose to return and gave them material help to this end, but the majority didn't feel the joy personally. A careful reading of Isaiah 62:4-5 indicates that Yahweh's joy over the restored state of Zion was a reflection of the joy which the returnees showed over her: "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken [as during the 70 years captivity]; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate...for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married. For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee".

Water could have followed Judah through the desert journey from Babylon to Zion (Isaiah 43:19)

But they hankered after a human army to protect them, and most of them wouldn't even begin the journey.

Isaiah 58:6-13: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and

This seems to be a reference to an insincerely kept day of atonement in Ezra or Nehemiah's time. The Jewish nobles were

that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? *Then* shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward... *If* thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable". Likewise v.10: "And *if* thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; *then* shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday". But the same prophecy says that *if* they kept the Sabbath and gave to the poor, "they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach". *If* they did all these things, there would be no drought (58:11); but Malachi records how there was drought, because they had not fulfilled these conditions.

oppressing the poor and thereby keeping the feast with no meaning. If they had properly kept the feast, *then* the promised Kingdom conditions would have burst forth to the world around them. But they were too caught up with their own self-benefit to be bothered to show true care for their brethren. If they had, *then* the glory of Yahweh would have entered the temple, just as Ezekiel 43 had prophesied would happen, if the Kingdom was built as commanded. Notice how Isaiah 60:1-3 speaks of how Zion's light had would certainly come and give light to the world- even though the prophecy was actually conditional on Judah keeping the Sabbath and caring for their poor brethren: "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee... And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising". Nehemiah repaired the breaches, Ezra laid the foundations of the temple...the prophecy of Isaiah 58 was fulfilled on the surface, but not in its Kingdom sense, because

they failed to keep the Sabbath etc. Isaiah 58:10 says that *if* they drew out their soul to the hungry, if they allowed themselves to feel the hunger of others, *then* would their light rise and their darkness be as the noonday. And thus the prophecy of Isaiah 60:1,2 that Zion's light is going to dawn was conditional upon the Jews caring for their hungry amongst them- even though in that passage, the condition isn't directly stated. The restoration was therefore only a sham of what was possible.

Isaiah 60:10 says that “The sons of strangers shall build up thy walls”- the Gentiles could have helped in the rebuilding. “Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night” (60:11). The “therefore” connects with the preceding verse, as if the gates would always be open in order to constantly welcome repentant Gentiles. When the city and temple was rebuilt, Gentiles would come and feed Israel’s flocks and name them all “the priests of the Lord” and bring them food to eat in tribute (61:4-6)

The reality was that the walls were built from a motive not of glorifying Zion in fulfilment of prophecy, but for defence *against* the Gentiles. But the gates had to be shut to keep the Gentiles out (Nehemiah 13:19), lest they yet further corrupted the Jews who were eager to trade with them on the Sabbath rather than convert them to the God of Israel. Instead of bringing their goods through the gates to lay before Yahweh, they brought in their goods to sell to His people in trade. But returned Judah didn’t act as a

nation of priests, the food the Gentiles brought in to Zion was to be sold for profit to the Jews. They failed to be a missionary nation, and rather were mere trading / economic partners on an equal footing [cp. the church today?].

Isaiah 60:13: “The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious”.

But Haggai lamented that instead, Judah dwelt in “cieled houses”, they used the exotic trees of the land for their own homes, whilst the house of Yahweh lay desolate. The prophecy of Is. 60:14 started to come true after Haman’s demise: “the sons of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet”. But Judah didn’t do their part in fulfilling the rest of that prophecy, which speaks of a rebuilt Zion.

Is. 61:3 speaks of how weepers would laugh with joy.

Nehemiah in his mourning for the state of his people began to fulfil Is. 61:3, concerning how those who wept over Zion would be given joy- but the prophecy continues to speak of how the old wastes of Zion would be rebuilt and repaired, and the Messianic age ushered

in. He didn't go on to fulfil this. Is. 61:7 went on to say that "in their land" the Jews would receive "everlasting joy"- but they didn't want to return to their land to receive it. God speaks of how He would remarry Zion in the same way as her sons would remarry her (Is. 62:4,5)- but her sons chose to stay in Babylon, and so the joyous wedding ceremony God envisaged didn't happen.

Isaiah 62:6-7: "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth".

This was fulfilled by a minority praying for the restoration of Zion during the 70 years captivity; Daniel and his friends are evident examples. Several passages in Isaiah (e.g. Isaiah 64:8-12) record model prayers for Zion's restoration. But the prayers dried up after the return; Isaiah's exhortation was ignored. The returnees did keep silence, and therefore Zion was not established as a praise in the earth.

Isaiah 65:17-19 describes the new creation of Zion as it was possible at the restoration: "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. But be ye glad

The former "heavens" of Solomon's temple *did* come to mind, and the old men mourned because of how far superior the former had been. The voice of weeping *was* heard in the streets of

and rejoice for ever in that which I create: for, behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy. And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying”.

65:21-22 continues: “And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat”.

Isaiah 62:10-12 speaks of the return from Babylon: “Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation [Joshua-Jesus, the high priest, returning from Babylon?] cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city *not forsaken*”.

Zion, as Judah mourned for their sins of marrying the surrounding nations and breaking the Sabbath.

But very few houses were built in Zion, because the people preferred to live on their farms, in their cield houses, outside the city (Nehemiah 7:4). They planted vineyards, but sold the fruit to others- on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15,16).

But Joshua didn't live up to the conditional prophecies made about him in Zechariah [see later]. Ezra and Nehemiah seem to have taken over the priestly and kingly work of Joshua and Zerubbabel respectively. Nehemiah's record concludes on the negative note that Judah had forsaken Zion (Nehemiah 13:11). Nobody wanted to live in Jerusalem because of the persecution there; the Levites even went and lived outside it where they had “fields”, because they weren't given their tithes (Nehemiah 13:10. Lots had to be drawn to get people to live there (Nehemiah 11:1).

It became a ghost town, when it should have been inhabited as a town without walls for the multitudes of returned exiles joyfully dwelling there (Zechariah 2:5). It was God's intention that ten men (a reference to Israelites of the ten tribes?) would take hold of the skirts of a Jew (i.e. one of Judah) and come with him to worship in the new temple (Zechariah 8:23). But in fact the opposite happened. So few wanted to live in Jerusalem, that the rulers had to cast lots to force one in ten Jews to go and live in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1). And the ten tribes didn't really unite with Judah, but went off and got lost in the Gentile world.

“Where is the house that ye build unto me?...to this man will I look, even to him that is of...a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word” (Isaiah 66:1,2)

The Jews did tremble at the word at the beginning of the rebuilding (Ezra 10:9). But it was a momentary thing; they came to see the building of the walls as more important than keeping a trembling spirit. Works eclipsed spirituality. Yet Isaiah had taught that the trembling at the word was more essentially important than building temples. But Judah paid no attention in the long

term.

Their spirit was ‘stirred up’ to achieve the work of the Kingdom at the restoration (Ezra 1:5).

Yahweh cut off the “master” [‘the stirred up one’, s.w.] because they divorced their wives and married Gentiles (Mal. 2:12). The potential work of God on men’s hearts was frustrated by their hardness of heart.

Zech 2:4: “And said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein”. Likewise Ezek 36:10: “And I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, even all of it: and the cities shall be inhabited, and the wastes shall be builded”.

Neh 7:4: “Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded”. They were happier to settle outside of Jerusalem and concentrate on building up their own farms in the villages and small towns of Judah, rather than sense the importance of Zion. Nehemiah 11:1-3 suggests that so few wanted to live in Jerusalem because of the persecution there, that they had to draw lots to get at least a tenth of the total population to live there- in what should have been the capital. *If* more had returned from Babylon, *if* more had lived in Jerusalem, *then* Yahweh would have been a wall of fire to them, and then the Kingdom conditions described in the rest of Zechariah 2 would have

come about. Although the restoration prophecies speak as if the increase of Zion's population was to be unconditional, Ezek 36:37 implies that this would only happen if they prayed for it: "Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this be inquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them; I will increase them with men like a flock". But they got on with building their own homes and farms outside Jerusalem, they blessed those who had the courage to live in Zion itself, but didn't earnestly pray for the fulfilment of the prophecies. They figured that the time for their fulfilment hadn't come, as Haggai laments; instead of praying for their fulfilment. And we must assess our attitude to the fulfilment of prophecy in the light of Isaiah

Isaiah especially is full of restoration prophecies; but Isaiah especially carries repeated statements that God can predict the future, and that His prophetic word will surely come to pass (e.g. Is. 43:9). These repeated statements are surely to encourage Judah to believe the restoration prophecies, and to see that what was prophesied really would and could come to pass- but it required their response!

Resistance To Isaiah's Prophecies

Much of the later chapters of Isaiah speaks of the faithful remnant in Babylon. The prayers and thoughts of that faithful minority often

surface- e.g. "Wilt thou refrain thyself for these things, O Lord? Wilt thou hold thy peace?" (Is. 64:12; Is. 62:1). Thus they fulfilled the prophecy that Zion's watchmen would give God no rest (Is. 62:6,7). But overall, the poor response of Judah seems to have led God to abandon the plan for the gloriously rebuilt Messianic temple. Is. 66:1,2 records Him reflecting that "Where is the house that ye build unto me?" [i.e. they had not built it as He required in Ez. 40-48], and instead deciding to focus on dwelling in the hearts of the contrite faithful minority who trembled at His word. Ezekiel was sent to preach to the early captives, with the message that they were responsible personally for their exile- even though they insisted they were innocent and were suffering unjustly for their fathers' sins. Ezekiel 18 and other passages labour the point that they personally, sitting their in captivity, were serious sinners. God even warned Ezekiel ahead of time that those captives were "a rebellious nation" (Ez. 2:3), just as wicked as their fathers. There was active opposition to Ezekiel's witness to the exiles- they persecuted him as with "briars and thorns", behaving as scorpions to him (Ez. 2:6). His face had to be hardened against their faces (Ez. 3:8). This was in the very early days of the exile. And yet by the time of Isaiah 66, we see that even well after the restoration had happened, there was still major persecution of the faithful remnant and their prophets. Thus Isaiah speaks of the reapplication of the promises about building a temple- that temple would now be in the individual lives of a faithful remnant. Zech. 4:7 had prophesied that if Zerubbabel lived up to his potential, then a flat tableland would be prepared as a "platform" [Heb.] on which the new temple could be built. But this didn't happen- and so this language was reapplied to the work of John the Baptist in making the rough places of men's hearts smooth, in order for them to accept Jesus, the true temple.

We've seen that the Jewish opposition to Yahweh's prophets argued that Israel had been rejected by God and that there could be no High Priest any more. It seems to me that it is the Jews who are the 'satan' who is rebuked in the court scene of Zech. 3:1-10. I have elsewhere traced the connections between the 'satan' concept and apostate Jews (2). This view was rebuked in the vision; but the point is that it was the Jews who were the satan / adversary to the prophets and the faithful minority. Is. 58:1,2 is a criticism of Judah in exile and also of those who did return to the land- they sought God daily, and yet abused their brethren (Is. 58:6), just as recorded in Neh. 5:15. If they had ceased from their sins, "*Then shall your light break forth as the morning*", *if they had fed the hungry etc,*

then would've been fulfilled the Messianic Kingdom prophecies of the light of Zion rising above the Gentiles etc (Is. 58:10,12 cp. Is. 60:1).

Not only did Cyrus and the other various potential fulfilments of the servant songs fail to rise up to their potential; Judah preferred to stay in the soft life. The sad ending of the book of Esther leaves Judah prosperous in Babylon, having declined the potential exodus back to Zion which God had set them up with. Passages like Ezekiel 18 and Is. 59:9 imply a certain bitterness of Israel towards their God, considering that He had dealt with them unfairly, and inappropriately punished them for the sins of their fathers. Despite having enabled their exit from Babylon, they complained: "Vindication remains far removed from us and deliverance does not reach us" (Is. 59:9). This was an awful spurning of the great salvation enabled for them. They remonstrated against God's message of deliverance from captivity: "Can prey be taken from a warrior? Or can prisoners of a tyrant be rescued?" (Is. 49:24). They thought their salvation was too hard even for God. They made the same mistake as all who reason that their situation or personality is too far gone for God to redeem. For the 'salvation' of the exiles in Babylon is alluded to in the New Testament as a prototype of our salvation in Christ. The good news of *potential* deliverance from Babylon is quoted as the good news of salvation from sin (Is. 52:7-10 = Mk. 1:15; Mt. 10:7,8; Rom. 10:15; Eph. 6:15; Is. 61:1,2 = Lk. 4:16-21). Time and again in the restoration prophecies we encounter statements intended to answer the scepticism felt by the exiles about the promises of redemption from Babylon (Is. 40:27-31; Is. 42:22; Is. 43:22; Is. 46:12; Is. 48:4,8; Is. 49:14). The servant was called to sustain the "dispirited" by the prophetic word (Is. 50:4). And yet passages like Is. 50:4-11 and even Is. 53 speak of how the servant met even physical abuse as well as rejection in his ministry to his fellow Jews. Indeed the servant feels that his mission to them has been a failure (Is. 49:1-6), a complaint met by God's promise that his mission would be in some way reapplied to the Gentiles in their captivity to sin. The way the servant is beaten and has his hair pulled out (Is. 50:4-11) reminds us of how the prophet Jeremiah was treated the same way by the Jews when his message was rejected (Jer. 20:2; Jer. 37:15). The servant was spat at by his fellow Jews- an expression of utter contempt (Job 30:10). Whilst the servant prophecies find their later fulfilment in the Lord Jesus, it seems to me that in their first context, they speak of how a prophet or prophets at the time of the exile were rejected and even beaten up by their fellow Jews. Indeed,

Isaiah ends on a negative note, describing the judgments to come upon the Jews who had rejected the message of deliverance from Babylon (Is. 66:24). Is. 65:8-16; Is. 66:5 etc. speak of a minority of Jews who trembled at the word of prophecy and were Yahweh's servants, who had been disfellowshipped by the leaders of the Jewish community in Babylon. The majority of the captives insisted, according to Ez. 18, that they hadn't sinned, and they were suffering unjustly because of the sins of their fathers; whereas this righteous remnant in Babylon admitted that "we have sinned. Equally with them of old time have we transgressed" (Is. 64:5). They took the message of Ezekiel to heart- unlike the majority. And thus this was the sad end of the great plan developed by the God of all grace for His people in Babylon. They rejected it, and hated His servants who brought that good news to them.

Notes

(1) Here are some nice examples, which reflect the spirituality of those men. Ezra said that God had punished them less than their iniquities deserved (Ezra 9:13), somehow alluding to the prophecy of Is. 40:2, which said that at the time of Zion's restoration, God would admit to having punished her "double for all her sins". Yahweh in His love and pity felt that He had punished them twice as much as they deserved; but Ezra realized that it was less than what they deserved. Similar is Ezra 9:8: "And now *for a little space* grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage". This uses the same relatively rare Hebrew construction as in Is. 54:6-8, which likens Judah to a young wife who had been "refused" during the 70 years captivity: "For *a small moment* have I forsaken thee...in a little wrath I hid my face from thee *for a moment*". Here is Yahweh, likening Himself to a faithful husband feeling more guilty than He was, taking upon Himself the fault for it all, saying that for the "small moment" of the captivity, He had forsaken His people. But Ezra saw that "little space" as a time when they received *grace*; he understood the prophecy of the figs in Jer. 24, that it was only through the captivity and the fact God had graciously not destroyed them but rather preserved them there, that there was the opportunity for a remnant to re-establish the Kingdom. What may appear to some as forsaking is in

fact God's grace to us, when spiritually discerned- whether it be deep within our own lives, or in the state of affairs upon this planet. Yet it should be noted that the prophecy of Jer. 24:6,7 about the good figs seems not to have come true at the restoration- although it could potentially have done so.

(2) See *The Jewish Satan in The Real Devil*.

6-2-1 Isaiah's Prophecies Of Restoration

The Unity Of Isaiah

There's been much talk of how Isaiah 1-39 appears different in style and attitude to Israel from Isaiah 40-66. I'm personally of the conviction that the two 'halves' of Isaiah are by the same inspired author. The phrase "the holy one of Israel" occurs 12 times in Is. 1-39, 14 times in Is. 40-66 (the so called 'second Isaiah'), and only 5 times elsewhere in the Old Testament. The New Testament quotes 'Isaiah the prophet' with the same rubric, regardless of whether 'first Isaiah' or 'second Isaiah' are being quoted (compare Jn. 12:38-40; Rom. 9:22-29; 10:16,20). The Septuagint supports the unity of Isaiah, and the Dead Sea scrolls copy of Isaiah doesn't make any break between chapters 39 and 40. These arguments for the unity of Isaiah must however be balanced against the fact that there is a marked difference in attitude to Israel when chapter 40 begins; and that parts of the prophecy are clearly relevant to Hezekiah's time, whereas other parts are relevant to the events of Judah's restoration and the fall of Babylon which enabled this. My suggestion is that, as with the Psalms and some of the other prophets, Isaiah was edited and in places re-written, under inspiration, during the captivity. Hence, parts of it clearly have relevance to Hezekiah's time and the deliverance from Assyria, but these were used to inspire and teach the Jews in Babylon about a similar great deliverance and restoration which they could expect from Babylon. This is why some commentators (1) have made a convincing case that the whole of Isaiah applies to Hezekiah's time, whilst others have made an equally convincing case that most of the prophecy applies to the restoration (2). My suggestion is that the whole of it did apply to Hezekiah's time, but it was re-written, under inspiration, as applicable to the Jews in exile in Babylon and their deliverance from Babylon, which was set up to happen after the pattern of their earlier deliverance from Assyria.

The Inspired Re-Writing Of The Old Testament In Babylon

Briefly, here are corroborative reasons for thinking that perhaps the whole existing canon of Old Testament Scripture was [under inspiration] edited, re-written and codified during the exile in Babylon:

- According to Jewish tradition, Ezra edited and produced the Pentateuch in its present form in Babylon (3). This would account for the record of Jacob in exile being so verbally similar to the allusions made to it in the restoration-from-Babylon prophecies in Isaiah. There was certainly great scribal activity in Babylon- 2 Macc. 2:13 speaks of Nehemiah founding a library of the Jewish scriptures there. This gives another perspective on the way Nehemiah's prayer in Neh. 1 is so full of references to Deuteronomy- if the latter had just been re-written and presented to the Jews in Babylon. The commands to build the tabernacle are repeated in Exodus, and there is the record of Israel's golden calf apostasy set in the middle of them. Ex. 25:1-31:18 give the tabernacle building commands, then there's the golden calf incident, and then the commands are repeated in Ex. 35-40. Surely this was edited in this manner to give encouragement to the exiles- the commands to rebuild the temple had been given in detail in Ez. 40-48, but the exiles failed- and yet, the implication runs, God was still willing to work again with His people in the building of His sanctuary despite their failure.

- The Talmud claims that the majority of the prophetic books were re-written and edited into their present form during the captivity, under the guidance of a group of priests called "The Great Assembly" (4). There are many verbal points of contact between Chronicles and the returned exiles.

- Time and again we encounter the phrase "to this day" in the historical books of the Old Testament (e.g. "the Syrians came to Elath, and dwelt there to this day", 2 Kings 16:6)- and each time it appears the reference is to the time of the restoration, when presumably those books were edited and rewritten as relevant for the Jews, either those still in Babylon or those who had returned to the land. A good case can be made, for example, that the book of Judges was rewritten at that time in order to show that God's people don't need a King in order to be His people, but rather they can be ruled by Spirit-filled leaders (5).

- The comment in Josh. 15:63 that "the Jebusites dwell with the children of Judah at Jerusalem unto this day" sounds very much as if it were written in the captivity, lamenting the way that the local tribes still lived in Zion. "The children of Judah" is very much a phrase used about the exiles. Thus books like Joshua were written up in the captivity in order to show Judah how they were repeating the sins of their forefathers, and appealing to them thereby to learn the lessons. It's even possible that the lament that "Geshur and Maacath dwell in the midst of Israel unto this day" (Josh. 13:13 RV) is a reference to "Geshem the Arabian" and Sanballat dwelling amongst Israel at the time of their return (Neh. 2:19 etc.).

- It has been observed that the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings have certain similarities. For example, they all quote the Deuteronomy version of Israel's earlier history, leading to the suggestion that Deuteronomy was the first of the collection, a kind of introductory background history. These "former prophets" appear to have been edited during the exile as history which spoke to the concerns and needs of the exiled people of God (6). This combined history speaks mainly of the southern Kingdom, which was the group who went to captivity in Babylon; and it explains why this captivity was justified, as well as giving many examples of where repentance could bring about a restoration (1 Kings 8:46-53 is specific). This history addresses the questions which concerned the captives- does God abandon His people for ever? Are Israel entirely to blame for what happened? Is there hope of restoration after receiving Divine judgment and breaching His covenant? Can God have a relationship with His people without a temple? To what extent will God always honour the promises to Abraham and David? Should other gods also be worshipped? Reading these books from this perspective reveals how incident after incident was especially selected by the inspired editors in Babylon in order to guide God's people there. Take the story of Naaman's Hebrew "maid". Naaman had been the enemy of Israel, and that little child [Heb.] was one of the children of those taken captive. But she witnessed to her captor; he turned to Yahweh; and his skin became like that of "a little child" (2 Kings 5:14)- like her. The message was obvious. The children of the captivity were likewise to witness to their captors and bring them into covenant with Yahweh.

- A comparison of Psalms 14 and 53 illustrate this process of re-writing at Hezekiah's time. These Psalms are both "A Psalm of David", and are virtually identical apart from Ps. 53:5 adding: "There were they in great fear, where no fear was; For God hath scattered the bones of him that encampeth against thee: Thou hast put them to shame, because God hath rejected them". This surely alludes to the Assyrian army encamped against Jerusalem (2 Chron. 32:1), put into fear by the Angels, and returning "with shame of face to his own land" (2 Chron. 32:21). Yet both Psalms conclude with a verse which connects with the exiles in Babylonian captivity: "Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! When God bringeth back the captivity of his people, Then shall Jacob rejoice, and Israel shall be glad". So it would appear that the initial Psalm was indeed written by David; the version of Ps. 14 which is now Ps. 53 was added to and adapted in Hezekiah's time (Prov. 25:1), and both versions had a final verse added to them during the exile.

- There are evident similarities between the vocabulary and style of Zechariah, Job and the prophets of the restoration. Thus both Job and Zechariah refer to the ideas of the court of Heaven, "the satan" etc. My suggestion is that Job was rewritten during the exile, hence the many points of contact between Job and Isaiah's prophecies about the restoration. When we read that Job has suffered less than his iniquities deserve (Job 11:6), this is the very term used to describe Israel's sufferings in Babylon (Ezra 9:13). Job, "the servant of the Lord", is being set up as Israel, just as that same term is used about Israel in Babylon throughout the latter part of Isaiah. Job's mockery by the Arabian friends perhaps parallels the Samaritan and Babylonian mockery of Judah; his loss of children is very much the tragedy of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians which Lamentations focuses upon. And Job's final revival and restoration would therefore speak of the blessed situation which Judah could have had at their return to the land.

God's Change Of Attitude In Second Isaiah

The message of Is. 40-66 seems to me to be that God's everlasting love and grace was enough for Him to be prepared to return the captives to Judah, and establish them there with a Messiah and wonderful Kingdom. The tragedy is that they preferred to stay in Babylon, thus opening up these prophecies to either a delayed or altered fulfilment in the work of Jesus and the final coming of His Kingdom on earth. The earlier chapters of Isaiah lambasted Israel as a "sinful nation, a people laden with

iniquity”, appealing for their repentance (Is. 1:4); whereas ‘second Isaiah’, written or re-written whilst they were in captivity, speaks of Judah as a nation “who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord” (Is. 51:1). God imputed His righteousness to them, because He had unconditionally forgiven them. Instead of calling upon them to mourn, as in first Isaiah, second Isaiah calls upon them to rejoice. They are to repent because God had forgiven them- not repent so that He might forgive them: “I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake [i.e. not for the sake of your repentance or righteousness]... I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud [therefore] return [repent] to me, for I have [already] redeemed you” (Is. 43:25; 44:22). This is God’s grace in its essence. As they sat by the rivers of Babylon, even as they later became caught up in the politics and business of Babylon, God’s heart broke for His people. And He announced this utter grace- that He had forgiven them, even though they’d not really repented, and counted them as righteous. And therefore He begged them to “return”, not only to return to Him in repentance in their hearts, but to show this by ‘returning’ to the land. And, so tragically, they preferred to stay in Babylon, for the most part. His grace was poured out to them... and Israel would not. All we can resolve in our hearts is to feel for God in this tragedy, and to realize that these very same prophecies of grace have been applied to us. And it’s for us to respond to them.

The prophetic message to the exiles was "Comfort ye my people!" (Is. 40:1). Yet this comfort is that spoken of in Ez. 14:22,23, where we read that the exiles would be comforted when they recognized the evil of Judah's ways and recognized that the judgment upon her had been just. But Is. 40 appears to be a message of unconditional comfort to the exiles- without specifically demanding their repentance. But even then, they still failed to accept it and respond; they preferred to stay in Babylon.

Isaiah 35 is an evident prophecy of the future Kingdom of God on earth. But it is replete with connections with the prophecies of Judah’s restoration from Babylon in Isaiah 40-55:

Isaiah 35	Isaiah 40-55
Water in the wilderness	Is. 41:18,19; Is. 43:19,20; Is. 44:3; Is. 50:2; Is. 51:3

God's glory revealed Is. 35:2	Is. 40:5,9
Time of judgment and recompense Is. 35:4	Is. 40:10
Strength to the faint-hearted Is. 35:3,4	Is. 40:9, 29-31
A highway for the return to Zion Is. 35:8	Is. 40:3

The conclusion from this is surely that the way home from Babylon to Judah was to be seen as the entrance into the Kingdom age. Which is why I suggest that the Messianic Kingdom could've come at the restoration. Isaiah's predictions about the return from exile in Babylon (Is. 49:6), the freedom of the land from foreign dominance (Is. 53:8,11), the repopulation of Jerusalem (Is. 54:1), rebuilding the temple (Is. 53:5) etc. all came true at the return of the exiles; but those same prophecies speak of the resurrection of the dead (Is. 42:11; Is. 45:8; Is. 49:8), Messiah teaching the Law to Israel, all the world coming to accept Israel's God and coming to worship in the new temple etc. The prophecies of the restoration of the exiles from Babylon are inextricably connected with these things. And yet they didn't happen; and even those aspects which did, only came true to a very limited extent- solely because of Israel's indolence, and the fact the majority of the Jews remained in Babylon.

Notes

- (1) H.A. Whittaker, *Isaiah* (Wigan: Biblia, 1988); J.W. Thirtle, *Old Testament Problems* (London: Henry Frowde, 1907),
- (2) See the Anchor Bible and other commentaries.
- (3) Carl Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) pp. 232-235 reproduces plates from the synagogue wall at Dura-Europas showing Ezra doing this in Babylon.
- (4) M. Simon and I.W. Slotski, eds, *The Soncino Talmud: Babba Bathra 14b - 15a* (London: The Soncino Press, 1935) Vol. 1 pp. 70,71.
- (5) See W.J. Dumbrell, 'No King In Israel', *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* Vol. 25 (1983) pp. 23-33.
- (6) The similarities of style, language and indications of common editing are explained in detail in Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981); there is a good summary in Terrence Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). See

too M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy And The Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

6-2-2 Cyrus As A Potential Messiah In Isaiah's Prophecies

The servant songs or poems of Isaiah clearly have reference to a Messiah figure who was to appear at the time of the restoration from Babylon. The early songs clearly have reference to Cyrus- he is named as such. Expositors such as Harry Whittaker and J.W. Thirtle have sought to prove the naming of Cyrus as an interpolation, claiming that Isaiah has sole primary reference to the days of Hezekiah. This seems to me to be desperate. The naming of Cyrus, and the specific references to his military campaigns in the prophecies, simply can't be gotten around. To brush all this off as uninspired interpolation and fiddling with the text of holy Scripture just won't do. The references to Cyrus aren't merely the mention of his name. Is. 41:1-5 alludes unquestionably to the dramatic conquest of Sardis by Cyrus in 547 BC. The 'servant' is described as swooping down first from the east and then from the north, trampling local rulers beneath him (Is. 41:2-5,25; Is. 45:1; Is. 46:11). This 'servant' was to end the Babylonian empire (Is. 43:14; Is. 48:14,15), enable the captive Jews in Babylon to return to their land (Is. 42:6,7; Is. 43:5-7; Is. 45:13), restore Jerusalem and the ruined cities of Judah (Is. 44:26-28; 45:13). There can be no serious doubt that it was Cyrus who fulfilled these things. The servant is a "bird of prey from the east" (Is. 46:11)- according to Xenophon, the eagle was the emblem of Cyrus. The servant "victorious at every step" with lightning speed (Is. 41:2) surely refers to how Cyrus conquered the Medes, the former Assyrian empire, and the Lydians before taking Babylon in 539 BC. We should have no problem with a pagan king being described as God's "servant", for that very term is used of Nebuchadnezzar in Jer. 25:9.

Whilst the application of the whole of Isaiah to the times of Hezekiah is sound, the evident reference of Is. 40-66 to the returning exiles implies that this section of Scripture, along with many other prophecies, was re-written under inspiration by the Jewish prophets in Babylon and applied to their own times. Isaiah has so many detailed allusions to Babylonian life and beliefs that it's impossible to think that it was all written in Hezekiah's time, with no reference to the Babylonians. We find the specific names of Babylonian idols (Is. 46:1,2), ceremonies and processions known only in Babylon (Is. 46:7), omens (Is. 44:25), magic

and astrology (Is. 47:1,2,12,13). Time and again there is specific reference to leaving Babylon and returning to Judah (Is. 40:3-11; Is. 42:15,16; Is. 48:20-22; 49:9-12; 52:11,12).

The idea of prophecies being re-written shouldn't come as strange to us. Many of the Psalms are clearly relevant to David, and yet just as clearly relevant to Hezekiah and other Kings. Thus Ps. 41 is David's reflection on the situation of 2 Sam. 15- but evidently it's been re-written with reference to Hezekiah, also afflicted with an "evil disease"; and Ahithophel's part in David's life was played out in Hezekiah's life by Shebna (Is. 22:15). It seems apparent they were re-written over time, and hence have relevance to various historical settings. As an example, consider Psalm 51, which down to v. 17 is clearly relevant to David's sin with Bathsheba. But then, in order to make the entire Psalm an acrostic, we find verses apparently 'added', referring to God building the walls of Jerusalem and acceptable sacrifice being offered again in the temple [which didn't exist in David's time]. David's sin and restoration was evidently understood by some inspired scribe or prophet at the time of the exile to speak to Judah's sin, punishment and restoration. Hence the apparent changes of some passages from "I" to "we". Psalm 137 speaks of Judah in captivity, apparently initially as a result of Sennacherib's invasion as recorded in 2 Kings 18:13. And yet it seems to have been re-written with reference to Judah's captivity at the hands of the Babylonians some years later. This sort of thing would've happened with whole books. J.W.Thirtle claims that the original manuscripts of most Old Testament books were sealed with Hezekiah's seal, as they had been re-written and edited during his time (1)- Scripture itself testifies to him and his men re-organizing the writings of David. Isaiah, with its initial application to Hezekiah, and then its obvious reference to the captivity and restoration, is another example. Isaiah 14, an oracle against the King of Babylon, goes on to speak of him within the same chapter as the King of Assyria (Is. 14:4,22,25). What seems to have happened is that a prophecy relevant to the Assyrian invasion under Hezekiah has been re-written, under inspiration, with reference to the pomp of Babylon being cast down too. Any serious student of Job will have observed the huge number of links and verbal similarities to the restoration prophecies of Is. 40-66. Job lost his family as a result of God's hand, endured the silence of God for a period, and then the Lord 'restored his captivity' (Job 42:10) and he received a new family even more numerous than the old one, and great wealth. Clearly, the story of Job was re-written as

encouragement to the exiles to endure the apparent silence of God, and to believe in their ultimate restoration- as well as an exhortation to pray for their captors, as Job prayed for his friends. The same could even be said of parts of the Genesis record concerning Jacob, who figures so widely in Isaiah as an encouragement to the exiles- for he too went into exile and returned. 2 Macc. 2:13 speaks of Nehemiah collecting the writings of David and editing them, and I suggest that Ezra and Nehemiah may have been responsible for this inspired re-writing of the Old Testament books at the time of the exile. There are several references within the historical books that appear to be notes added during the exile- e.g. Jud. 18:30 refers to a situation being ongoing until the time of the deportation to Babylon. Clearly an inspired editor was at work in Judges some time after the exile.

This leaves us with the ‘problem’ which Whittaker and Thirtle pointed out- how can Messianic language be applied to a pagan king like Cyrus? Rather than run a red line through the text and disregard it as uninspired, I suggest the following solutions.

Firstly, it should be noted that Isaiah 40-55 especially is packed full with allusion to the Marduk cult. All that Marduk claimed to do and be, Isaiah explained as actually true, and solely true, of Yahweh God of Israel. The descriptions of Cyrus as having been anointed etc. are allusions to the way Cyrus was held to have been anointed and raised up by Marduk. Yahweh is saying that actually He, and not Marduk, had done this. The Abu-Habba collection in the British museum actually has an inscription that claims Nabonidus dreamt that Marduk raised up Cyrus (2)- Isaiah’s point is that actually it was the God of Israel who had done this. The references to Yahweh taking Cyrus by the hand, anointing him, pronouncing his name and giving him a throne (Is. 45:1,8) are almost word-for-word what Cyrus claimed about Marduk in his ‘Cyrus Cylinder’.

But secondly and more importantly in our context, it seems to me that Cyrus was a potential Messiah figure. Cyrus was the anointed one, the ‘Christ’ of God (Is. 45:1). Anointing is especially associated with being anointed as a king in the Davidic line (1 Sam. 2:10,35; 2 Sam. 22:51; 2 Sam. 23:1; Ps. 2:2). Could it be that God was willing for Cyrus to become Israel’s King?

Whilst the chronology is admittedly difficult, it would appear that Daniel and his group of faithful friends, possibly Ezekiel, maybe Esther, and some other prophets were in close contact with Cyrus. The enigmatic reference to Cyrus making the decision to allow Nehemiah's mission for the Jews to return *with his queen sitting near him* may suggest Jewish influence upon him (Neh. 2:6). Could it be that potentially, he was enabled to convert to the God of Israel and fulfil the 'servant' prophecies? It would be thanks to him that the seed of Abraham would be redefined- Gentiles could become part of the covenant seed by saying "I belong to Yahweh" or writing Yahweh's Name on their hand (Is. 44:3,5). This didn't actually happen- but the prophecy was reapplied to the way that Gentiles became part of Abraham's seed through baptism into the Name (Gal. 3:27-29). The later servant poems / songs in Isaiah appear irrelevant to Cyrus, but applicable to the nation of Israel as God's "servant", or to one particular "servant". Perhaps this is reflective of the way that Cyrus didn't live up to his potential, and the 'servant' prophecies became capable of other potential fulfilments? And yet Is. 44:28 states: "Of Cyrus he says, 'He is my shepherd; he will fulfil all my purpose'". This is typical of prophecy which is conditional, even though the conditions aren't stated. It is observable that all the servant songs / poems have language and terms which repeat throughout them- it's as if one person *could* have fulfilled them all, they could've been relevant to one person, but in reality this didn't work out.

The Jews of Isaiah's day would have had big problems with this idea of a pagan king becoming the King of Israel and being Yahweh's special "servant" and even Messiah. Folk have the same problem and resistance to the idea today. But passages like Is. 45:9-13, Is. 48:14-16 and much of the material that follows the servant songs, are in fact seeking to answer objections to this- e.g. by saying that God is the potter and men are mere clay, and He will raise up precisely *whom He wishes*- even pagan Cyrus- to be His man, the arm of His salvation, at least potentially.

Notes

- (1) J.W. Thirtle, *Old Testament Problems* (Printland Publishers reprint, 2004 facsimile of the 1914 edition) p. 301.
- (2) See P.A. Beaulieu, *The Reign Of Nabonidus King Of Babylon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 108.

6-3 Jeremiah's Restoration Prophecies

Jeremiah's restoration passages likewise. They are summarized in Jer. 12:15-17, where God describes His conditional dealings with the surrounding Gentile nations in language reminiscent of that He uses about His own people : “After that I have plucked them out I will return, and will bring them again [to Judah] every man to his heritage...and it [i.e., this] shall come to pass, *if* they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name...*then* shall they be built in the midst of my people. But if they will not obey, I will utterly pluck up and destroy that nation”. The *if...then* construction is clearly conditional: the Gentiles could have come and dwelt in the land in a Kingdom-like situation, if Judah had taught them, and if they had responded.

“After seventy years be accomplished at Babylon...then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all you heart. And I will be found of you...and I will turn away your captivity” (Jer. 29:10-14). The LXX suggests that the praying and seeking was perhaps a condition of fulfilment: “And do ye pray to me, and I will hearken...and do ye earnestly seek me, and ye shall find me”.

But the next verses go on to say that because they had false prophets in Babylon, the wrath of God was against them all, and even those in the land would suffer because of them. And further (29:23-26), they committed adultery and vied for leadership amongst themselves. Judah did return, but evidently they didn't seek Yahweh with all their hearts beforehand. And thus they were not fully found of Him, and He did not therefore fully turn away their captivity. Indeed, by choosing to remain in Babylon, they themselves disallowed this turning away of their captivity. God gave Judah in captivity “hope in your latter end” (Jer, 29:11

RV)- a hope of restoration at the end of the 70 years. Yet they preferred the Babylon life, and rejected this hope. “Ye shall seek me...and I will be found of you” (Jer. 29:14) then becomes a conditional statement- then, *if* they sought the Lord, they would have been found of Him.

Jer. 30:10: “Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid”. Isaiah’s restoration prophecies contained not only many clear commands to *not fear* at the time of the restoration (Isaiah 41:10,13,14; 43:1,5; 44:2,8; 51:7; 54:4), but also a clear statement that if they were truly the re-established Kingdom, they would not fear: “Thou afflicted, tossed with tempest [s.w. Zechariah 7:14 re. how Judah was ‘tossed around’ by the 70 years captivity] I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with

The adversaries to the rebuilding *did* make the returned exiles afraid: “For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” (Nehemiah 6:9). Likewise Ezra 3:3: “And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries”. Nehemiah exhorted the people *not* to be afraid perhaps on the basis of Jeremiah’s words (Nehemiah 4:14). Their fear and problem-oriented view of life stopped the Kingdom bursting forth into their experience. That fear was rooted in an obsessive self-interest that eclipsed a true faith in that which is greater and larger than us as

sapphires...and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD; and great shall be the peace of thy children. In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression; for *thou shalt not fear*: and from terror; for it shall not come near thee...and all thy children shall be taught of the LORD” (Isaiah 54:11-14).

Jer 31:4-9: “Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.

Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things...

Behold, I will bring them from the north country [Babylon], and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return

individuals. And so it can be with us. The “stones” were laid (Nehemiah 4:2 s.w.), but not with colours, as could have been. And neither were the foundation stones gemstones, as could have been. And their children were not taught of Yahweh, because the priests were lazy to do so (Mal. 2).

But Judah easily gave up the work of building; they had to be constantly coaxed to get on with it by Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Zechariah. They were, however, effectively declining to allow themselves to be built up into God’s Kingdom, because they were too worried about building their own houses than God’s. And so insofar as we too decline the spiritual upbuilding which there is available in God’s word, so we decline a part in God’s work of building a house for His Name.

They did this, but became so obsessed with treading out

thither...

They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a *straight way*, wherein they shall *not stumble*". Likewise Isaiah 63:13 reminded the returnees that when they had been led through the wilderness to Canaan under Moses, they did not stumble [s.w.].

the grapes that they did it even on the Sabbath, and thereby disallowed the fulfilment of the Kingdom prophecies which were dependent upon them keeping the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15; Isaiah 58:13).

"A great company" didn't return- only 50,000 or so, according to the records in Ezra and Nehemiah. The majority chose to stay in comfortable Babylon.

But both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to have a Babylonian military escort on the journey back; they weren't sure that they would be given "a straight way" with Yahweh's protection. Neh 4:10 records that "Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is *decayed* [s.w. "stumble", Jer. 31:9], and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall". They were easily discouraged by the words of the surrounding world, by the apparent hopelessness of their task; and thus they stumbled. Ezra 8:21 LXX describes how Ezra fasted for them to be given a "straight way", as

Jeremiah had foretold they could have. He saw the need for them to make the effort to fulfil the prophecy. Note how Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim featured "straight" progress; the wheels on earth surely connect with how Israel should have been, moving in a straight way back to the land, in harmony with the Angel-cherubim above them likewise moving in a straight way. But they failed to "keep in step with the Spirit"... They were to walk "each one straight before him" (Isaiah 57:2 RVmg.), as each of the cherubim went straight ahead (Ezekiel 1:12). Psalms 107:2,7 RV speak of Israel being gathered out of the nations and being led in a "straight way" to Zion, as they had [potentially] been enabled to do on their departure from Egypt. Yet then they spent 38 years walking a distance coverable in just 11 days-because they did not walk in the "straight way". The house of Israel were to "measure the pattern" of the temple just as the Angel had done; they were to work in harmony with the Angel, laying out the temple

exactly as the Angel had done in the preceding vision (Ezekiel 43:10 cp. Ezekiel 40:5-13). And we too are to follow where our Angel potentially enables us to go.

Jer 31:12-13: “Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the LORD, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together: for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow”.

The wheat, wine and oil were all withheld by Yahweh as a result of their selfish materialism, according to Haggai and Malachi. And Nehemiah 5:3 specifically mentions that a “dearth” came even in Nehemiah’s time.

The young and old didn’t rejoice together- the old men wept at how small the temple was compared even with Solomon’s, whilst the younger ones rejoiced (Ezra 3:12). Sorrow at realising their sins is a feature of the Ezra and Nehemiah records- rather than joy in the real experience of God’s redemption. Again, are there similarities with ourselves? The life in Christ, the Kingdom life, is of all joy and peace through believing, of joy and peace in the spirit of holiness. But is this the life and mindset which we live?

Jer 31:14: “And I will satiate

But the priests returned to

the soul of the priests with fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, saith the LORD”.

Judah were commanded to return from Babylon in Jer 31:21: “Set thee up waymarks, make thee high heaps: set thine heart toward the highway, even the way which thou wentest: turn again, O virgin of Israel, turn again to these thy cities”. The same command to flee from the land of the north [Babylon] is to be found in Isaiah 48:20; Jer. 51:6; Zechariah 2:6; and they were to “*get thee up to the high mountain*” (Isaiah 40:9), using the same word about Judah ‘going up’ from Babylon to Israel.

mind their own fields because the tithes weren’t paid to them (Nehemiah 13:10).

But the majority of Judah remained in Babylon. And the majority of those who did return, only did so in order for purely personal benefit- of having their own house and land. They ‘went up’ to the land, but not to Zion. With reference to Isaiah 40:9, Hag 1:7-9 exhorted them: “Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. *Go up to the mountain*, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. Ye looked for much [i.e. they expected the promised Kingdom blessings], and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house”. Their focus was on their own lands and farms rather than the glory of Zion (as Nehemiah 13:10,11). They stood related to the things of God’s kingdom, but never

ventured beyond their own personal self-interest. They would not accept that God manifestation rather than human salvation and pleasure was the essential purpose of their God.

Jer 33:18: “Neither shall the priests the Levites want a man before me to offer burnt offerings, and to kindle meat offerings, and to do sacrifice continually”.

But Nehemiah was heartbroken that the temple was “forsaken”, because the “Levites and the singers, that did the work, were fled every one to his field” because the tithes weren’t paid to them (Nehemiah 13:10,11).

Jer. 27:4,5 LXX prophesies that when Babylon falls, then Israel and Judah together “shall proceed, weeping as they go, seeking the Lord their God. They shall ask the way till they come to Zion...and they shall come and flee for refuge to the Lord their God”

When Babylon fell to Cyrus and the Persians, the Jews didn’t take this as any signal to leave. They didn’t repent; they didn’t come weeping to Zion; they stayed put, because the Persians treated them with favour. They didn’t perceive the need to “flee” from the temptations of prosperity, ease, and acceptance in society; and from this the latter day church must take a warning.

Jeremiah's Babylon Prophecies

Jer. 51:8 is clear that those who remained in Babylon rather than returning to Judah would be “cut off in her iniquity”. But actually this threatened judgment didn’t happen in that way. Most of the Jews did

stay there, and simply assimilated into the world around them. Jer. 51:8 opens up another window into what God potentially planned at this time: “Take balm for [Babylon’s] pain, if so be she may be healed”. Balm in Jer. 46:11 refers to repentance. Surely this passage speaks of Judah appealing to Babylon to repent, and then coming out of her, returning to Judah, and leaving her to perish in her iniquity if she didn’t repent. God’s intention here was not carried out by Judah. They made no appeal for Babylon to repent. Only a few of them returned to Judah, most preferring the Babylon life. But *had they done what God suggested*, then the whole prophecies about Babylon’s destruction would have become conditional prophecies, exactly after the pattern of Jonah’s pronouncement of destruction upon Nineveh, which actually never came to pass because they did repent.

Jer. 51:6,45 make it clear that every single Jew (“every man his soul”) was ordered by God to leave Babylon- and Jer. 51:60 clarifies that all these words were written down and that Seraiah read them to the Jews of Babylon. They were *all* supposed to “let Jerusalem come into your mind” (Jer. 50:50)- but in the end, only a minority like Nehemiah did so. Judah’s disobedience was chronic and specific. They rejected all the wonderful things which God had worked out for them in potential. It was such a tragedy, as tragic as when we individually are our community as a whole repeat it in our contexts today.

We have to remember that Jeremiah’s prophecies about Babylon were given in the context of the prophecies about Judah’s restoration. Passages like Jeremiah 50 imply that when Babylon fell, Judah would return to their land and flourish into the Kingdom of God. But this didn’t happen. Another scenario worked out- Darius took over the kingdom of Babylon (Dan. 5:31), and the image prophecy of Daniel 2 explained that there would now have to be a succession of empires before the Kingdom of God would come. I therefore see Daniel 2 as a new prophetic scenario which would have to come into operation if Judah didn’t do as they were told in the prophetic word. Hence the vision has two ways of being read- the whole image could represent Babylon and its next rulers, which would be destroyed in toto and replaced by the restored Kingdom of God at the time it fell; or, it could be read as a long term prophecy of the ensuing centuries, if Judah didn’t turn into the Kingdom of God as they could have done. And this is the outworking that became necessary.

Jeremiah Disbelieved

Jeremiah especially reveals the grace which God was so eager to show to the exiles. Jer. 7:3-7 made it clear that Judah's return to the land was to be conditional upon them not oppressing the poor- only "*then* will I cause you to dwell in this place". Yet in His grace and zeal for His people, it seems God overlooked that condition- for the returned exiles *did* oppress (Neh. 5:1-5), and yet they returned to the land. And yet they would've dwelt in Zion "for ever and ever" (Jer. 7:7) if they had not been abusive to others and truly loved God.

Jeremiah's prophecies of gracious restoration were known by the exiles; but many passages in Isaiah, the Psalms (e.g. Ps. 137:7-9) and Lamentations (Lam. 5:20,21) indicate that the exiles had little conviction they would be fulfilled, considering Judah as "utterly rejected" by God, and just getting on with their lives in Babylon without any real hope in God's salvation. Considering the prosperity of their lives there, this was an all too convenient conclusion for them to draw. Once again we see that false interpretation of Scripture invariably has a moral subtext to it. Is. 40:1,2 speaks a message of comfort to the exiles: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God". But [in full allusion to this prophecy], the exiles were like Rachael who refused to be comforted over her loss (Jer. 31:15); they claimed they found "none to comfort" (Lam. 1:2,16,17,21). But they were wilfully refusing the comfort of God's repeated word of hope and restoration. They didn't grasp the plain teaching of the prophetic word because they didn't want to- it demanded too much of them, and a giving up of the comfortable Babylon life. Hence Is. 43:19 laments: "I am doing a new thing: now it springs forth [in the decree to return to Zion?], do you not perceive it?". And do we "not perceive it?" time and again in our own lives, as to the potentials God is opening up?

6-4 Ezekiel's Restoration Prophecies

And finally, consider Ezekiel's prophecies of the restoration:

Israel and Judah were to Some of the ten tribes did

become one nation in the land, “and my servant David shall be a prince in the midst of them” (Ezekiel 37:16-24). This is clearly the same “prince” as referred to in Ezekiel 45-48. The restoration prophecy of Jer, 30:9 speaks of a returned Judah serving “David their king, whom I shall raise up unto them”- implying that David would have been resurrected at the restoration, if all had gone according to what was possible?

Ezek 34:14: “I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a *fat pasture* shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel”.

The purpose of building the temple system was so that Yahweh’s Name would no longer be profaned by His people (Ezekiel 36:23; 44:7).

Ezek 36:24-29: “For I will take you from among the

return with Judah. Thus “the Jews” is used synonymously with “Israelite” (Nehemiah 2:10; 4:1; 5:1,8; 7:73; 12:47). 12 he-goats and 12 bulls were offered for “all Israel” in Ezra 6:17; 8:35. But still Judah and Israel remained divided; and no “prince” arose to fulfil the prophecies.

The restored Judah did live in a “fat” pasture land, but the fatness of the land was still given to the kings of Persia because of Judah’s spiritual weakness (Nehemiah 9:25,35-37).

They built a temple, but profaned the Sabbath and also the covenant and temple (Mal. 1:12; 2:10,11), in that they saw it all as mere religion, and the fire of a true relationship with the Almighty was smothered.

They were taken from among the many nations that

heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh”.

Israel were to return from captivity, destroy all the Gentile abominations and idols from their land, and then receive a new heart and a new covenant (Ezekiel 11:18,19).

The temple was to be built and sacrifices offered, “and I will accept you” (Ezekiel 43:27). This is to be connected with the prophecy of Ezekiel 20:41, that “I will accept you...when I bring you from the peoples, and gather you out of the countries wherein ye have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you before the heathen”. The context of this verse speaks of Israel

comprised Babylon / Persia; they were brought, as many as could be bothered to go, to their own land. They were cleansed there (s.w. Ezra 6:30; Nehemiah 12:30). But they became un-cleansed through allowing Tobiah into the temple chambers, by trading on the Sabbath, and by marrying Gentiles (Nehemiah 13:9,22,30). The priesthood needed to be “cleansed” again (Mal. 3:3 s.w.). The promise of Ezekiel 36 sounds unconditional- as if, whoosh, God would make His sinful people righteous regardless of their own will. And so some have misunderstood the operation of God’s Spirit in our own days. But although not directly stated, the promise of entry into the new covenant, whereby God would encourage obedience through the work of His Spirit, was conditional. Judah could have entered the new covenant there and then, with all its requirements for a Messiah figure to abrogate the Mosaic law. But they turned back to their uncleannesses, they would not keep God’s statutes, and their potential

being regathered “with a mighty hand and with a stretched out arm”, and “I will purge out from among you the rebels...I will bring them forth out of the land where they sojourn [i.e. Babylon] but they shall not enter into the land of Israel” (Ezekiel 20:34-38).

“And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you” (Ezekiel 36:27-29). Jer. 31:14 likewise had promised the returning Jews “fatness”.

Ezekiel 36:33: “Thus saith the Lord GOD; In the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities I will also cause you to dwell in the cities, and the wastes shall be builded”.

Messiah figures failed to appear. Yet again, the promise of entry into a new covenant was deferred, to be fulfilled in a new Israel who are sprinkled through the waters of baptism. The promise was fulfilled, but in a far different context to that intended.

The mighty hand and stretched out arm of God was available to bring Judah out of Babylon- but most of them preferred to stay there. God was not sanctified before the heathen. The wonderful possibility of a new covenant went unrealized- to be deferred until the true Israel of God are gathered home in our last days.

Ezra 9:9: “For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us [s.w. “put” my spirit] a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations”. They revived the stones out of the heaps (Nehemiah 4:2). A new spirit was potentially given to them, God put in the heart

of men like Nehemiah to revive the work (Nehemiah 2:12 s.w.). But this didn't force them to be obedient. They chose not to be, and so the promised kingdom blessings of corn etc. were replaced by famines, in the times of Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi.

Judah were forgiven at the restoration; but they failed to live the life of response to that grace, and therefore the spirit did not continue with them.

Ezekiel 37:7: "So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone". This meant that the "whole house of Israel" was to stand up from their graves and return as a mighty army to the land. Their attitude in Babylon was exactly as in Ezekiel 37:11: "behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts". These were the very sentiments of Jeremiah in Lamentations, and those who wept by the

The "noise" is s.w. in Ezra 1:1 about the "proclamation" of Cyrus for Judah to return to the land. All of God's people didn't return; the majority preferred to stay in Babylon.

waters of Babylon when
they remembered Zion.

Ez. 16:55 is explicit that both Samaria [the 10 tribes] and Judah would ‘return to their former estate’ at one and the same time. And this passage is clearly in a restoration context. It was potentially possible for the 10 tribes to have returned at the same time as Judah. But somehow, that potential was never made possible by them. In fact, Ezekiel’s prophecies appear to be full of *possible scenarios* for what could have happened at the restoration. Ez. 36:33 says that although Judah had profaned God’s Name in Babylon [despite the prophecy of Jer. which predicted the possibility that they would spiritually mature whilst there!], yet He would sprinkle their hearts by grace and make the new covenant with them; and *then*, “In the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be builded” (Ez. 36:33). But in recorded history, there was no apparent connection between Judah’s forgiveness and the rebuilding of the land.

Ez. 20:30-33 contains God’s response to the elders in captivity wanting Ezekiel to pray for them. They were committing whoredom, idolatry etc. Ez. 36:20 likewise comments how they “profaned my holy name” during the Babylonian captivity. They were not enabling God’s plan of restoration to be realized. Ez. 20:35-40 therefore goes on to outline what was perhaps another possibility- that God would take the entire captive people into the wilderness at the end of the 70 years captivity, and purge out the rebels, and then bring them into the land, where they would have a temple and worship God (Ez. 20:40)- presumably in the temple outlined in Ez. 40-48. But it seems this alternative didn’t work out either. God promised to “be to them [the Jews in captivity] a sanctuary for a little while in the countries [the 127 provinces of Babylon] where they are come” (Ez. 11:16 RV). His intention was that they should be there, preserved by Him even in their punishment, for the “little while” of 70 years. And yet they preferred to remain there in Babylon.

6-5 The Cherubim And The Restoration

Ezekiel’s opening vision of the cherubim was surely to encourage the captives in Babylon that above them was an awesome Angelic system,

that was able to carry them with it back to the land- if they were workers together with God. Although it seemed that they were sitting still, nothing was happening, they were just passing time by the rivers of Babylon, above them there was an intensely active system of Angels working for their good. Asaph, writing Psalms in the captivity, perceived this when [surely referring to Ezekiel's recent vision] he speaks of how the God who dwells between the cherubim is in fact actively leading Judah somewhere (Psalms 80:1). And yet the common phrase "Lord of Hosts" / Angels never once occurs in Ezekiel or Daniel. This outstanding omission is surely reflective of the sad fact that the Angel-cherubim withdrew from the land during the captivity- the land where the Angelic eyes of the Lord had run to and fro previously. Ezekiel 1:20 describes how "Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go...for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels". The wheels, it appears, represented God's people Israel on earth. If they had kept in step with the Spirit-Angel, following Him both to Babylon and back to Judah at His bidding, they would have been in step with God's plan for them, and all would have prospered. This passage appears to be behind Paul's appeal to us to walk in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Ezekiel himself was the great example of this, for he was "lifted up" by the Spirit just as the wheels were lifted up, and went wherever he was taken, backwards and forwards between Babylon and Judah (Ezekiel 8:3; 11:1). He became part of the Cherubic system. Ezekiel had to put his hand under the wings of the cherubim; and then there appeared permanently in the Cherubim visions "the form of a man's hand [i.e. Ezekiel's] under their wings" (Ezekiel 10:2,8). When the cherubim lifted up, so was Ezekiel lifted up (Ezekiel 11:22-24). Judah should have left Jerusalem when the Spirit told them to; and they should have upped and left Babylon when the Spirit told them to. But they were out of step with the Spirit, despite Ezekiel's acted parable of literally being lifted up and going where the Cherubim went. The equivalent of this for us is surely our sense of doing all for God's glory, of having this as the final deciding factor in all our decisions.

We note in this context that it was an Angel who described to Ezekiel the nature of the temple which the exiles were intended to build; and we even read in Ezekiel 40:14 that "He made..." [e.g. the posts of the temple]. The Angels had potentially built that temple; it was for Israel to build according to the pattern of it. And for each of us, there are wonderful things prepared for us to achieve for the Lord, made

potentially possible, with all the host of Heaven eagerly awaiting our fulfilment of them on earth. But so very often they remain only poorly replicated by us. And the temple prophecies of Ezekiel are a classic example. Ezekiel saw a functioning temple- he speaks of “where they washed the burnt offering”, he saw animals being killed, things being laid on tables (Ezekiel 40:38-43). It was all- potentially- ‘happening’. It just had to be realized on earth. The temple was to have cherubim motifs throughout it (Ezekiel 41:18)- as if to show that the Cherubim of Ezekiel 1 had now ‘landed’ on the temple at the end of the prophecy. The vision of God’s glory entering the temple “was according to the vision...that I saw by the river Chebar” back in Babylon (Ezekiel 43:2,3). This is the meaning of the fact that cherubim visions both begin and end the prophecy of Ezekiel. The cherubim would move from Judah to Babylon and then back to Judah, to enter into and dwell in the temple. Yet God’s glory did not enter the temple which Nehemiah built. This was because the people had not followed Ezekiel’s example, they had not identified themselves with the Angelic movements above them, but rather remained dominated by their petty self interests. They never really repented- for Ezekiel 43:11 records Ezekiel being told to only give Judah “the form of the house” and “write it in their sight” only “*if* they be ashamed of all that they have done”. There is no record of Ezekiel giving them the plans for the temple- so the wonderful prophecy could not be fulfilled, because they did not repent.

The sound of the cherubim Angels which Ezekiel heard was like the noise of an earthquake (Ez. 3:12). Those two Hebrew words, for "noise" and "earthquake", occur later in his prophecies, when he hears the "noise" of "shaking" or earthquake as the bones of Israel in exile come together by the spirit / Angelic operation of Yahweh (Ez. 37:7). The Spirit came from four places (Ez. 37:9)- just as there were four cherubim. As the sound of the cherubim was as of a great army (Ez. 1:24), so revived Israel stood up as a great army (Ez. 37:10). The Angel cherubim would work with God's disillusioned and broken people, to revive them, so that they would become like the guardian Angels of Israel above them. The point was that the Angel cherubim system which Ezekiel had seen at work amongst the captives was able to gather them together, and give life to the nation. And yet that didn't happen to those exiles- because they didn't walk in step with the spirit.

“Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion” (Is. 52:8) is a restoration prophecy embedded between verses which speak of the command for Judah to leave Babylon: “Loose thyself from the bands... depart ye, go ye out from thence” (Is. 52:2,11). Who are the watchmen? Surely they are the Angels, who potentially prepared the way for Judah to leave Babylon. Had the people of Judah followed the cherubim Angels above them and all returned to Zion, they would have as it were seen the Angels eye to eye, sung together with the Angels at the new creation of Zion... and God’s eyes are the Angels, so in that sense Judah would have seen eye to eye with God. But they didn’t utilize what God had prepared; they lazily preferred to stay within their comfort zones by remaining in Babylon. In our experience in Christ, the same is all true, day by day. The way is set up for us, and if we bravely and boldly go in the way which the Angels have prepared, the way God intends, then we will have the experience of truly walking with the Lord, singing with His Angels, seeing eye to eye, in foretaste of the final day when we shall finally see Him face to face.

Following The Angel

The return of the exiles led by Ezra made the journey by a "right way" from Babylon to Zion (Ezra 8:21). Yet this is the very word used about the "straight" feet of the Cherubim Angels in Ez. 1:7,23. The return from Babylon involved following in the path of the Angels, walking in step with them. The restoration prophecy of Jer. 31:9 spoke of how the returnees would walk "in a straight way" (s.w.) "by the rivers of waters"- and surely Ezra consciously alluded to this when by the river Ahava he fasted for the exiles to return in a "right / straight way". He knew that these prophecies of restoration would not just automatically come true- they had to be fulfilled by much prayer, fasting and stepping out in faith. But so very few perceived that. And the challenge remains for us today- to walk in the way which God's Angels have potentially prepared for us, with prayer and boldness.

The Divine presence as symbolized by the cherubim Angels was in the land until Judah went into captivity; hence the cherubim removed from Jerusalem. In their machinations against Israel and Judah, her enemies forgot that “the Lord was there” (Ez. 35:10). Yet God’s intention was that His people would return, the Angel cherubim of glory would return,

and again it would finally be true that “the Lord is there” (Ez. 48:35). Note how in Ez. 3:23 the cherubim of glory are described as the Lord being “there”, and yet they move away to Babylon. Israel were being asked to follow their Angel, as they had followed the Angel in the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness. But they refused, generally, and therefore the great things the Angels had potentially made possible were not realized. Our following of the Angel is just as real, and just as much a matter of daily freewill choice, as it was for the exiles.

What Judah prayed for by the rivers of Babylon was indeed heard. There they had asked that God would “visit” them and “return” them (Ps. 80:14). The same two Hebrew words are to be found in Jer. 27:22, where we read that God would exile His people to Babylon and then “visit” them and make them “return”. We meet the same two words in Zeph. 2:7, where God would ‘visit and return’ the captivity of the remnant of Judah. But when God did “visit” His people, just as when He ‘visited’ His people in the gift of His Son, they didn’t want to ‘return’ or respond. Those who had desired ‘the day of the Lord’ at that time had been praying for it, when it was ‘to no end’ for them. And we have to ask ourselves whether we really mean our prayers for the Lord’s return. Jer. 27:22 predicted that God would “visit” His people and “bring them up”. Those very two words are found in the declaration of Cyrus as recorded in 2 Chron. 36:23: “God hath charged [s.w. “visited”] me to build him a house in Jerusalem... who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up [s.w. “bring them up”]”. The most powerful monarch in the Middle East made the humanly bizarre and inexplicable command to “go up” to the land. ‘Going up’ and ‘visiting’ are language associated with Angels. The people were being encouraged to follow the cherubim-Angel. But most of the people said ‘No that’s fine, we’ll give some money, but we’ll stay here thanks. We won’t be ‘going up’’. And in essence, we are *so* similar as a community.

ANGELS AND THE RESTORATION

Angels In Jeremiah

There is much reference to Angelic language in the prophecies of Israel's return from captivity in Babylon, which also points forward to the part Angels play in the present and future regathering of Israel. It is significant that Ezra and Nehemiah speak of the "God of Heaven" whilst

Zechariah speaks of the "God of the earth" or 'land' of Israel, perhaps because the Angel of Israel literally went to Heaven when the glory departed from Jerusalem, and returned, in a sense, at the restoration- to depart again at Christ's death ("Your house is left unto you desolate"; of the Angel that once dwelt in the temple).

The following commentary on the relevant passages highlights the main uses of Angelic language and the implications that follow.

Jeremiah

The latter day application of Jeremiah and Ezekiel have possibly been emphasized to the neglect of their primary reference to the Babylonian captivity and restoration. This is no doubt due to a (correct) reaction against the critical school of thought which assigns a vague primary application to much Bible prophecy and then proceeds to mutilate the text.

Chapter 23

23:3 "I will gather the remnant of My flock"- the Angel of Israel is likened to a shepherd in Ps. 80:1; Is. 63:9-11 etc.

v. 4 "I will set up shepherds over them which shall feed them"- rulers who would genuinely care for Israel like the master shepherd, the Angel, did. Jeremiah was frequently moved to lament the false shepherds of Israel, which is understandable if the Angel shepherd of Israel inspired Jeremiah. He would have been deeply hurt at his flock being left to ruin by those to whom He had delegated His shepherding role (cp. how in Is. 63:9-11 both the Angel and Moses appear to be the shepherd that led Israel).

v. 5 "I will raise unto David a righteous branch, and a king shall reign and prosper". Zech. 6:12 interprets this as a reference to Zerubbabel: "the man whose name is the branch. . . shall build the temple of the Lord". Zerubbabel being a king-priest was in the kingly line, and thus can correctly be called a king in the line of David (Matt. 1:12; Lk. 3:7; 'Sheshbazzar' of Ezra 1:8 is the Babylonian equivalent of 'Zerubbabel'; Ezra 3:8 describes his brothers as "priests and Levites"). Great prince Nehemiah humbly entered Jerusalem incognito on an ass (Neh. 2:11-

15)- it is a wild speculation that Zerubbabel did the same, and thus provided a primary basis for Zech. 9:9 "Thy king cometh unto thee (also unrecognized, in the case of Jesus entering spiritually ruined Jerusalem). . . lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass".

v. 7,8 "They shall no more say, The Lord liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; but, The Lord liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them" (primarily fulfilled by the Babylonian policy of scattering their captives among other nations they conquered- hence the existence of the Samaritans in Israel). The Angel brought Israel out of Egypt- and was also responsible for their regathering from Babylon.

v. 11 The Babylonian captivity was to be because "in My house have I found their wickedness, saith the Lord". The Angel that dwelt in the temple could call it "My house".

v. 14 "They are all of them unto Me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah"- both of whom were visited and destroyed by Angels. Similarly the Angels would bring judgement on Jerusalem

v. 15,16 "The Lord of Hosts "(Angels). This title of God is common in these prophecies.

Chapter 24

v. 1 "Two baskets of figs were set before the temple of the Lord"; one representing the apostate Jews who remained in the land, and the other those who went to Babylon and later revived spiritually. We have seen that an Angel dwelt literally in the temple. This vision of two groups of Jews standing before an Angel is probably the basis of the vision of Zech. 3, where Joshua and the Jews eager to rebuild Jerusalem stand before the Angel, with the satan standing there too. 'Satan' is often associated with apostate Jews in the New Testament.

v. 5 "The God of Israel" (Jacob)- Angelic language.

v. 6 "I will set Mine eyes (Angels) upon them for good"

v. 7 "I will give them an heart to know Me"- the Angels acting directly on a man's heart.

v. 10 "The land that I gave unto them and to their fathers"- done by the Angel.

Chapter 25

v. 11 "This whole land shall be a desolation". The Angels of Zech. 1:11 reported that "all the earth (land- of Israel) sitteth still and is at rest" (cp. also Jer. 30:10), indicating that they were responsible for the state of the land.

Chapter 29

This chapter stresses the Angelic title "Lord of Hosts" (v. 8,17,21,25)

v. 10 "I will visit you" (God manifestation through the Angels) "after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon". Notice the further similarity with the visiting of the Jews by the Angel at the Exodus.

The use of Exodus language in both Isaiah and the other prophets regarding the return from captivity creates a link between them and Isaiah. This means that Isaiah has a dual application to both Hezekiah's time and also the restoration (how else can the Cyrus passages be satisfactorily understood?). For more evidence of this, see the appendix.

The similarity of language makes the equation look like:

Angel visiting Israel in Egypt= Angel saving Judah from Assyria in Hezekiah's time= Angel saving Judah from the Babylonian captivity.

v. 12 "Then shall ye call upon Me, and ye shall go and pray unto Me, and I will hearken unto you"- prayer to God manifest in the Angel.

v. 14 "I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places, whither I have driven you, saith the Lord: and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive". All this was the work of the Angel.

v. 19 "They have not hearkened to My words, saith the Lord, which I sent unto them by My servants the prophets"- Angels inspiring the word of God.

Chapter 31

v. 28 "Like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict, so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the Lord".

The interpretation of Jer. 1:11 in 'Angels and the word of God' in Chapter 8 shows that the watchers here are Angels.

v. 31 "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah". Will the future covenant with Israel be made through Angels? Or is this regarding the new covenant that the Angels arranged in Christ? See 'Angels and the end of the Law' in Chapter 12 for details of how separate groups of Angels instituted both the Law and Christian dispensation.

v. 32 "Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt". This covenant was given by the Angel at Sinai. "Which My covenant they break; and should I (therefore) have continued an husband unto them?" (AVmg.). This associates the Angel with marrying Israel, and would explain the passages in Ez. 16,20 and elsewhere which speak of God falling in love with Israel and being flattered by their love. The implication in these passages is that God made an emotional decision in 'proposing' to Israel at Sinai. Such language is far better suited to Angels than to God Himself. The Angel here in v. 32 seems to be saying that His divorcing Israel would be justified- and as we see later in Hosea, God did divorce Israel. This contradicts- apparently- God's personal abhorrence of divorce. The situation appears less contradictory if it is recognized that the Angels actually divorced Israel, with God looking on and accepting the reason for the Angel's action. Mal. 2:14 brings this out: "The Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant". This "wife of thy youth" cannot be God Himself- seeing that He is witnessing between Israel and this other party. It is fitting if she therefore represents the Angel, whom

Israel married in her national youth at Sinai, where the Angel made the covenant with Israel to constitute Himself "the wife of thy covenant". It should be remembered that Malachi was prophesying in the same context of the restoration as Jeremiah. The Jeremiah passage shows that just before the captivity God, manifest in the Angel, considered divorcing them, and He thought similarly after the restoration too, according to Malachi. "The God of Israel. . . the Lord of Hosts (Angelic titles) saith that if He hate here, put her away" (AV: "The Lord hateth putting away". The ambiguity here seems designed)). This is the same idea as Jer. 31:32- the Angel saying He would be justified in divorcing Israel, although He did not want to.

v. 33 "I will put My Law in their inward parts". The Law was given by Angels; again, notice the action of Angels on the human heart. The word is soon to be placed in Israel's stony hearts- and the power of the Spirit Angels will be operative in this.

". . . and will be their God". The Angel will still be "the God of Israel" in the Kingdom; or will He be replaced by Christ?

v. 36 "If those ordinances depart from before Me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever"- the Angel of Israel will always preserve them.

Angels In Ezekiel

EZEKIEL

The primary fulfilment of Ezekiel too is in the restoration from Babylon. The great emphasis on the Angel-cherubim shows the importance of the Angels in it. The Cherubim of chapter 1 "came out of the north" (v. 4). "The North" in the prophets often refers to "the north country" of Babylon. Is the whole vision primarily describing the Angels coming from Babylon, with the wheels "upon the earth" (v. 15) representing natural Israel under Angelic control? Thus "when the living creatures (Angels) went, the wheels went by them "(v. 19), due to the Angelic inspiration of the Jews and their touching the hearts of men like Cyrus, Ezra and Nehemiah "according to the good hand (Angel) of . . . God upon" them; "the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels" (v. 20). Remember that the Angels are the vehicles of God's Spirit. The visions

of the glory progressively removing from the temple show the Angel departing from Jerusalem, and then in chapters 40-48 the glory Angel returns to a re-built Jerusalem. Recall how the Angel in Ex. 33 and 34 is also described as the "glory". What other primary application can chapters 1 and 40-48 have? The exact dimensions of the temple given in Ezekiel recall Zech. 1:16 and 2:11, where the Angel accurately measures Jerusalem in preparation for the rebuilding of the temple. In the same way as it is possible to argue that Christ's second coming in AD70 was described in detail but was postponed to the last days because of Israel's lack of spiritual response, it may be that Ezekiel's visions of the temple were what should have been achieved during the restoration, but because of the feeble spiritual response of the Jews during and after the restoration, as lamented by Malachi, Zechariah and Nehemiah, the full glory of the temple which God intended was postponed until Christ's return in our last days.

Ezekiel's familiar prophecies of Israel's regathering thus have their primary fulfilment in the restoration. Ez. 36:36 is obviously relevant: "The heathen that are left round about you (the other nations that the Babylonians had placed in Israel) shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places" (by the miraculous rebuilding of the temple amidst great opposition). 37:14 alludes directly back to the vision of the Angel-cherubim's spirit being placed in the "wheels" of natural Israel: "I (the Angel) shall put My spirit in you, and ye shall live". There are many links discernible between Ezekiel and Zechariah, as they both prophesy concerning the same scattering and restoration of Israel. Just two examples:

Ezekiel	Zechariah
36:29 "I will also save you from all your uncleanness: and I will call for the corn, and will increase it, and lay no famine upon you".	9:17 "Corn shall make the young men cheerful, and new wine the maids. . . how great is His goodness" (in forgiveness).
37:16 "Judah. . . the children of Israel. . . Joseph, the stick of Ephraim. . . all the house of Israel"	10:6 "The house of Judah. . the house of Joseph. . they of Ephraim"

Angels In Zechariah

Zechariah Chapters 1-3

The first half of this prophecy is packed with Angelic language and insight into exactly how the Angels scattered and restored the Jews. The allusions to Angelic activity appear to diminish in the second half of the prophecy, as the emphasis shifts away from the primary fulfilment in the restoration to the more glorious regathering of Israel and the establishment of the Kingdom.

Zechariah Chapter 1

v. 3 "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels); Turn ye unto Me, saith the Lord of Hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the Lord of Hosts".

The triple repetition of "Lord of Hosts" clearly points towards the Angels. 'Turning' back to God has the implication of patching up a marriage: "If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? . . . yet return again unto Me, saith the Lord" (Jer. 3:1). This is similar to Jer. 31:32 and Mal. 2:14 already considered, where again in an Angelic context God, through the Angel, implies He would be justified in divorcing Israel.

Mal. 3:7 seems a parallel passage : "Even from the days of your fathers (cp. Zech. 1:2,4,5) ye re gone away from Mine ordinances (given by an Angel), and have not kept them. Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of Hosts" (Angels).

v. 4 "The former prophets have cried, saying, Thus saith the Lord of Hosts"- Angels responsible for inspiration. "They did not hear"- alluding to Jer. 34:14, where the context is about the keeping of bondmen. This was a problem during the restoration period (Neh. 5:1-12).

v. 6 "Like as the Lord of Hosts (Angels) thought to do unto us. . so hath He dealt with us"- as if the idea came into the Lord's mind and He decided to act on it; the language of limitation, surely, seeing the 'logos' was with God Himself from the beginning.

v. 8-11 "A man riding upon a red horse, and he stood among the myrtle trees"- defined in v. 10,11 as an Angel: "O my Lord, What are these? And the Angel that talked with me said. . . they answered the Angel of the Lord that stood among the myrtle trees". The red, speckled and white horses behind him (1:8; 6:2-7) would therefore also appear to be ridden by Angels- indeed they are called "the four spirits (Angels; Ps. 104:4) of the Heavens" in 6:5. The horse riders of Rev. 6 are clearly based on this vision in Zech. 6, and they would therefore be Angels. Zech. 6:5 describes the horses as "standing before the lord of the whole earth"- the mighty Angel of the Cherubim that stands for the land (earth) of Israel. In 1:8 they are behind Him, although He then sends them out to survey the state of the land of Israel. They return to Him, reporting that "we have walked to and fro throughout the earth (land), and behold, all the earth sitteth still and is at rest". Is there any reason to doubt that these Angels literally walked about in the land, albeit unseen, at a similar speed to which we walk? They walked "to and fro" because it is not in their ability to know the exact situation of a country just from a cursory glance. The comment of the Angel on this was: "I am very sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease" (v. 15)- that were sitting at rest in God's land. This scenario is similar to that in 1 Kings 22, where Angels come and go from God, reporting back information and receiving commands, showing how much the Angel in the myrtle trees, "the Lord of all the earth" (land), was a representation of God Himself.

v. 12 "The Angel of the Lord answered and said, O Lord of Hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem"- an Angel praying 'O God of us Angels. . .' Angels have the same problems grappling with time periods as we do! Notice it was the "Lord of Hosts" (Angels) who "had indignation these threescore and ten years" against Jerusalem.

v. 13 "And the Lord (of Hosts) answered the Angel that talked with me with good words and comfortable words". These words of comfort therefore came from a "comforter"- the title of Israel's Angel (see Chapter 13). There must surely be a highly significant connection here with Is. 40, the start of Isaiah's prophecies concerning the restoration:

"Comfort ye My people, saith your God" (Is. 40:11)- the God of Israel was manifested through an Angel. "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her appointed time (the 70 years) is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned" (40:2). Zechariah explains how the Angels

spoke comfortably to Jerusalem, enabling the restoration. "Comfortably" means literally 'to the heart'- and we have seen that the Angel, "the good hand of . . . God" acted upon the hearts of Ezra and Nehemiah, stirring up the spirit of Cyrus, to enable the restoration. Nehemiah actually means 'Comfort of Yah'; 'Nehemiah ye, Nehemiah ye My people'. The Angel spoke comfort to Jerusalem through the words and work of Nehemiah.

Jerusalem had by the end of 70 years "received of the Lord's hand (the Angel) double for all her sins". Is. 40 can therefore be seen as the Angel preparing the way for Cyrus' decree. This is confirmed by the similarities between Is. 45 concerning Cyrus and Is. 40:

Isaiah 40	Isaiah 45
v. 3,4 "Prepare ye the way... make straight in the desert a highway. . . the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain".	v. 1,2,13 "Thus saith the Lord to Cyrus. . . I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight. . . I will make straight all his ways. . . he shall build my city, and he shall let go my captives"

Notice too the emphasis in both chapters on the natural creation.

Indeed, Cyrus is closely identified with the Angel using him; "He is my shepherd. . . saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built" (Is. 44:28), exactly as the Angel-shepherd (Is. 63:9-11; Ps. 80:1) of Israel said. This explains why an Angel can be called "the prince of Persia" in Dan. 10:13. Is it an 'undesigned coincidence' (not that any exist in Holy Scripture anyway) that John the Baptist and his disciples (cp. Elijah's school of prophets) are called Angels (Mal. 3:1; Lk. 7:24)? It is as if the same Angel worked through Nehemiah and Cyrus to "prepare. . . the way" as worked through John years later.

Malachi 4 is relevant to all this. It speaks of "The Lord of Hosts" (Angels); notice the triple repetition of this phrase in the few verses of the chapter, and the reference to this Lord giving the Mosaic Law in v. 4; which was Angelic work. The Angel says that the day was coming upon Israel when the earth (land) would be smitten with a curse (4:6), and a day of fiery trial would result in them not being left "root nor branch"

(4:1). These are both clear titles of Christ. The Angel can change His mind, we know. It seems that the Angel is threatening to totally cast off Israel and leave them without even the hope of Christ, the root and branch which had previously been promised to Israel in their times of lowest spiritual ebb (e. g. in the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah) to remind them that although they sinned, a root and branch in the person of Christ would still arise to save them. Such a threat cannot have been made by God Himself, who knew from the beginning the nature of His purpose with natural Israel as the seed of Abraham His friend. This Angel warned Israel that "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet. . . lest I come and smite the earth (land) with a curse" (v. 5,6). Elijah being sent by an Angel here in Mal. 4 confirms our interpretation of Is. 40- that Cyrus and the Elijah prophet were sent by an Angel.

v. 14 "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion (the temple) with a great jealousy". "Jealous" being the same Hebrew word translated "zealous", we see the tremendous zeal of the Angels for the restoration. Hence the ability of Ezra and Zerubbabel to achieve so much, seeing that they worked with the Angel. The pathetic, half hearted response of the Jews due to their obsession with materialism as decried by Haggai, Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah must have been so 'frustrating' for the Angels, who were willing to provide so much power and success for those who would whole-heartedly commit themselves to the work. How many similarities with the new Israel?

v. 16 "I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of Hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem". As the Jews literally returned to Jerusalem, the Angel too physically returned to "My house"- where He used to live. To some limited degree the Angel must have literally been in the temple- as Ez. 40 prophesied would happen. However, in the same way as the temple described by Ezekiel was not built on the scale intended by the Angels because of Israel's apathy, so maybe the Angelic presence too was greatly diminished to what it could have been. The presence of the temple Angel in Lk. 1 indicates that He was there to some degree. The Lord of Hosts stretched the line upon Jerusalem by the Angel surveying and measuring Jerusalem as described in Zech. 2, Rev. 11 and Ez. 40-47.

v. 18,19 "Four horns. . . which have scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem". The number four is associated with the four cherubim

Angels- the four types of Angel- controlled punishment explained elsewhere in these studies.

v. 20,21 "Four carpenters. . . are come to fray them (the four horns), to cast out the horns of the Gentiles, which lifted up their horn over the land of Judah to scatter it". The four carpenter Angels "frayed" the horn Angels which had scattered Israel. For another example of Angels casting out other Angels from a previous position, see 'Angels and the ending of the Law' in Chapter 12. The Hebrew for 'fray' means 'to hasten (with anxiety), to frighten'. Thus one group of Angels hastens the fulfilment of other Angels' work; hence in v. 12 an Angel prayed to the Lord of Hosts (Angels) encouraging them to end their indignation because the 70 years were ended. Similarly the Comforter Angel says that Jerusalem has "received of the Lord's hand (Angel) double (i. e. too much?) for all her sins" (Is. 40:2), and that her warfare ('appointed time') has ended, or expired. The phrase "appointed time" is the same word translated "host", used concerning the Angels, thus indicating that the period of the captivity was under Angelic control. Thus Dan. 10:1 also points out that "the time appointed was long"- implying too long, seeing that "the thing was true"?. This helps us to explain Angels being in some ways in opposition to each other in Daniel, e. g. the Angel prince of Persia withstanding another Angel in His action because of the need to execute a certain time period first.

Zechariah Chapter 2

This chapter exemplifies the relationships between the Angels in implementing God's purpose. Chapter 1 has described the continuing sins of the Jews, and the Angelic actions in punishing both the Jews (by the four horse-Angels), and their oppressors by the four carpenter-Angels. In chapter 2 an Angel begins to prepare judgements on Jerusalem, but is interrupted by another Angel who describes God's plan to restore Jerusalem, and quickly corrects the impression made on Zechariah by the first Angel.

v. 1 "A man with a measuring line"- the Angel of 1:16; cp. Ez. 40:3; 47:3; Rev. 21:15-17 and the idea of "the measure of a man, that is an Angel". Measuring is a figure of judgement- e. g. "judge not. . . for with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you" (Mt. 7:12); "shall I

come unto you with a (measuring) rod?" (i. e. in judgement- 1 Cor. 4:21).

v. 3 continues: "The Angel (i. e. the one doing the measuring) that talked with me went forth, and another Angel went out to meet him, and said unto him, Run (i. e. run back), speak to this young man (the observing Zechariah), saying, Jerusalem shall yet be inhabited".

The Angelic language continues: "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels). . . I will come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee" (v. 8,10)- i. e. the Angel would physically return to Jerusalem (the temple? In which case this has yet to be fulfilled). The primary fulfilment of this was in the return from Babylon- the Angel led them back across the deserts, physically moving with them, to enter Jerusalem. This would explain the restoration from Babylon in terms of the wilderness journey and the Angel's guidance of them then- because this very same Angel was involved in leading them through a different wilderness, back to Israel.

v. 5 especially has reference to the Angels' part in the restoration: "I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her". As the Angel had been a pillar of protecting fire to Israel previously, He would be to them instead of a physical wall as they started rebuilding Jerusalem amidst great opposition, with no physical wall to protect them.

Zechariah Chapter 3

A theme of Zechariah's early prophecies is the opposition between groups of people, individuals or Angels who want to rebuild the temple and restore Israel, and adversaries to them. Thus in chapter 1 there are the carpenters opposed to the horns, and the Angel who wants to measure (judge) Jerusalem being countermanded by the Angel who decrees that Jerusalem is to be inhabited in chapter 2. This is continued in chapter 3 by the vision of Joshua and satan standing before the Angel. It is suggested that this 'satan' is an Angel (we are familiar with satan Angels from 1 Chro. 21:1 and Num. 22:22 at least); this is because groups of people, even evil ones, have their viewpoint represented or brought to the notice of the court of Heaven by a satan Angel- a 'devil's advocate', as it were!

The satan Angel "resists" the Angel representing Joshua. The resisting was during the 21 year period when the temple rebuilding was suspended (Ezra 4:24). This corresponds to the 21 days (years), during which the Angel prince of Persia resisted Gabriel's work of rebuilding (Dan. 10:13). Taking this further, this 21 day-year period is the same as the three weeks (21 days) which Daniel spent praying for the rebuilding to commence. Somehow- and the complexity of the situation is well beyond the present writer- the period Daniel spent praying was over-ruled; there is a sense of time in the court of Heaven, and probably will be in the Kingdom too (e. g. Zech. 14:16). His prayer was answered from the first day he prayed (Dan. 10:12), but despite one Angel being eager to answer it, another opposed it. Why. . . how. . . ?

v. 1 "And He shewed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and satan standing at His right hand to resist him". The prayers offered by Joshua the high priest came before the Angel to whom all prayers go initially, in the form of an Angel presenting his case; whilst the satan Angel opposed Him. He was a satan by reason of representing the Samaritan opposition. In our notes on Jer. 24:1 we suggested that the two baskets of figs placed before the Angel in the temple laid the basis for this vision. The baskets represented the faithful and apostate Jews. The Joshua Angel would have represented the faithful Jews eager to rebuild Jerusalem, whilst the satan Angel would represent the apostates whose very existence militated against God answering the prayers of the rest of Israel. Does the same principle apply to Israel after the spirit- that the apostasy and apathy of some hinders the answering of the common prayers of the others? And our common prayer is surely for the second coming and the greater restoration of the true temple.

v. 2 "And the Lord said unto satan, The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee". The Angel-Lord (Jude 9) says that despite the sins of the bad figs in Israel and the opposition of the Samaritans, His choice of rebuilding Jerusalem will stand. Jude 8-10 lends support to this line of interpretation. Jude says that Michael the Archangel did not "bring a railing accusation" against the satan Angel, nor did He "despise dominion" (another Angel-ruler) or "speak evil of glories" (AV:"dignities"; the same word is in Jude 24 "the presence of His glory"- the Angels). This marked lack of aggression which Jude emphasizes shows that there was no conflict between the

Angels, as may be wrongly inferred from the severity of the English word "rebuke".

Our demeanour generally, especially with each other when it is necessary to have divergent opinions, or to correct others' ways of executing God's purpose as they see it, should be done in the same mutually loving spirit. Notice how Jude 8 links the satan of Zech. 3 with a "dominion"- a ruler or 'prince'. The satan Angel who resisted the Joshua Angel for 21 days is "the prince of Persia" in Dan. 10:13. "The Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee; is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?". Another allusion in Jude (v. 23) interprets this: "Others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh". The implication is that the Angel just about decided in favour of saving Jerusalem out of the 'fire' of eternal punishment (cp. Jer. 17:27) for her sins- He had "compassion, making a difference" (v. 22). The "garment spotted by the flesh" must connect with the "filthy garments" worn by Joshua as he came into the Angel's presence.

v. 4,5 The Angel "answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee. . . so they (the Angels that stood by). . . clothed him with garments. And the Angel of the Lord stood by".

Does this mean that the Angel commanded other Angels to arrange Joshua's forgiveness and to end his being "polluted from the priesthood" (due to lack of proven ancestry and the high priestly garments), in order that the prayers he presented should be more powerful? This would explain why he was given both a mitre and garments (v. 5). In passing, why did Zechariah suggest giving him a mitre (v. 5)? The greater Joshua was also clothed with a change of nature by the Angels (as outlined in Rev. 4 and 5).

v. 7 "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels); If thou wilt walk in My ways, and if thou wilt keep Mine ordinance (of Lev. 18:30 about the abominations of the surrounding nations). . . thou shalt also judge My house. . . My courts, and I will give thee places to walk among these (Angels) that stand by".

"My house" refers to the Angel dwelling in the temple; the offer of places to walk among the Angels is the same idea as being "made equal unto the Angels" in Lk. 20:35,36.

v. 8 "I will bring forth My servant the Branch". As shown earlier, it would seem that an Angel was personally associated with arranging the advent of Jesus, as He arranged that of Zerubbabel, the type. Ps. 80 has a clear Angelic context; it describes the God of Hosts, His right hand, making "the branch. . . strong for Thysel" (i. e. so Jesus could fully reconcile them with God?).

v. 9 "I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day. . . saith the Lord of Hosts" (Angels). Again, the ability of an Angel to arrange forgiveness of sins.

The Vision Of Seven Lamps

Zechariah Chapter 4

The vision is of a bowl with seven lamps, fed from a sump of oil in a bowl which is supplied by pipes from two olive trees.

The "seven lamps are the seven eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth" (Zech. 4:2,10)- i. e. they represent the Angels active in the land of Israel to enable the restoration. They are energized by the spirit in the bowl. The candlestick being part of the tabernacle was therefore also a "pattern of things in the Heavens"; it represented how the Heavenly organization of Angels works. The olive trees "are the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (v. 14). The "Lord of the whole earth" is the Angel of 3:1 (making "the God of the earth" in Rev. 11:4 also an Angel). The olive trees actually stand by the candlestick, thus making the whole arrangement of bowl, branches, pipes and lamps represent the workings of the one Angel- in the same way as the Angel of Jesus in Rev. 1 can somehow stand in the midst of a candlestick.

The olive being a symbol of leadership (in Judges 9:8 the olive tree was the first tree to be thought of as a national leader), it would be fitting that they represented Joshua and Zerubbabel. However, there is a definite allusion to the Angel cherubim here. "Within the oracle he made

two cherubims of olive tree" (1 Kings 6:23); "and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two (olive tree) cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony" (Ex. 25:22). If the olive trees are like the Cherubim, then "the Lord of the whole earth" of Zech. 4:4 which was between them connects with the ark- the Angel that dwelt over the ark, between the Cherubim. Josh. 3:11-13 also makes the connection between the ark and the "Lord of all the earth". The candlestick therefore represents the Angel co-ordinating the restoration, as well as the other "seven" Angels in His control.

This shows the close association between the Angel-cherubim and Joshua and Zerubbabel. Thus from the Angelic inspiration of these two men, the spirit was supplied to the candlestick through the gold pipes- the faith they showed and their prayers supplied the spirit which enabled the seven lamp Angels to act. However, the close link between the two olive trees and the Cherubim Angels once again shows that the ultimate impetus to our faith, prayers and spirituality comes from God's spirit in the Angels rather than from any personal inspiration we may feel. This idea of the flow of the spirit, enabling God's action through the Angels as a result of our prayers, is found elsewhere:

- "This shall turn to my salvation, through your prayer, and the supply of the spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19)
- ". . . how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit ("good things", Mt. 7:11) to them that ask Him?" (Lk. 11:13).

Of Oil And Olives

Thus in the vision of the seven lamps, the prayers and faith of Joshua and Zerubbabel were the oil, the spirit that was supplied to activate the seven lamp Angels that went to and fro in the land of Israel preparing the way for the restoration. However, the olive trees were "sons of oil" (4:14 AVmg)- they were anointed with the oil initially. Is this a dim foreshadowing of the birth of the spirit ("sons of oil")? The oil of the spirit is clearly a symbol of the word- the men of the olive trees were sons of the spirit word through their belief in the word of God through Jeremiah concerning the restoration. The olive branches emptied the golden oil out of themselves- if we are to have the same victory of faith as Joshua and Zerubbabel, we have to in the same way pour ourselves

out in prayer and golden faith. The amount of oil flowing into the bowl determined the amount flowing out of it to the lamp Angels, seeing that there was a constant flow of the oil in the vision. Thus the amount and intensity of our prayers and spirituality affect how brightly the Angels burn in their zeal to fulfil our requests. Notice too the power of the prayers of a small minority of God's people. The two olive branches which feed the bowl are replaced by Christ, the one branch (Zech. 3:8; 6:12), who would provide the Spirit in abundance so that the true spiritual temple could be built- "the branch. . . shall grow up out of His place, and He shall build the temple of the Lord" (6:12).

It is difficult to relate Rev. 11:1-5 to all this. It is clearly based on this and other visions in Zechariah, but the exact links are elusive. The measuring of the temple in Rev. 11 is similar to that in Zech. 2, which was stopped by the Angel. In Rev. 11 the measuring (for judgement) goes ahead for the Jews but not for the Gentiles. The two witnesses of Rev. 11 are empowered to overcome their adversaries, as Joshua and Zerubbabel were given power to overcome theirs. There are often what appear (superficially?) to be vague allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation, and it is hard to determine their exact significance (e. g. Job 3:21= Rev. 9:6). Maybe the points of contact between Zechariah and Rev. 11 are examples of this? But Rev. 11:4 seems specific: "these are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks". And why two candlesticks when there was only one in Zechariah?

Let us take the rebuke which the Angel gave Zechariah twice (a sign of rebuke often in Scripture- e. g. "Simon, Simon"): "Knowest thou not what these be?" (v. 5,13), the Angel answered Zechariah when he asked what the system of pipes represented. Let us be humble to the Word, let us really accept the potential power of our prayers and truly poured out spirit. Note too the Angel's method of educating Zechariah by asking the question "What seest thou?" (v. 2). Through what mechanism do they open the word of God to us and lead us to concentrate on certain parts of it, as they did to Zechariah?

Zechariah Chapters 5- 14

Zechariah Chapter 5

This seems to be almost in parenthesis, concerning the sins of Israel and ultimately the evils of Judaism and false religion.

Zechariah Chapter 6

Chapter 3 depicts the Angels of Joshua and the satan Angel standing before the mighty Angel called "the Lord of the whole earth" in 4:14. Chapter 4 shows this same Angel similarly flanked by two olive trees. Chapter 6 has the same "Lord of all the earth" Angel (6:5) flanked by two brass mountains (v. 5 cp. v. 1), with four chariots full of horses being sent out from Him.

'Chariots' and the 'cherubim' are linguistically connected, and thus also connected in Biblical usage- e. g. "He rode upon a cherub (chariot)" (Ps. 18:10). The number four has links with the Angel cherubim; John Thomas ⁽²⁾ interprets these "four (chariot) spirits of the Heavens" (6:5) as the same as the four faces of the cherubim. The whole vision is full of Angelic language. "The chariots of God are. . . thousands of Angels" (Ps. 68:17); God makes His Angels spirits (Ps. 104:4). We have mentioned previously that the horses within the chariots also represent Angels (Chapter 3), under the control of the four mighty cherubim Angels. This is similar to Ps. 68:17 describing God's chariots as being full of Angels.

v. 6 "The black horses which are therein go forth into the north country; and the white go forth after them". "The north country" must be Babylon (2:6; Jer. 1:13,14 etc.)- those Angels went to minister to the Jews there and to enable the hearts of the Persian rulers to continue to support the work of rebuilding (or is this looking back to the judgements on Babylon in preparation for Cyrus' decree concerning the restoration?). Another group of Angels went toward the South- i. e. the land of Judah (Ez. 20:46,47).

v. 7 "The bay went forth, and sought to go that they might walk to and fro through the earth: and He (the Angel) said, Get you hence, walk to and fro through the earth. So they walked to and fro through the earth". The "earth" here is probably 'the land' of Israel- which would have

included Babylon, at its proper extent from 'sea to sea'. These Angels, the same as those who originally surveyed the whole area by walking "to and fro through the earth" in 1:10,11, "sought" permission from the co-ordinating Angel to continue their work.

v. 8 "These (two groups of Angels) that go toward the north country (Babylon) have quieted My spirit (Angel) in the north country". The Spirit-Angel that needed quietening in Babylon was perhaps the satan-Angel that was resisting the Angel seeking to further the rebuilding work. He would have gone (literally?) to Babylon to give the "prince of Persia" the idea of banning the rebuilding. The two Angels that quietened Him were those of Dan. 10:12,13- the Joshua-Angel of Zech. 3:1, and Michael who "came to help Me" (Gabriel) in Dan. 10:13. Alternatively, note that Dan. 9:21 describes Gabriel being "caused to fly with weariness"- thus it may have been Gabriel who was 'quieted' or 'given rest' (AVmg.) in Zech. 6:8, implying He was in Babylon trying to enable the rebuilding but needed the support of the other two Angels.

Zechariah Chapter 7

Notice the frequent references to "the Lord of Hosts" and the Angel returning to His house- where He had dwelt in the temple.

Zechariah Chapter 8

v. 2 "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels); I was jealous (zealous) for Zion (the temple) with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury". The Angel's tremendous zeal for the restoration comes bubbling through. No wonder the Kingdom prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah could have been fulfilled if only the people had worked together with the Angels to their full potential!

v. 3 "I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem". The physical movement of the Angel back to Jerusalem.

v. 4 "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels): there shall yet old men and old women dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age". The Angel, v. 3, was to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, i. e. in the temple. Here in v. 4, old men and women were to do so- showing the Angel's close identification with his charges, such as

Anna the prophetess who "departed not from the temple" at the time of Christ. As a result of the Angelic work in restoring Jerusalem, the old people who could remember the temple in its former glory when they were taken captive 70 years previously would return to Jerusalem again.

v. 6 "If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in Mine eyes (Angels)? saith the Lord of Hosts". The Angel is saying 'Because you find it hard to believe what I can really do for you, I might not do it in reality; but don't think My Angels (eyes) can't actually do it if they want to!'

Zechariah Chapter 9

v. 14 "The Lord shall be over them"- as the Angels went over David beyond the mulberry trees (2 Sam. 5:24) and as the Angel in the cloud was over Israel in the wilderness. "His arrow shall go forth as lightning"- Angel cherubim language. He "shall go with whirlwinds of the South"- the group of Angels sent into "the south" (i. e. Judah) in Zech. 6:6.

v. 16 "The Lord their God shall save them in that day as the flock of His people"- the Angel is elsewhere styled a shepherd (Is. 63:9-11; Ps. 80:1). "The lord of Hosts (Angels) hath visited His flock the house of Judah" (10:3). Similarly, Israel "went their way as a flock, they were troubled because there was no shepherd" (10:2)- i. e. the Angel was not with them.

Zechariah Chapter 10

v. 10 "I will bring them again also out of the land of Egypt, and gather them out of Assyria" (Babylon- they are frequently used interchangeably). Notice the word "again"- as the Angel brought Israel out of Egypt the first time, so He would do it again in the restoration.

Zechariah Chapter 11

Earlier it was suggested that the "I" referred to in this chapter is concerning the Angel, as it was an Angel who broke the covenant with Israel, as described in Zech. 11:10.

Zechariah Chapter 12

v. 4 "In that day. . . I will open Mine eyes (Angels) upon the house of Judah"- cp. Michael 'standing up' for Israel in the last days (Dan. 12:1).

v. 5 This shows how Angels will be very much in evidence on earth at the time of Jerusalem's surrounding by armies and Armageddon: "The inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be my strength in the Lord of Hosts (Angels) their God". Who this 'God' refers to is defined in v. 8: "He that is feeble amongst them (the "inhabitants of Jerusalem") at that day shall be as David, and the house of David shall be as God, as the Angel of the Lord (which will go) before them". This implies that the inhabitants of Jerusalem will have the same power as the hosts of Angels which will have been seen fighting "before them". Thus the Jews will "walk up and down in His Name" (Zech. 10:12) as the Angels are now said to do (Zech. 1:11; Job 1:7).

Zechariah Chapter 13

v. 7 "Awake O sword ,against My shepherd. . . smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered". The shepherd here clearly refers to Jesus, but the shepherd elsewhere in Zechariah refers to the Angel- another proof that there was one specific Angel in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Jesus.

Angels In Haggai

HAGGAI

If Judah had followed what the Angels made potentially possible, they would have worked zealously to rebuild the temple according to Ezekiel's specifications. Note the word play in Hag. 1:13,14: the *messenger* (Heb. *malak*- the word for Angel, the Angel who was behind the words of the prophets) gives a message (*malakut*) to the people to "work" (*melaka*). It's rather like making a word play in English between 'word' and 'work'- if the word of the prophets, the word of the Angels, had been taken seriously, the people would've worked. And so with us- if we perceive the spiritual possibilities which the work of the Angels is setting up through God's word, then we will work, doing our part to bring it all to realization.

The Angels were zealous for the restoration to proceed, and therefore influenced the people as far as they could to be zealous for it too. They did this in various ways- e. g. by direct rebuke through the prophets whom they inspired: "Thus speaketh the Lord of Hosts, saying, This people say, The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built" (1:2). The context of this, according to Ezra 5:1, was of the people losing heart in the rebuilding because of the opposition from the Samaritans and the temporary ban on the work from Babylon. They argued: 'We'll do God's work if we get the chance, but this ban is clearly a sign from God not to go ahead'- when really it was their self-satisfaction with their "ceiled houses" (1:4) that made them give up so easily. But the Angels were eager to go ahead! The paltry excuses for shirking the Lord's work today are no better. As ever, they stem from the apathy born of materialism, but are wrapped up in pseudo-spiritual reasoning. The satan Angel that caused the 21 day-year delay in the rebuilding (Dan. 10:12,13; Zech. 3:1 etc.) was maybe representing the apathy of the Jews as well as the opposition of the Samaritans in the court of Heaven. The two Angel chariots sent to overcome this opposition (see notes on Zech. 6) would therefore have tried to influence the Jews to be more genuinely committed to Zion's cause. Part of their work was in the inspiring of Haggai's words (n. b. the many references to "the Lord of Hosts" in Haggai). Again, the context of Ezra 5:1 must be remembered- Haggai prophesied to encourage the people during the 21 year cessation of the rebuilding (details in Ezra 4).

Despite the apathy of the people, the Angel's encouragement was tremendous: "Be strong, O Zerubbabel. . be strong, O Joshua. . be strong, all ye people. . and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts" (Angels)- 2:4. "My Spirit (Angel) remaineth among you" "(2:5), just as the same Angel was with them "when ye came out of Egypt". And with us too.

In common with Ezekiel, Zechariah and Isaiah, Haggai also speaks of the possible glory that could have been at the restoration, but which has now been postponed until the second coming: "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts: Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the Heavens, and the earth. . and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts (Angels). . . the glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of Hosts" (2:6,7,9). Compare this with what

actually happened- the old men wept because the new rebuilt temple was nothing like the former temple.

Angels In Ezra And Nehemiah

EZRA

EZRA Chapter 1

v. 1 "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus". The Angel acted directly on his heart (or on his guardian Angel?).

EZRA Chapter 5

v. 5 "The eye of their God (the Angel) was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease" (building).

EZRA Chapter 6

v. 22 "The Lord had made them (Israel) joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (the God of Jacob- an Angelic term for the Angel that stands for Israel). Note the emphasis on the Angel directly working on human hearts.

EZRA Chapter 7

The theme of the Angel acting on the heart is common here: "The king granted (Ezra) all his request, according to the hand (Angel) of the Lord his God upon him. . . blessed be the Lord God of our fathers (the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was an Angelic term), which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart. . . I was strengthened as the hand (Angel) of the Lord my God was upon me" (v. 6,9,27,28).

EZRA Chapter 8

v. 31 "We departed from the river of Ahava. . . to go unto Jerusalem; and the hand (Angel) of our God was upon us"- on the dangerous journey back across the desert with no military escort, carrying the temple

treasures. As the Angel was with them from the Red Sea to Jerusalem at the Exodus, so He was again.

EZRA Chapter 10

v. 11 "Now therefore make confession unto the Lord God of your fathers"- confession of sin to an Angel.

NEHEMIAH

Notice the same emphasis on the Angel acting directly on the hearts of the Jews and Persians- 2:8,12,18; 4:6.

The Angel Gabriel explained to Daniel that he had to battle with both the rulers of Persia *and Greece* in order to bring about the fulfilment of Daniel's prayer and Jeremiah's prophecy- in the command for the Jews to return to Judah. By appreciating the local politics which the Angel brought about between Persia and Greece, we can better understand why Gabriel had to manipulate *Greece* in order for the *Persians* to allow the Jews to return, and even to encourage them to do so: "From the point of view of the Persian king a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal lifeline, and as long as the Greeks dominated the coast and Egypt he supported a strong Judean province headed by a Judean-Persian official and peopled by a pro-Persian population, most of whose families were hostages in Babylon and Persia"⁽¹⁾.

Notes

(1) Othniel Margalith, "The Political Role of Ezra as Persian Governor," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98:1 (1986):111.

6-6 Zechariah's Restoration Prophecies

God's glory would have dwelt not only in the temple but in the whole city of Jerusalem (Zech. 2:9). But there is no evidence that the shekinah glory ever actually returned to the rebuilt temple let alone was visibly present over the whole rebuilt city of Jerusalem. The Jews were asked to leave Babylon so that Jerusalem would have an "abundance of peoples", in language evidently appropriate to the Messianic Kingdom (Zech. 2:8,10). And yet they for the most part remained in Babylon, and thus

showed they didn't want to do their part in making that prophecy of the Kingdom come true in their experience. The prophecies that the Gentile rulers of Judah will be their servants (Zech. 2:10-17) clearly show that Judah wasn't intended to remain a mere subject kingdom of the Persian empire. So much was possible- but they chose to remain, to take the easier option- which is always to remain within the structures we are safe and familiar with.

Zechariah is also relevant to the restoration period. He speaks of the day of Israel's final obedience, when finally "the Lord shall be seen over them...as lightning" (Zechariah 9:14), just as the cherubim and lightening had been over Ezekiel and would have been over Israel at the restoration- had they followed it. Zechariah attributes Israel's final success as thanks to "the Lord of hosts"- the hosts of Angels working with them and for them. In "the time of the latter rain", Yahweh will again "make bright clouds" for Israel, reminiscent of Ezekiel's cherubim (Zechariah 10:1). Finally, the Lord *shall* go before them, as He had wanted to in Ezekiel's time, and even the feeble amongst Israel "shall be as the angel of the Lord [who goes] before them" (Zechariah 10:14; 12:8). They will become as the Angel in the same way as Ezekiel became part of the cherubim system, following eagerly where the Angel-cherubim lead. At the time of the restoration, God could say: "I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built...the Lord shall yet comfort Zion" (Zechariah 1:17). This was the same "comfort to Zion" of Isaiah 40:1. But Israel would not follow God back to Jerusalem, and those who did generally were consumed with their own petty self interest. And so the prophecies and promises of "comfort to Zion" were re-interpreted and fulfilled in a spiritual sense in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. God had gone ahead of them- He had returned to Zion already, and bid Israel follow Him there. It was His plan that the light of His glory would enter into Zion at the restoration (Hag. 2:7); but Israel had to act as if they believed this, and likewise show forth glory: "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (Isaiah 60:1). He eagerly prophesied that "strangers shall build up thy walls...in my favour have I had mercy upon thee" (Isaiah 60:10)- not 'I am prepared to have mercy upon you', nor 'I will have mercy...'. God had had mercy upon them, and invited them to respond to it.

6-7 The Restoration Psalms

A case can be made that the whole of book 3 of the Psalter (Psalms 73-89) was written / edited in Babylon. The Psalms of Korah (83-87) seem to reflect the longing of the righteous remnant in Babylon for the temple services. And it is just possible that the entire Psalter was re-edited there in Babylon, under inspiration- for so *many* Psalms have elements of appropriacy to the exiles in Babylon and the restoration. The LXX titles of Psalm 56 [“Concerning the people that were removed from the Sanctuary”] and 71 [“Of the sons of Jonadab, and the first that were taken captive”] speak for themselves. Likewise the LXX attributes Psalms 146-148 to Haggai and Zechariah.

According to the LXX titles, there were certain Psalms which were written for the dedication of the rebuilt temple, and others written by Haggai and Zechariah. They include: Psalms 96,138,147,148. These all seem to speak as if the time of a glorious temple was to be the time of God’s Kingdom; this was the possibility, and it was the prevailing hope in the minds of the faithful minority. But the Psalms had to remain prophecies of the future day of Zion’s glory. Psalms 96 is very clear: “Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name [i.e.] bring an offering, and come into his courts” (:8). But Judah did *not* bring the right offerings, although the glory of Yahweh’s Name ought to have elicited them (Mal. 1:11-16). Psalms 96:13 confidently anticipate the coming of Messiah there and then: “then shall all the trees of the wood rejoice before the Lord: for he cometh, he cometh to judge the earth: he shall judge the world with righteousness”. These words are quoted about the second coming of Jesus in Acts 17:31.

The Psalms Of Asaph

Additionally, there are the Psalms of Asaph, who lived at the time of the restoration (Ezra 2:41). All his Psalms draw on the past dealings of God with His people and encourage them on this basis to make the wilderness journey back to the land, just as they had done at the Exodus. Psalms 77:11,12 invites the surrounding nations to “Bring presents unto him that ought to be feared”, so that the Messianic Kingdom could then be established. And it is an Asaph Psalm that warns Israel about the danger of limiting what God is potentially prepared to do for His people (Psalms 78:41). And in another one, Psalms 81:15,16 says that if Israel had been

obedient, their Arab enemies would soon have submitted to them, and God would have fed them with honey from the rock rather than just water. Note that Psalms 80:16,17 asks God to strengthen a Son of Man to be Messiah, seeing that the temple is in ruins; the raising up of a Messiah was perceived as potentially possible at the time. In this context, Psalms 83 concerns the Arab nations who were wanting to cut off the people of Judah who had returned at the restoration. Verse 13 asks for the prophecy of Dan. 2:44 to be fulfilled against them in the form of Messiah's coming. But this prophecy has been deferred to our last days, when a returned Israel seek the same deliverance.

Psalm 80 is a psalm of Asaph, written [or re-edited] in Babylon. He speaks much of the cherubim- of how God dwelt between the cherubs, and still lead His people in that way (Ps. 80:1). Asaph grasped Ezekiel's fundamental point- that God hadn't forgotten His people, but the cherubim was just as actively leading and protecting God's people in Babylon as they had been in the land of Judah. Asaph asks God in this context to "restore us" to the land (Ps. 80:3,14,19 RVmg.), lamenting how the walls of Zion are broken down (Ps. 80:12). He speaks of how the faithful people weep tears "in great measure" (Ps. 80:5), a reference to their weeping by the rivers of Babylon, and the theme of tears and weeping amongst the exiles which we meet so often in Lamentations. But in this context, Asaph speaks of how a "branch" or "son" (Ps. 80:15) would be made strong by God, and this Messiah figure would be the man of God's right hand as well as "the son of man whom you make strong for yourself" (Ps. 80:17). Clearly Asaph prayed for and expected a Messiah figure to arise at the same time as the restoration from Babylon. But none did; those who could've played that role, such as Zerubbabel "the branch", ultimately failed. And the cherubim Angels are hovering above us, too, enabling so, so much.

Many of the Psalms reflect the feelings of the righteous remnant in Babylon- e.g. the thought that just one day in God's temple is better than a thousand days in Babylon's "tents of wickedness" (Ps. 84:10). Ps. 85 reflects how that faithful remnant believed that God had forgiven them (Ps. 85:2), and therefore they asked for His anger to cease and for Him to lead their feet in the way which would lead back to Zion (Ps. 85:4,13 RV).

Psalm 78

Asaph says he will “utter *hidden* things...what our fathers have told us...*we* will not *hide* them from their children” (:2,4 NIV). He speaks as if these things had been known by the fathers but not repeated to Asaph’s generation, and now Asaph as a teaching priest was going to teach them to the present generation. This would imply that after initially pining for Zion, the Jewish community in Babylon got on with life and forgot their historical roots; for “the things” of which the Psalm speaks are a recounting of the covenant history of God with His people. In this context Asaph reminds them that Yahweh had chosen Zion for His temple (:60,68), and now at the restoration “The Lord awoke from sleep, as a man wakes” (:65). Asaph warns them that He has “rejected the tents of Joseph, he did not chose the tribe of Ephraim” (i.e. the 10 tribe Kingdom had been scattered and were not returning at that time), but he chose the tribe of Judah”. The final verses must surely be read as prophetic perfect, i.e. speaking about what was going to happen as if it had: “He beat back his enemies, he put them to everlasting shame...He built his sanctuary...he chose David his servant (the same phrase recurs in Ezekiel’s temple prophecies)...and David shepherded them with integrity of heart” (:67-72). It could have been so that the surrounding Arab enemies of Judah were eternally destroyed (this has never yet happened, so it can’t be describing a previous historical event), the temple built on Zion, and a David-like Messiah appeared. This was potentially possible; but it wasn’t to be. The people preferred to live in ignorance of Asaph’s appeal to their previous history.

To sum up. Judah knew what the Kingdom life was all about; but they didn’t live it. They liked the idea of it, but it wasn’t their dominant desire. And so with us. We must live the Kingdom now if we wish to be in it. This is the sense behind the Lord’s repeated promise that we can right now live and experience “eternal life”. Insofar as we act and think and feel now as we will do in the Kingdom, so far we have the experience of the “eternal life”. That life was pre-eminently “in his Son” (1 Jn. 5:11-13,20). There in the living and thinking of the historical Jesus we have the definition of what eternal life will be all about. In this sense, “the kingdom” is a title of Jesus, seeing He was the living definition of it (Lk. 17:21). We can so orientate ourselves relating to the physicalities of the coming Kingdom that we overlook the fact that it will be but the material articulation of the Kingdom life which we are now called to

live. In this sense the Kingdom of God is not so much about material things [eating, drinking, for example] as about righteousness, joy and peace lived out right now in a spirit of holiness (Rom. 14:17).

The Songs Of Ascents

These songs, part of the restoration Psalms, are relevant to any ‘ascent’ or ‘going up’ to the Lord’s house. They are full of reference to God’s eternal purpose with Jerusalem and the temple. It seems to me that they may have been re-written under inspiration with reference to God’s people returning from Babylon to Jerusalem. Consider the following details:

“The Lord is thy keeper...the sun shall not smite thee by day...” (Psalms 121:5,6)- reference to Israel’s exodus from Egypt, but also to God’s miraculous keeping them on the desert journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, without a guard from the Babylonian authorities.

“I was glad when they said unto me, let us go unto the house of the Lord” (Psalms 122:1)- the feelings of a faithful Jew in Babylon responding to Cyrus’ decree. “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psalms 122:6)- the faithful in Babylon praying for Zion.

“As the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters....so our eyes look unto the Lord...until he have mercy upon us. Have mercy upon us...for we are exceedingly filled with contempt...with the scorning of those that are at ease” (Psalms 123:2-4)- the faithful by the rivers of Babylon praying for the captivity to end.

“The Lord brought back those that returned to Zion” (Psalms 126:1 RVmg.) is obviously relevant to the exiles returning. They are described as going forth into captivity weeping but bearing previous seed, and now returning home with the sheaves (Psalms 126:6). This could be a reference to their children whom they had taken with them 70 years previously returning; or it could also imply that there had been a spiritual growth and fruition during the captivity. At least, this was what God had intended.

Psalms 127 has obvious relevance too: “Except the Lord build the house [the temple], they labour in vain that build it...the watchman [cp..

Nehemiah placing watchmen on the rebuilt walls] waketh but in vain...it is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late [cp. working so hard on the wall they had no time to even change their clothes]...they shall speak with their enemies in the gate” [cp. Nehemiah talking to the Arab traders and enemies in the rebuilt gate of Jerusalem].

7 “The prince” In Ezekiel

11-7-1 " The prince" : Potential Messiah

The restoration was to be associated with the appearance of a potential Messiah figure. This is a point repeatedly made in so many prophecies of the restoration. Take Is. 61:1-4: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison [Babylon] to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion [the “poor of the land” allowed to remain after the Babylonian invasion], to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness [cp. how they sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon]...And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations”. And there are many other such prophecies which connect the appearance of a Messiah with the rebuilding of Zion. Haggai prophesied to encourage the people to get on with building the temple (Ezra 5:1), and yet he spoke of the desire of all nations (Messiah) coming with an earthquake and glory filling the temple (Hag. 2:7). I submit that this is a prophecy of what *could* have happened at that time, but it has been deferred to the second coming of the Lord Jesus. The cherubim visions of Ez. 1,9 and 10 are applied in the New Testament to the glorified Christ (Rev. 2:18; 1 Pet. 4:17; 2 Pet. 2:4-9). This surely implies that they were ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah; and perhaps we are to understand that they could have had fulfilment in a Messiah figure at the time of the restoration.

Ezekiel 17:22,23 spoke of how at the restoration, Babylon would fall and a “tender one” arise, who would grow into a tree under whose branches all the birds would find shelter. This is the very language of the

Kingdom of Jesus in Mt. 13:32. The Kingdom of Babylon- also likened in Daniel to a tree with birds beneath it- could have been replaced with God's Kingdom when it fell soon after the restoration of Judah. But no Messiah figure arose, and so the prophecy had a changed fulfilment- the tree that was abased and then lifted up could have been Israel, but it was re-applied to the Lord Jesus, the ultimate "servant" of Yahweh. Ezekiel 19:13,14 help us perceive this more clearly- Judah in Babylon were as it were "planted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty ground". She had "no [Messianic] strong rod to be a sceptre to rule", and this was "for a lamentation". But the prophecy was fulfilled in another way- for the Lord Jesus was the root out of a dry ground who sprang up and *did* fulfil God's intention (Is. 53:1).

"The prince" of Ezekiel 40-48 is hard to understand as an immortal being such as the Lord Jesus. "The prince" of Ezekiel 21:27 was Judah's last ruler- so "the prince" later in Ezekiel would appear to be a promise of a restored monarchy. Yet tragically, the royal family chose to remain in Babylon. "The prince" offers as He is able (46:11)- hard to apply to the Almighty Lord Jesus. According to Ezekiel, He offers sacrifice for his own sin, and has children, to whom He will pass an inheritance. And he has to be warned not to oppress the people (46:18). It is a more comfortable interpretation, surely, to see him as primarily referring to Zerubbabel or Joshua the High Priest (44:3). Under Joshua, the iniquity of the land could have been removed, and "ye shall call every man his neighbour under the vine and under the fig tree" (Zech. 3:8-10). The Messianic Kingdom could have been brought in, the new covenant accepted by Israel. It could have been Eliashib- but despite his apparent enthusiasm, he didn't even build the wall outside his own house (Neh. 3:20-22), and arranged for his grandson to marry Sanballat's daughter (Neh. 12:10,11). It is evident from 46:3 and 44:3 that the promised Messiah figure was to be both a king and a priest- which would fit Joshua. He is described as a crowned High Priest, called "the branch", who would build the temple and reign as "a priest upon his throne". But this didn't happen. Because Zechariah concluded this prophecy with the comment: "And this shall come to pass, if ye will diligently obey the voice of the Lord" (Zech. 6:10-15). Joshua-Jesus didn't live up to it. And Zerubbabel never ruled in Jerusalem- he returned to the soft life in Babylon after the temple was rebuilt. But the prophecies suffered a deferral. They will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the branch.

The image of Daniel 2 can be understood as referring to a succession of kings of Babylon who would arise after Nebuchadnezzar, who personally was represented by the head of gold. Or at least, the various metals could refer to successive stages of the Babylonian empire. In this case, the coming of Messiah (the little stone) to destroy Babylon and establish God's Kingdom could have come within a few generations after Nebuchadnezzar- i.e. at the time of the restoration. But this potential fulfilment of the image prophecy didn't happen.

The idea of deferral of fulfilment is common enough in Scripture once you look for it. "The wrath of the Lord was upon Judah" in Hezekiah's time; but he made a covenant with God and cleansed the temple "that his fierce wrath may turn away from us" (2 Chron. 29:8,10). But this day of the Lord's wrath was deferred until 90 years later (Zeph. 1:18; 2:2). Hezekiah's zealous cleansing of the temple (2 Chron. 9:12-16) cannot fail to have been behind Ps. 69:9 "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up"- and yet these words are applied to the Lord's cleansing of the temple and His death in the 1st century. Could it not be that Jesus cleansed the temple fully understanding these things, and seeking to defer God's wrath upon Judah, to give them a chance to repent? And it was delayed- in that there was no immediate wrath from Heaven against the Jews for murdering the Son of God. And yet the days were shortened as well as deferred for the elect's sake. An amazing Father somehow builds all these various factors into His time periods. Truly everything happens in our lives at the 'right' time!

A Hidden Potential Messiah?

The restoration prophecies continually refer to an individual called "the righteous one"- the references are somewhat masked in the English translations which speak simply of "righteousness", but it is evidently 'the righteous one' who is being addressed rather than abstract righteousness. Consider the statements of intent about this Person: The righteous one would be prepared and kept hidden by Yahweh (Is. 42:6); he was to be raised up to rebuild Zion and release the captives from Babylon (Is. 45:13); he is pictured as near / approaching (Is. 51:5), called to Yahweh's footstool in Zion (Is. 41:2); he was to be "brought in" to the temple at the end of the 70 weeks prophecy (Dan. 9:24); then, Jerusalem would be known as the habitation of the righteous one (Jer. 50:7 and

often- AV "habitation of justice"), the intention of Ez. 48:35 would be fulfilled, in that Jerusalem would be known as the city where Yahweh dwells; the righteous one of Yahweh would then "go out" in blessing to the surrounding nations. Hence Jer. 33:16; 23:6 etc. outline God's intention that after the restoration, the rebuilt Zion would be named "The Lord our righteous one" because Jerusalem would be the habitation of the righteous one (Jer. 31:23). This is similar language to the restoration prophecies of Isaiah- the surrounding Gentile world would see / perceive / believe in "the righteous one" who would reign in the rebuilt Zion (Is. 62:2).

The impression seems inescapable that at the time of the restoration, God had prepared a Messiah-figure, hidden (as it were) in Yahweh's quiver (Is. 49:2), not revealed to Israel, who could have restored Judah, rebuilt Zion and converted the surrounding Gentiles. It could be that this person was Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah or some other known historical figure. Or it could be that this person was prepared, waited in the wings, but was never used by God. He could have been revealed to Judah by the anonymous messenger of Isaiah 40. But all these prophecies had to be reapplied- to the Lord Jesus, with John the Baptist and later the latter day Elijah as the announcing messenger.

7-2 Zerubbabel- Potential Messiah?

The "great mountain" of Babylon was to become a plain before Zerubbabel (Zech. 4:7)- a clear allusion to Dan. 2:44, in which the little stone of Messiah destroys the Kingdoms of men and becomes a great mountain to replace the statue headed by Babylon. But Zerubbabel didn't destroy Babylon- according to Jewish tradition he returned there after 'giving up' in Jerusalem. Perhaps Zech. 11:16 refers to him as "the worthless shepherd" who didn't gather "those that be scattered", who didn't encourage the Jews scattered in Babylon to return to the fold of Zion, and who didn't care for their spiritual wellbeing. And so the prophecy that Babylon would be destroyed before Zerubbabel has to be reapplied, and will be fulfilled at the return of the Lord Jesus. Haggai foretold that if Israel were obedient, "I will fill this house with glory" (Hag. 2:7), just as Solomon's temple was filled with glory (1 Kings 8:10,11; 2 Chron. 5:13,14; 7:1,2). Haggai sought to inspire the people when they had flagged in their zeal for the Lord's house; and the method he chose was to remind them that they *could* bring about Messiah's

Kingdom if they wholeheartedly worked with God to allow His ideal intentions to come to pass. “I will shake the heavens and the earth...and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill *this house* with glory...the glory of *this* latter house shall be greater than of the former...and in *this* place will I give peace” (Hag. 2:6-9). Note the stress on *this* house- but that temple they built wasn’t filled with glory, the vision of Ezekiel about the glory returning and entering the temple wasn’t fulfilled- and Solomon’s former temple was more glorious than that of the second temple. Why? Because they didn’t get on and build it and glorify it as they were intended to. Zerubbabel is told again: “I will shake the heavens and the earth; and I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms...the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother [this is the language of Zech. 14:13 about what will happen in the last days]. In that day...will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant...and will make thee as a signet” (2:21-23). The day when heaven and earth would be shaken was the day when the second temple was to be filled with glory as Ezekiel had said. *Then*, there would be major war between the Gentile nations, and Zerubbabel would be some kind of Messiah figure. But none of these things happened. Their fulfilment was delayed until the last days, when all nations who come against Jerusalem will slay each other, and “my servant” the Lord Jesus will be proclaimed as Messiah. *Then*, in our time of the end, the heavens and earth will be shaken (Heb. 12:26,27). It could have happened while the second temple was standing- but it didn’t, thanks to Israel’s indolence.

When Zedekiah was taken into captivity (Ez. 17:20), it was prophesied that “a tender one” (Messiah- Is. 11:1; 53:2) would be planted “upon an high mountain”, and grow into a tree in whose shadows all animals would live (Ez. 17:21,22). This is clearly the Messianic Kingdom (Lk. 13:19). This young twig at the time of the captivity was surely Zerubbabel, and the “high mountain” upon which his Kingdom could have been established is surely the “high mountain” of Ez. 40:2 where the temple could have been built. Yet the prophecy had to suffer a massive deferment until its fulfilment in Christ. Zech. 6:12 reads rather strangely: "Behold there is a man- Shoot is his name". Seeing Zerubbabel's name means 'Shoot from Babylon', it's odd that Zerubbabel isn't named specifically. Perhaps the implication is that Zerubbabel had failed, but another person with the same basic name still could fulfil the prophecies. But with the failure of Zerubbabel, there was no other king-

priest to fulfil the prophecies. The Maccabees attempted to force a fulfilment, with opportunists like Simon and John Hyrcanus claiming to be king-priests- but with no actual dynastic evidence. And they hardly fulfilled the prediction that the King-Priest Messiah would sit on David's throne (Zech. 6:10).

At the time of the restoration, “I will make them one nation in the land...and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations” (Ez. 37:22). Remnants of the 10 tribes had been taken into captivity along with the two tribes; it *could* have been that at the restoration, the difference between Israel and Judah was ended and one Messianic King reigned over them. The majestic prophecy of Jer. 23:5-7 had prophesied that when Israel returned from Babylon, “the branch” would rise and save them “and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth”, i.e. establish the Messianic Kingdom (cp. Ps. 72:2; Is. 9:7). But Zerubbabel, the “branch-from-Babylon”, lead the people back from Babylon, half heartedly built a temple- which faithful men wept at, when they saw how feeble it was compared to that which should have been (Ezra 3:12). And then he beat it back to Babylon. Nelson’s Bible Dictionary comments: “For some mysterious reason, Zerubbabel is not mentioned in connection with the Temple dedication. Neither is he mentioned after this time”. The reason seems to be that he returned to Babylon. R.K. Harrison in the Zondervan Encyclopaedia mentions that “a 6th century AD Jewish chronicle preserved the tradition that Zerubbabel returned to Babylonia after 515 BC and succeeded his father Shealtiel as the prince of the exiled remnant there”. He chose to be a prince in Babylon’s Kingdom, the kingdoms of men, rather than in the Kingdom of God. And so many have followed his decision in the centuries since, thus frustrating what could have been for them and many others within their influence. Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 11.3) records that “Zorobabel, who had been made governor of the Jews that had been in captivity, came to Darius from Jerusalem, for there had been an old friendship between him and the king”. He was friendly with the King of Babylon, and chose to follow where *this* lead rather than friendship with the Almighty. Compare this with how the ‘friendliness’ of a boss or worldly friend has lead so many into promotions or situations where they simply cannot do the work which God intended for them. It could even be that the prophecy of Zech. 5 concerning the wickedness in the land of Judah somehow returning to Babylon and there building a temple is a reference to how Zerubbabel was to re-direct

his energies into building a corrupted house for himself on his return to Babylon, a pseudo-temple. Zech. 5:11 speaks of this being built in Babylon upon her own “base”, the same word used in Ezra 3:3 about the altar being established upon its own “base” in Zion. It could also be that Zech. 11:17 speaks of Zerubbabel’s return to Babylon: “Woe to the idol shepherd that leaveth the flock! the sword shall be upon his arm, and upon his right eye: his arm shall be clean dried up, and his right eye shall be utterly darkened” [i.e. in leprosy]. Was this how he ended his days, we wonder? Yet he, the ‘shoot out of Babylon’ as his name means, *could have been* the promised Messianic shoot out of the withered stem of Jesse. He could have been the Messianic shoot out of the dry ground of Babylon (Is. 53:2) who would accompany the return of the temple vessels from Babylon (Is. 52:11). But he disappears strangely out of the record. Thus the events of Nehemiah 8, where the Feasts of Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles as well as the dedication of the wall are all recorded, make no mention of the High Priest or Zerubbabel officiating. He, Joshua and indeed anyone who could have taken their place somehow didn’t rise to the occasion. And so Isa 51:17-18 lamented, prophetically: “Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his fury [at the end of the 70 years captivity]...[but] There is none to guide her among all the sons whom she hath brought forth; neither is there any that taketh her by the hand of all the sons that she hath brought up”.

Even with Ezekiel’s prophecies behind him concerning “the prince”, Zerubbabel was easily discouraged in the rebuilding, and needed the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah to encourage him again. He kept the feast of tabernacles (Ezra 3:4) but without dwelling in booths (Neh. 8:17)- i.e., half heartedly. He *could* have been Messiah, perhaps- he may well have been 30/33 at the time of the restoration (Mt. 1:12,13). When Judah returned, they could have entered into the new covenant, featuring “nobles [an intensive plural, meaning ‘the great noble’]...and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them” (Jer. 30:21). Zerubbabel the Governor could have fulfilled this; but he flunked out. Yet God lifted up his spirit a second time (Hag. 1:14 cp. (Hag. 1:14 cp. Ezra 1:5); he was given a second chance, such was God’s enthusiasm that he should achieve what was potentially possible for him. But again, he failed. He saw the glory of Babylon as more attractive than the hard work required to bring about Yahweh’s eternal glory in Zion. It is noteworthy how God

worked through this man's failures, and desired to give him (and all Israel) further opportunities.

Yahweh had promised that He would lead His people on that wilderness journey from Babylon to Zion just as He had earlier led His people from Egypt to the same promised land. Jer. 31:2 had encouraged them that Israel "found grace in the wilderness" before, and they would do again, "When I go to cause [Israel] to go to their place of rest" (RV). God had promised in Jer. 31:9 that He would bring Israel on their journey from Babylon to Judah along the fertile crescent- He would "cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble". This is why Isaiah's prophecies of the restoration from Babylon are shot through with allusion to the exodus and wilderness journey (e.g. Is. 43:2; 51:10; 63:11). Jer. 31:2 had prophesied of the returning Jews: "The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him *to rest*"- just as Zech. 1:11 describes the land being "at rest" when they returned to rebuild Zion. My point is that Yahweh didn't give up with His people because many chose to remain in Babylon, and those who did make the journey didn't believe His promises of protection very strongly. He zealously worked with whatever they could present Him with.

Jeremiah's prophecies of the restoration also featured the uprising of a Messiah: "In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land (Jer 33:15). And again: "Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob And have compassion on his dwelling places; and the city shall be rebuilt on its ruin, and the palace shall stand on its rightful place. And from them shall proceed thanksgiving and the voice of those who make merry; and I will multiply them [cp. the lack of evidence that the population of resorted Judah was very great at all, and the problem in getting enough people to live in Jerusalem in Neh. 11:1], and they shall not be diminished...'And their leader shall be one of them, and their ruler shall come forth from their midst; and I will bring him near, and he shall approach me; for who would dare to risk his life to approach me?' declares the LORD" (Jer. 30:18-21 NAS). This leader who would come close to God in mediation would be willing to give his life to enable this. This must be connected with how Is. 53, describing Messiah's death, is actually in a restoration context (beginning in Is. 52). Could it not be that a Messiah figure could

have arisen and died a sacrificial death to bring his people to God? Daniel 9 likewise associates the rebuilding of Zion with the death of “Messiah the prince” to reconcile Israel to God- perhaps potentially possible within a literal 70 week period from Cyrus’ decree? Ezra’s prayer of Ezra 9 is full of reference to Daniel 9, as if he saw it as capable of fulfilment then. Daniel had been mystified as to why Jeremiah’s prophecy of 70 years desolation of Zion hadn’t been fulfilled on time, and he asks Yahweh *not* to defer fulfilling it (Dan 9:19), as if he was fully prepared for a deferment in fulfilment. The reply came in the form of the 70 *weeks* prophecy- as if to say that in 70 weeks, *then* the punishment for Judah’s sins would finally be accomplished, whereas Daniel had thought it ought to already have been accomplished seeing that 70 years had already passed. But the 70 weeks prophecy likewise had a deferment, until the true and faithful Messiah finally appeared to take away sin and make an end of punishment for iniquity. And in a restoration context, Jer 31:31 had promised: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah”. The new covenant could have then been established, requiring the abrogation of the Old Covenant [the law of Moses] on the basis of an acceptable sacrifice. Somehow, this would have been possible. But it was deferred until the time of the Lord Jesus. That covenant required Judah to have God’s law written on their hearts, so that they each had the knowledge of God (Jer. 31:34); and yet Mal. 2:5-7 laments that the priests were more interested in divorcing their wives than teaching God’s law to the people; their lips didn’t keep nor teach the knowledge of God. This new covenant is spoken about in Jer. 50, where we read that Babylon would fall as God’s revenge for what they did to the temple, and then Judah in their dispersion would “ask the way to Zion...saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten” (Jer. 50:28,5). Indeed at the time of Babylon’s fall, Judah were to heed God’s call to “Remove out of the midst of Babylon”, who had taken them captives (Jer. 50:8,33). Babylon did fall; and yet Judah did not return. Indeed, Daniel the Jew became a senior ruler in the administration that followed Babylon’s fall (Dan. 5:31). At that time, God was strong to show Himself Judah’s redeemer (Jer. 50:34)- but they chose to remain in Babylon under the Medo-Persian administration. So they did not ask the way to Zion and seek a new covenant with Yahweh; and thus the promises of a new covenant, strong redemption in Yahweh, a Messiah figure arising, were all delayed and re-interpreted in their fulfilment.

Zerubbabel: The Potential Branch

Dan. 9:25 appears to identify “the anointed one, a prince” with the restoration of Jerusalem after the return. The Massoretic punctuation of Dan. 9:25 actually suggests that ‘Messiah the prince’ appears after the first seven of the seventy weeks- perhaps there was the possibility 49 day-years after the command to rebuild Jerusalem for a Messiah to have appeared? This would’ve fitted Zerubbabel perfectly. Lk. 3:27 describes Zerubbabel as the head / chief / leader. The term Rhesa is incorrectly rendered in many versions as a name. Perhaps Luke’s point was that the Lord Jesus was the final Messiah, after the failure of so many potential ones beforehand. ‘Zerubbabel the chief’ would then be a similar rubric to “David the king” in Matthew’s genealogy (Mt. 1:16). Zerubbabel was the ‘head’ of the house of David (Ezra 4:3; Hag. 2:23; Zech. 3:8; 6:12,13), as was his descendant Hattush (Ezra 8:1-3 cp. 1 Chron. 3:22). Potentially, Hos. 1:11 could have come true: “Judah and... Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head [Zerubbabel?]; and they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel” (RSV). And perhaps as head of the house of David, Zerubbabel was intended to be the “David my servant” who would be the one king and one shepherd who would lead Israel back to the land from exile (Ez. 37:22,24). Significantly, Neh. 7:7 describes Zerubbabel as being at the head of twelve leaders of the returning exiles, who are called “the people of Israel” (cp. Ezra 2:2).

Zerubbabel is called “the branch” (Zech. 3:8; 6:12; Jer. 23:5,6), and this obviously invites connection with the prophecy of a branch / Messiah who would grow out of the cut down stump of Jesse (Is. 11:1). Again, Zerubbabel fits the picture perfectly. The house of David had been cut down in judgment, but the prophesied branch would not be from the royal line of Kings- but rather simply from the ‘stump’ that had been left, i.e. a descendant of Jesse who was not in the direct line of kings. Mic. 5:2 speaks of a similar person- a Messiah-king who would be from Bethlehem, i.e. the family of Jesse, rather than from Jerusalem where the royal line of kings were born. His origins would be “from old”- i.e. a person who is still a descendant of Jesse, but not in the direct line of kings.

But despite all this, yet again we come to the sad realization that Zerubbabel like his people simply didn’t live up to it; and the prophecies came to be fulfilled finally in Jesus. He could have been Yahweh’s

signet ring (Hag. 2:23), His specially favoured son- but he balked at the height of the calling.

So I submit that the prophecies *could* have had their fulfilment in Joshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel, or some other Messianic figure at that time. Everything was made possible to enable this- Joshua, who couldn't prove his Levitical genealogy, was given "a place of access" amongst the priesthood, those who "stood" before the Lord (Zech. 3:7 RV). Ezra thanked God that they had returned and that they had "a nail in his holy place" (Ezra 9:8), a reference surely to a Messiah figure whom he felt to be among them, the "nail in a sure place" of Is. 22:23. According to Mt. 1:12 and Lk. 3:27, Zerubbabel was the Prince of Judah, and the rightful heir to David's throne. But due to his weakness, the fulfilment was deferred to Jesus. Zech. 3:7-10 contained the same message to Joshua: "*If thou wilt walk in my ways, and if thou wilt keep my charge* [as so frequently commanded in Ez. 40:46; 44:8,14-16 s.w.], then thou shalt also judge my house (as prophesied in Ez. 40-48), and shalt also keep my courts (so often mentioned in Ez. 40-48), and I will give thee places to walk (s.w. Ez. 42:4 about the walkways in the prophesied temple)...hear now, O Joshua". But he didn't. He didn't keep the courts, but allowed Tobiah the Ammonite to set up his office for subversion in the temple chambers. Likewise Zerubbabel was to hold a measuring line in his hand and rebuild the temple (Zech. 4:10), just as the Angels had held the same measuring line over the temple in Ez. 40 and Zech. 2:1. He is told that it will not be due to "an army" but due to God's Spirit / Angel (Zech. 4:6 RVmg). The "army" refers to the army which the King of Babylon was willing to send with the returning exiles in order to support the returning exiles. But Israel's attention is focused instead on how the Spirit / Angel would enable all things.

The Angel would work with Zerubbabel- but he would not. It was all potentially possible. "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it" (Zech. 4:9); but he beat it back to Babylon instead. Before him, all nations of the earth could have fallen, the whole 'mountain' of Babylon could have crumbled as before a mighty stone; in him Dan. 2:44 could have had its fulfilment (Zech. 4:7). And so much is potentially possible for us, too. The Lord may have many people in a city, all is prepared for their conversion- but we may not do our part, and so the potential harvest is never reaped. Isaiah 41 describes the Messianic saviour as coming to the land from Babylon,

from the north and from the east. Babylon was east of Judah, and yet the approach road came down from the north. This was the way Zerubbabel and Joshua would have come; but the prophecies suffered a massive deferment to the coming of the Lord Jesus in a more figurative sense from the north and east. Zech. 4 contained a vision of Joshua and Zerubbabel, likened to two olive trees which emptied their oil into the seven branched candlestick, representing the ecclesia of Judah. They represented the kingly and priestly offices. The whole 'lightstand' depended upon these two anointed ones, these providers of oil, and the fact they both in various ways failed to deliver true faith and spirituality meant that the victory over the world which the vision also prophesied could not come about; the final fulfilment had to come through the Lord Jesus, who was the ultimate Priest (cp. Joshua-Jesus) and Prince of Judah (cp. Zerubbabel). This prophecy could have been fulfilled at the restoration; but when we read in Rev. 11:4 that "These are the two olive trees and the two candlesticks", is the Lord not saying that now He has redefined and rescheduled the fulfilment of that vision in a latter day context.

There is another prophecy of Zerubbabel or Joshua which had to have its real fulfilment deferred until the coming of Jesus: " Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass [Did Zerubbabel / Joshua like Nehemiah enter Jerusalem on a donkey?]. And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem [the opposing Samaritans], and the battle bow shall be cut off: and he shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth" (Zech 9:8-10). This latter phrase contrasts with the repeated reminder that the Persians had dominion "on this side the river" (Ezra 4:10,11,16; 5:3,6; 6:13; 8:36; Neh. 3:7). The coming King (and Joshua was prophesied as a king) was to free Judah from Persia's dominion, and establish God's Kingdom, with boys and girls playing in the streets of Jerusalem (Zech. 8:5). "From sea even to sea" is a conscious quote of the famous Messianic prophecy of Ps. 72:8. This was David's prayer for Solomon; that he should have been the Messiah, and his Kingdom should have been Messiah's. 1 Chron. 28:6,7 definitely seems to imply that Solomon could have lived for ever had he been obedient: "I will establish his kingdom for ever, *if* he be constant to do my commandments". But as everyone

knew, Solomon had failed, what was potentially possible hadn't come true, due to his apostasy. Now, again, it *could* come true through the work of Joshua and Zerubbabel, and the priesthood and people being obedient to the temple prophecies of Ezekiel. If they wanted the Kingdom to come, then they had to live the Kingdom life.

But it didn't happen; men like Joshua and Zerubbabel just didn't have the strength or commitment or even desire or the vision to see what could have been, even though the words of their prophets were shouting it to them. And the people were indifferent to it all, worried only about their own harvests and keeping the best animals for themselves rather than sacrificing them. It would seem that the genealogies of the books of Chronicles, with all their emphasis on the priesthood and temple service under Solomon, were produced at this time- in order to encourage the people to restore the Kingdom of God as it had been, and thereby bring in the Kingdom. References to "Jeconiah the captive" (1 Chron. 3:17 RV) make sense in the context of the records being written up in the captivity. And we can understand why the story of Shaharaim is mentioned in 1 Chron. 8:8- a Jewish refugee in Moab, who sent away his two Gentile wives [cp. what was done in Ezra 10:44] but ended up being blessed with more children. Note how Ezra 2:62 records Judah being 'reckoned by genealogies', using the same Hebrew word which is the hallmark of 1 Chron. (4:33; 5:1,7,17; 7:5,7,9,40; 9:1,22). And in this context, Is. 40:26 compares God's 'bringing out' of Judah from Babylon with His 'bringing out' the stars by their individual names, all wonderfully known to Him. Ps. 87:6 had prophesied something similar about the restoration of Zion's fortunes: "The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there". The Kingdom of God was to be the restoration of Israel's Kingdom- but they had to actually get on and restore it rather than wait for it to come. This is another reason for understanding Ezekiel's temple as being broadly of the same dimensions as that of Solomon.

Isaiah's messianic prophecies describe a Saviour coming from both the north and the east (especially in Is. 41). Babylon was to the East of Judah, and yet the approach road came down from the north. This Saviour could have come and brought destruction of the Gentile opposition, and established the Kingdom of God in the land. The carpenter encouraged the goldsmith (Is. 41:7) in the building of the wall (cp. Neh. 3:8,32), and there are other links with what happened at the

restoration (e.g. the way each worker says to his neighbour “be of good courage”, the same word used throughout Nehemiah for the ‘repairing’ or strengthening of the wall). But evidently the intended, possible fulfilment just didn’t happen. The fulfilment has been deferred until the return of Jesus. He will come from Heaven, the figurative “north”, rather than literal Babylon; the essence will be gloriously fulfilled, but not every literality. And so it may well be with the prophecies of the temple and worship system which was to be restored.

Ezekiel’s temple prophecies begin with a man / Angel with a measuring reed, measuring Jerusalem and the temple. This recurs in Zech. 2:1, where the Angel again measures the temple and then promises that Yahweh will be a protecting wall of fire around the city, meaning that the Jews should fearlessly return from Babylon (2:5-10). There follows a description of God’s Kingdom on earth, with God Himself dwelling in Zion and all nations converting to Him. Yet the Jews returned with fear from Babylon- or some of them did. And they fussed so much about building a wall to protect them, in studied disregard of God’s promise here. God helped them build the wall- He was still so keen to work with them. And He later encouraged them that “I will encamp about mine house because of the army, because of him that passeth by, and because of him that returneth [s.w. used about Judah’s return from captivity, Ezra 2:1; 6:21]: and no oppressor shall pass through them any more” (Zech. 9:7,8). The Mosaic Law had required a half shekel temple tax, but He reduced it- again, such was His desire to work with them and have them as His people (Ex. 30:11-16 cp. Neh. 10:32,33). But still they feared, still they didn’t fully believe, still they saw the establishment of God’s Kingdom as only their concern insofar as it coincided with their self-interest; and so the promised establishment of the Messianic Kingdom just didn’t come. The temple still lay “waste” (Hag. 1:4,9) just as it had lain “desolate” [s.w. Jer. 33:10,12] after the Babylonian destruction. The ‘restoration’ was in fact not really a restoration at all, in God’s eyes. Thus Ezra sat down desolate [AV “astounded”] at the news of Judah’s apostasy in marrying the surrounding women; using the very same word as frequently used to describe the ‘desolate’ Jerusalem that was to be rebuilt (Ezra 9:3 cp. Is. 49:8,19; 54:3; 61:4). He tore his priestly garment (Ezra 9:3), as if he realized that all Ezekiel’s prophecies about those priestly garments now couldn’t come true (s.w. Ez. 42:14; 44:17,19). Is. 58:12,13 prophesied that the acceptable rebuilding of Zion was dependent upon Judah keeping the Sabbath acceptably; and yet

Nehemiah's record makes clear their tragic abuse of the Sabbath at the time of the restoration; and this therefore meant that the rebuilding of the temple and city were not going to fulfil the Messianic prophecies about them which existed: "And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou [Zerubbabel?] shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. *If* thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words...". But Judah wanted to spend their Sabbaths 'relaxing', pursuing their hobbies, making a few more shekels by trading on the quiet. For such petty, petty things, the glory of God's Kingdom was rejected by them. And yet so often we see those who leave the Faith doing just that. And we in essence often start down that same path.

Zech. 4:6 appears to me to a criticism of Zerubbabel. He was warned that the restored Kingdom would be brought about not by "might" (military force) but by God's Spirit, operating through the Angels. This had been the message of Ezekiel as well as Zechariah's visions- that through the Angelic cherubim, God was ready to work out the promised and miraculous restoration of His Kingdom, so that Yehud would no longer be merely a province of Persia. Hence Zech. 4:14 pleads with them to understand that Yahweh is Lord of *all* the earth, and His Angels are everywhere active. The cherubim chariots are seen roaming the "land of the north" just as much as Israel (Zech. 6:5-7). But Zerubbabel and the Jews believed in what they could see, rather than in God's unseen armies. They presumably thought that such independence could only be achieved by armed rebellion against their Persian benefactors- and that was impossible. The history of the Maccabees soon afterwards showed this mentality. The Jews saw what was going on around them as a "day of small things" and despised it (Zech. 4:10). And yet *great* things were potentially possible. It's all *so* biting relevant to us- for we too see a day of small things, but the eye of faith sees great things prepared. A *Yehudite*- a specific term for a resident of the Persian province of Judah- could have had the peoples of all the nations in the Persian empire grabbing hold of their skirt (Zech. 8:23). Yehud could have risen up to be the head of all the nations in the land promised to Abraham, i.e. the Persian empire. These were the very real possibilities.

Joshua: Potential Messiah

Zech. 6:11-15 is clear enough that Joshua-Jesus could have become a king-priest, and the Kingdom of God been established in his time: “Take silver and gold, and make crowns, and set them upon the head of Joshua the son of Josedech, the high priest; And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both. And the crowns shall be to Helem, and to Tobijah, and to Jedaiah, and to Hen the son of Zephaniah, for a memorial in the temple of the LORD. And they that are far off shall come and build in the temple of the LORD, and ye shall know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto you. And this shall come to pass, if ye will diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God”. There is no record that Judah ever got near having a king again. Joshua the high priest never became king Joshua. And Gentiles didn’t come and help the Jews in building. It could be that their refusal of Gentile help to build the temple, insisting that *only* Jews work in it (Ezra 4:3 cp. Neh. 2:20), was actually going too far; by being so exclusive, they were disallowing the fulfilment of the prophecies both in Zech. 6 and in Isaiah, that Gentiles would help in the final rebuilding of Zion. As with some of us, their quite correct refusal to allow “the adversaries of Judah” (Ezra 4:1) to fellowship with us in the work can lead us to an exclusive approach to fellowship, that actually disallows the essentially outgoing and inclusive spirit of the God we serve. The Jews returned from Babylonian having swung to the opposite extreme from their earlier worldliness; they returned proud and refusing contact with the Gentile world, considering themselves saved by their own strength. And this is perhaps reflected in the way they refused on principle to allow any Gentiles to help them in the building work. Is. 60:10,11 had foretold: “And the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee [as in the decree of Cyrus]...Therefore thy gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day nor night”; and them as Ez. 43 had also described, “I will glorify the house of my glory” (Is. 60:7). But due to the Jews’ abuse of the Sabbath and their refusal to believe Yahweh would be the promised wall of protecting fire to them, the gates could not be open continually, and had to be shut at night (Neh. 7:3; 13:19). And Antiochus quite soon

after Nehemiah's time destroyed them [which shows how the spirituality involved in what we do, e.g. the building of the wall, is the essential thing, rather than the achievement of anything in itself]. The implication of the prophecies about Zion's open gates was that whosoever would could then come at any time to seek Yahweh. But men were potentially turned away from Him, and His Kingdom not realized...just because greedy, materialistic Jews wanted to have a few more coins in their pocket as a result of their trading on the Sabbath. And so with us, our meanness, our disabling of adverts to be placed, preaching to be done...by our selfishness, our desire to have more than we need to cover us in the case of an y eventuality, all this effectively shuts up the Kingdom against men. If the Pharisees could do just this, it is possible for us to do it. The salvation of others has been delegated into our hands.

Ezra And Nehemiah: Potential Messiahs?

According to Jewish tradition, Nehemiah's real name was Zerubbabel, the branch (Sanhedrin 38a)- perhaps the same Zerubbabel as mentioned in Haggai and Zechariah. The Hippolytus Chronicle 7:3:37 even claims Nehemiah was a direct descendant of David and in the direct kingly line. His name, 'comfort of Yahweh', invites us to see him as the potential fulfilment of the Is. 40:1,2 prophecy about a Messiah figure arising to the exiles, giving them God's comfort.

Isaiah begins his section on the restoration with a bold prophecy that the restoration of Zion was to be associated with a way being prepared for Israel's God to come to them (Is. 40:1-3). These words are repeated in Mal. 3:1-3, where the messenger was to prepare the way of Yahweh's coming. It seems that in some sense they could have come true in the first return of the exiles along the wilderness way back to Zion, under Ezra. But over 100 years later, in Malachi's time, the prophecy was still capable of fulfilment, if the priesthood would be purged. But finally it was all deferred in fulfilment until the coming of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. Is. 45:20-25 calls for the Jews to return from Babylon and come unto Him in Zion; but the majority remained in Babylon, and so these words were delayed in fulfilment; Rom. 14 quotes them about how the new Israel will come from all nations to the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus at the last day. But had Jewry returned from Babylon as they had been asked, they would have come to their Messiah there and then.

When Nehemiah speaks of them having been redeemed by Yahweh's "strong hand" (1:10), he is using the language of Is. 40:10, regarding how Yahweh would come and save Israel from Babylon and restore them to the land "with strong hand". Nehemiah saw the prophecy could have been fulfilled then. The way Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:5-7), Ezra (Ezra 7:8; 8:32) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:11; 13:7) are described as 'coming to Jerusalem' may hint that they could have fulfilled this coming of Yahweh to Zion; they *could have been* Messianic figures (Neh. 2:11; 13:7). Because of the decree of Cyrus, the land of Israel could have opened and brought forth Jesus ("salvation", Is. 45:8). Haggai 2:7 had spoken of how the desire of all nations would come in to the temple and fill it with glory. This has been understood by John Thomas as referring to Messiah coming in to the temple in Kingdom glory. This is exactly the picture we have in Ezekiel 43. But in Haggai's context, he is encouraging the Jews of his time that this is what really and truly could have happened then and there, had they been obedient.

The Jews built a wall and appointed human guards over them (Neh. 4:15,22), even though Yahweh Himself had promised to be their wall and their guard (Zech. 2:4,5). And Zech. 12:8 had repeated it: "In that day shall the LORD defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and he that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David". But they didn't want to believe it, as they cowered in fear from those who "came to fight against Jerusalem" (Zech. 4:8), whom Zechariah prophesied would be destroyed by Yahweh. And yet He graciously worked with them in their plan to build a physical wall, just as He worked through their desire for human kingship and a physical temple in earlier days, even though it was not His ideal intention. Likewise He had promised support for them if they returned to the land; He would preserve them on the way. Consider Is. 50:10: "Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice [s.w. Ezra 1:1 re the proclamation of Cyrus] of his servant [i.e. Cyrus, Is. 45:1], that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God". Yet Ezra was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers to guard them on the journey only because he had earlier told the king that Yahweh would be with them (Ezra 8:22), as if he really did want the support but was ashamed to ask for it. He disallowed Isaiah's prophesy that the restored Israel would never be ashamed [s.w. Ezra 8:22; 9:6] nor confounded (Is. 45:17; 49:23; 54:4). Nehemiah accepted such support when he came up from Babylon (Neh. 2:9). And yet perhaps Nehemiah was some kind of

potential Messiah- for the surrounding Gentiles ‘came up’ to him and shared in the luxurious temple meals (a common Kingdom prophecy- the same Hebrew words are used for the Gentiles ‘coming up’ to the temple in Is. 60:5,11; Jer. 16:19; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 8:22). Those meals could have been the Messianic banquets. Another indication that Nehemiah could have been a Messiah figure is to be found in Mal. 1:10 RV, which laments that even if *one* man could be found to shut the temple doors properly, then God’s pleasure would have returned to Israel. It was Nehemiah who shut the doors (Neh. 13:19- i.e. organized the temple services?), but presumably the implication is that he didn’t continue as required.

Ezra likewise appears to have failed to live up to his potential- Jacob Myers cites an Arab tradition that he returned to Babylon and died there (1).

Conclusions

Ezra, Nehemiah, Joshua, Zerubbabel...all overlooked the encouragement of Is. 42:4 concerning the servant-Messiah: “He shall not fail nor be discouraged”. Of course, the Lord Jesus Himself, along with these earlier potential Messiahs, *could* have failed and been discouraged. This was a conditional prophecy, if ever there was one. But the Lord Jesus made it real and live in His own experience; the others assumed, as we so often do, that these kind of scriptures are meant for someone other than us. Just as so many in the world assume that the good news of the Kingdom applies to us who preach it, and it must be very nice for us...but refuse to let the personal reality of it sink in for *them*. In passing, it should be observed that the servant-Messiah is described as being blind and deaf (Is. 42:19)- just as those who returned from Babylon were called blind, yet having eyes; deaf, yet having ears (Is. 43:8). They had the potential to see and hear; and the servant-Messiah likewise was at that time deaf and blind, but had the potential to see and hear with the vision and words of Messiah. It is hard to understand these words otherwise. So we conclude that another reason why the restoration didn’t turn into the promised Messianic Kingdom was simply due to poor leadership. Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah returned from Babylon and were intended to be leaders who would crown Joshua / Jesus as the Messiah-Priest-Branch who would rebuild Jerusalem. But nothing is heard of them further. Perhaps it is to them that Zech. 11:8 refers: “Three shepherds

also I cut off in one month; and my soul loathed them...then said I [on God's behalf], I will not feed you: that that dieth, let it die". They had gone into captivity because of poor shepherds, and now at their return they again lacked men willing to be their Saviours; and God is saying that He would not do the shepherding job which He had delegated to others. It could be that Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah all died in one month as a result of Zechariah's prophecy at the time of Ezra 5:1. Or it could be that the three potential shepherds who failed were Zerubbabel, Joshua and Nehemiah.

Notes

(1) Jacob Myers, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (New York: Doubleday, 2004 ed.) p. LXXII.

8 The Potential For The Surrounding World

11-8-1 Haggai 2

Haggai 2:6,7 clearly stated that *very soon* the desire of all nations would come to the temple, and Yahweh would fill the temple with His glory, just as He had when the first temple was built (this is another proof that the temple of the restoration was to be based upon the pattern of Solomon's). This was to be brought about by Yahweh shaking all nations, with the result that in a great battle, they would kill each other (Haggai 2:22); and *then* Zerubbabel "my servant" (a Messianic title) would be the King of God's Kingdom. But this didn't happen "soon" after those words were spoken. Indeed, they are quoted in Heb. 12 as now having relevance to our last days. "I will overthrow...kingdoms" (Haggai 2:22) is the language of Dan. 2:44- perhaps it could have been that four kings arose after Nebuchadnezzar and then Babylon would have been destroyed. Thus Dan. 2:42 speaks of *the* singular Kingdom being divided, as if referring to the Kingdom of Babylon / Nebuchadnezzar. Thus the image stood complete when the stone hit it- the whole dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar was to be destroyed. But this didn't happen, and so other interpretations of the image prophecy became possible, each fitting perhaps less accurately than the intended fulfilment would have done. Likewise Haggai 2:22 continues by saying

that in that “overthrow”, “the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother”. This is the language of Zech. 14:13; that prophecy also could have had a fulfilment at the restoration, but it is now deferred until the last days.

Surely what *could* have happened, had Judah rebuilt the temple and lived as they were commanded, was that there would have been a great invasion against the temple and Jerusalem, Yahweh would have intervened and destroyed the invaders, and then in humility all nations would have come to worship at the temple and the Kingdom would have been established with Zerubbabel as king. He had the same possibility as Solomon had- to be the king of the Kingdom of God, *if* he was obedient.

8-2 Meshech And Tubal

This same possible sequence of events is outlined in Ezekiel- there *could have been* the restoration promised in Ezekiel 35-37, followed by the invasion by the surrounding nations in Ezekiel 38, and then the judgment of those nations and establishment of the Kingdom as detailed in Ezekiel 39. We want to explore this sequence in more detail. Ezekiel 37 had its primary fulfilment in the return under Ezra. Then, Israel was given “a quickening” (Ezra 9:9 LXX), in fulfilment of how the dry bones in captivity were revived. At that time, Judah *could* have fully revived. But most of them chose to stay in Babylon. If there had been a full revival, then the events of Ezekiel 38 and 39 would have taken place. It has been suggested that there was a primary fulfilment of Ezekiel 38/9 in an unrecorded invasion of the land at the time of the restoration. However, historical evidence for this is severely lacking ⁽¹⁾. And yet the Scythian tribes such as Magog, Gomer, Meshech, Tubal etc. are all recorded as being the scourge of the Middle East at that time ⁽²⁾. They were marauding into more prosperous areas “to take a spoil”, especially “cattle and goods”, at around Ezekiel’s time. They could so easily have turned their attentions toward Israel. That invasion *could* have happened; but it didn’t. But because Israel were not faithful the temple was not built properly, and therefore the Ezekiel 38 invasion didn’t happen, and therefore Yahweh’s intervention and establishment of His Kingdom as described in Ezekiel 39 didn’t occur. In some ways, the Ezekiel 38 invasion and 39 defeat *could* have occurred but instead has been deferred until the last days.....because through that invasion the establishment of the Kingdom is led into. This suggestion makes sense of the thorny

problem of Ezekiel 38:11 stating that the invasion would come at a time when Judah would be living in unwalled towns, without bars nor gates, “at rest”- which is the very language of Jer. 30: 10, that the restored Judah would be “in rest and be quiet”. The same word is used in Zech. 1:11 to describe how the land was “at rest” when the captives returned to rebuild Zion. Ezekiel 28:25,26 predicted, in a restoration context, that Tyre would be judged, and then Israel would plant vineyards and dwell “securely”. It seems that this was potentially possible; Judah could have become Yahweh’s battle axe against Tyre, the nations brought to fear Him, and then the Kingdom conditions would have begun. The dry bones prophecy of Ezekiel 37 seems to be saying that after the intended spiritual revival of Judah in captivity, they would become a “great army”; but by the rivers of Babylon they lamented exactly in the spirit of Ezekiel 37:11: “Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off”.

Zech 2:4 had foretold that “Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein”, seeing that Yahweh Himself would be as a wall of fire around her to protect her from her adversaries (Ezra had recognised this promise, that God would be a wall to them- Ezra 9:9). Note how this prophecy is introduced by an Angel with a measuring reed measuring out the rebuilt Zion (Zech. 2:1), just as we have in Ezekiel 40. But Judah disbelieved the promise of a Divine wall of fire, and insisted on building a physical wall to protect them; and the record in Nehemiah has plenty of reference to their setting up of bars and gates in their fear (Neh. 3:3,6,13-15). By doing so they disallowed the fulfilment of Ezekiel 38:11, and thereby precluded what was prophesied as subsequently following. If they had trusted Him and paid their tithes, their cattle would have multiplied, and the Scythian tribes would have come down to seek to take them, as Ezekiel 38:12,13 foretold. But as it happened, their cattle were diseased and their agriculture not blessed because of their dilatory attention to Yahweh’s house that lay waste (Haggai 1:11). So therefore there was no invasion, and no victory against the nations, and no Kingdom established at that time.

There is one detail in Ezekiel 38 which definitely suggests that prophecy *could* have been fulfilled at the time of the restoration. Ezekiel 38:21 says that a sword will be called for against Gog and thus he will meet his end. This is quoting from Jer. 25:29, where the context is of a group of

Arab nations invading the land and a sword being called upon them. There are several other links with the nations of Ezekiel 38 when we look closer at Jer. 25:19-26:

Edom, Moab, Ammon

Dedan & the merchants of Tarshish (vv. 22,23)- it is possible to read the text as suggesting that Sheba, Dedan and the merchants are part of the invading force in Ezekiel 38, not against it.

" All the kings of the north, far and near" (v. 26).

These nations all had their part in the Babylonian invasion, which is why they were to be punished in the end after Israel's restoration from captivity (Jer. 25:12). Ezekiel was prophesying about the time of the restoration- after 38,39 he goes on to give commands about how to rebuild the temple on their return from captivity. This is the context in which Ezekiel alludes back to Jer. 25.

Notes

(1) There are other examples of Bible prophecies which apparently have no fulfilment in conventional history, e.g. Egypt being desolate 40 years. My previous comment on this has been that just because history has some gaps in it [cf. Velikovsky's theories in *Ages In Chaos* and *Mankind In Amnesia*], this doesn't mean that the prophecies weren't fulfilled because history doesn't record it. But another possibility is that these were prophecies which had conditional fulfilments, and the preconditions were never attained by the men and women concerned at the time.

(2) "Historically, the nations mentioned in this passage [Ezekiel 38], Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Gomer and Beth-togarmah, were a barbarous people known as the Scythians...Just about the same time that Ezekiel was born, the Scythians terrorised Southwest Asia and the Middle East. Pouring through the passes of the Caucasus mountains, hordes of Scythians covered the fertile plains of the south. Known and feared for their ruthless cruelty, they came like a flight of locusts, devouring the

countryside, consuming crops, slaughtering livestock, burning homes and villages, and massacring the inhabitants of the land...All carried a double curved bow, shooting over the horse's left shoulder. Arrows and bow were carried in a case slung from the left side of a belt. The Scyths also carried swords, knives and daggers and wore bronze helmets and chain mail jerkins lined with red felt. They carried round shields decorated with central gold emblems in the shape of an animal. The Scythians were accomplished horsemen, being among the first people to master the art of riding. This made their approach seem unnaturally sudden and gave them the great advantage of surprise attack [this is exactly the picture presented in Ezekiel 38]...During the time of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the Scythians attacked Syria...from their capital city of SaqqEzekiel Later, they attacked Egypt...In the same year that the prophet Jeremiah was called (626 B.C.), swarms of Scythian invaders struck terror into the nations surrounding the Assyrian empire [which *could have* included Israel / Judah]. Having made a pact with the Assyrians, Scythian horsemen were sent against Egypt...The inclusion of the nations of Meshech, Tubal, Gomer, Beth-togarmah, Persia, Ethiopia and Put in Ezekiel 38:3,5,6 is best understood in light of the historical context of the Scythian invasion.

- In Genesis 10:2, Magog, Meshech, Tubal, and Gomer are named as the sons of Japheth and are the founders of the northern group of nations from which the Scythians descended.
- In Ezekiel 27:13, Meshech and Tubal are mentioned as being sellers of slaves to Tyre; and in Ezekiel 32:26, they are spoken of as " instilling terror in the land of the living."
- Meshech is thought to be a people called the Moschi dwelling in the Caucasus mountain regions according to Assyrian inscriptions.
- Tubal is thought to be a people called the Tibareni dwelling on the Southeast shores of the Black Sea [perhaps from whence modern Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia].
- Gomer is thought to have been the Cimmerians, who occupied central Turkey in the days of the Assyrian empire [the forerunners of the Kurds?].

- Beth-togarmah is thought to be Armenia.

- Persia is the people inhabiting the region of modern day Iraq and Iran.

When the history of the Scythian people is examined, it becomes apparent that they are the people described in Ezekiel's prophecy. Herodotus, the Greek historian, refers to the suddenness of the Scythians attack on the Assyrian empire. By examining this passage in its historical and cultural context, it can be seen that Ezekiel 38-39 describes the Scythian invasions during the time of Ezekiel”.

Jay Rogers , *Is the Soviet Union Gog and Magog?* (Melbourne, FL, USA: Media House International, 1990).

Comments in square brackets are my own. A similar summary of Scythian activity, commenting on how strangely Judah avoided their invasions, is to be found in H.P. Mansfield, *Zephaniah: Prophet Of Doom And Destiny*.

8-3 Joel Chapter 3

If the thesis presented concerning Ezekiel 40-48 is accepted, it has far reaching implications for how we read many other OT passages. Take, for example, Joel 3. Here we have what appears to be a prophecy relating to the latter day invasion of Israel and the establishment of the Kingdom. And so, in principle, it is. Yet there are a number of details which seem hard to apply to a latter day / Kingdom fulfilment- e.g. how the children of Tyre, Zidon and the Palestinians are to be sold by “the children of Judah...to the Sabeans, to a people far off” (Joel 3:8). One deeply wonders how this would appropriately be fulfilled at the establishment of the Kingdom in the last days. Indeed, all the ‘latter day’ prophecies have elements within them which would seem to fit far more comfortably in an earlier fulfilment; not least the references to pruninghooks being turned into spears (Joel 3:10), and the references in Ezekiel 38 to other ancient weapons, or the descriptions in Ezekiel 39 of the wooden weapons of the invader being burnt for seven years. My suggestion is that these are all parts of conditional prophecies that could have been fulfilled in the invasion that *could* have happened had the temple been properly rebuilt, and thereby through that invasion Yahweh would have revealed Himself openly, and the Kingdom been established.

Joel 3 has many links with the restoration prophecies, once we allow ourselves to read it as describing what *could* have happened at the time of the restoration:

Joel 3:1 “that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem”.

Note: “Judah and Jerusalem”. It was Judah who were taken into captivity into Babylon, and it was them who could have restored the temple as instructed by Ezekiel. *Every* other time the phrase “captivity of Judah” is used, it refers to Judah having been taken captive into Babylon (Jer. 29:22; 33:7; Dan. 5:13; 6:13). That “captivity” refers to those who had been taken captive; the captivity is put as a metonymy for those taken away by it. In the latter day of which Joel speaks, those taken captive would be ‘brought again’. Time and again, Jeremiah had prophesied how Yahweh would *bring again* His people and the vessels of the temple back to the land (Jer. 28:3,4,6; 30:3,18; 31:23); and this all had a fulfilment in the return from captivity under Ezra and Nehemiah. It was then that in some sense Yahweh ‘brought again Zion’ (Is. 52:8). The very same word used by Joel [translated “bring again”] is to be found in the references to Judah’s return at the restoration (Ezra 2:1; 6:21; Neh. 7:6; 8:17). The same word is to be found in Ezekiel 38:8 and 39:27, where again, the invasion is to happen once Judah had been ‘brought again’ from captivity. Judah returned, and yet they didn’t rebuild the temple as they were commanded. Therefore the invasion didn’t come, and therefore the Kingdom wasn’t then established. As if knowing this, Hos. 6:11 had prophesied [otherwise strangely] that Judah would reap their punishment, *when* they returned from captivity. They returned [s.w. ‘bring again’], but not to the Most High (Hos. 7:16). Joel 3, however, speaks from the perspective that Judah would be ‘brought again’ from Babylon under Ezra; and then

Joel 3:2 “I will also gather all nations...and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land”.

The “all nations” to be gathered are those who scattered Judah amongst the nations; not every literal nation. And who “scattered” Israel? The very same Hebrew word is used in Jer. 50:17 to describe how Babylon scattered Judah amongst the nations. And most significantly, the same

word occurs again in Est. 3:8: “And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people *scattered abroad* and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom...”. It is quite wrong for us to imagine Judah sitting quietly by the rivers of Babylon, all huddled together. They were scattered throughout all the many provinces / colonies of the Babylonian empire. This was why Cyrus’ decree bidding the Jews return to rebuild Jerusalem had to be published “throughout all his kingdom” (Ezra 1:1), and Jews living “in any place” of that kingdom were included in the invitation. It was Babylon who had “parted my land” by dividing it up amongst the various ‘Samaritan’ peoples who were transported there from other conquered territories. And their being in Babylon is paralleled with being scattered to the four corners of the world as it was known to them: “Ho, ho, come forth, and flee from the land of the north, saith the LORD: for I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heaven, saith the LORD. Deliver thyself, O Zion, that dwellest with the daughter of Babylon” (Zech. 2:6-7). And consider Zech 7:14: “But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them [i.e. this concerns the Babylonian invasion], that no man passed through nor returned”. Indeed, Zech. 8:7,8 speaks of the restoration as coming from both West and East of Israel, implying that the Babylonians had sold some of the Jews as slaves in Greece and north Africa.

Joel 3:3 “they have *cast lots* for my people”.

One of the two other occurrences of the word is in Obadiah 11,12, where Edom is described as casting lots for Jerusalem at the time of Judah’s judgment by Babylon.

Joel 3:5 “ye have taken away my silver and my gold, and have carried into your temples my goodly pleasant things”.

As witnessed by the book of Daniel, this was exactly what the Babylonians did in the lead up to the 70 years captivity.

Joel 3:6 “the children of Judah”. This is the burden of the prophecy (3:8,18,20)- and it was Judah who returned at the restoration.

Joel 3:7 “I will *raise them* out of the place whither ye have sold them”

Fulfilled in Judah being raised up out of Babylon. The same Hebrew word is used in Ezra 1:1,5 concerning how God raised up the spirit of Judah to return to the land.

The next verses go on to describe how then there would be a great invasion, to be met by Yahweh's intervention and the establishment of the Kingdom. *Then*

Joel 3:17 "So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no stranger pass through her any more".

This is language undoubtedly to be linked with that of Ezekiel 40-48. There we have Yahweh dwelling in Zion, the city named Yahweh Shammah, 'Yahweh is there'. No stranger would pass through Zion, according to Ezekiel 44:7-9.

Joel 3:18 "a fountain shall come forth of the house of the LORD"

Just as in Ezekiel 47:1-12.

Joel 3:21 "I will cleanse their blood that I have not cleansed; for the LORD dwelleth in Zion".

Just as in Ezekiel 43:7,9 Yahweh promises that He will dwell [s.w.] in the midst of His people.

Thus Joel 3 and Ezekiel 35-48 all show the same basic pattern: Judah were to return from captivity in Babylon, and then Babylon and "all nations" confederate with her were to be gathered to battle against Judah and Jerusalem, who would be living in a Jerusalem boasting a temple built after the pattern of Ezekiel 40-48. From this temple Yahweh would "roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem" (Joel 3:16), destroy the invading armies, and establish His Kingdom, in which "Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation" (Joel 3:20- how else to understand these specific references to *Judah's* perpetuity?). But the tragedy was and is- that Judah for the most part preferred the soft life in Babylon (the lists in Neh. 7 number less than 50,000 as returning). They failed to discern that in spiritual terms Babylon was a prison cell from which the righteous should seek to

hasten out of, to flee from; to shake off the yoke it put upon their necks (Is. 51:14; 52:2). Yet all they saw was a nice, comfy life, and they thought they were doing their bit by giving some silver and gold to those who wanted to return and build the temple, a desire which they would all have soberly nodded in agreement with as being ‘a great work’ (what similarities with ourselves?). Those who did return satisfied themselves with a small temple, disregarding the instructions which Ezekiel had given them in Babylon, they lacked the faith to believe that Yahweh would be a wall of fire around them and instead built their own wall, and got on with building their own ceiled houses (as Haggai lamented) rather than Yahweh’s house, marrying the local women, extorting wealth even from each other and enslaving their less fortunate brethren, trading on the Sabbath, allowing the local Arab leaders chambers even in the temple...and so the Kingdom prophecies were deferred. The process that could have brought about Yahweh’s establishment of His Kingdom seems to have been centred around an attack from the surrounding nations, aimed against the wonderful new temple Judah were supposed to have built, which would be destroyed by Yahweh who dwelt in that temple [‘Zion’]. In principle, some elements of all this prophecy will come true in the last days- but not every detail. There will be an invasion- for parts of Joel 3 (e.g. “the sun and the moon shall be darkened”, v. 15) are quoted by the NT as relating specifically to our last days. But it won’t involve literal spears and swords. The temple which was to have been built, and which is referred to in Joel 3 and perhaps other references in Isaiah and Zechariah, need not be literally built in the last days in order to incite an Arab invasion. Now do these prophecies demand that it be built in the Kingdom age, either. *If* the Kingdom had been established *then*, as was possible, then yes, it would have been built; and all the details are outlined in Ezekiel 40-48. The new regime of sacrifices would have been acceptable, for then Jesus would not have died and offered the one sacrifice that took away eternally any need for other sacrifices. But God in His foreknowledge- and this is, admittedly, hard to fathom- knew of Israel’s negligence, and how what was realistically possible at that time just wouldn’t be realized, because of their short-sightedness and basic selfishness. And therefore, because of this, He had planned that He would give His only begotten Son, to replace all need for temple and sacrifices. And the whole of the OT pointed forward to this. But there is no reason to think that prophecies which we now understand as relevant to the Lord Jesus could not have somehow come true in another, earlier person. Thus Dan.

9:25 states “that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks”. Perhaps in literally 69 weeks- a year and a few months- after Cyrus’ decree, Messiah would have come and been slain. Note how “the prince” is very much the language of Ezekiel 40-48 concerning a mortal “prince”, and also Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:8; there is good reason to think that Sheshbazzar was an official name for Zerubbabel- see Michael Ashton, *The Exiles Return*). And Isaiah 53 is prefaced in chapter 52 by the command to return from Babylon and to proclaim the good news of the Messianic Kingdom which Cyrus’ decree could have brought in; as if it *could* have come true then. He shall “grow up” as a root from a dry land (53:2) uses the word frequently used about the ‘going up’ from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Looking back over Joel chapters 1 and 2, this whole line of reasoning makes even more sense. For there we have the land about to be invaded, the day of the Lord upon them, the invading armies already massed. And “Yet even now, saith the Lord, turn ye unto me with all your heart...for...He repenteth him of the evil...who knoweth whether he will not turn and repent...?” (2:12-14 RV). The people are summoned into the temple for a national prayer of repentance and fasting (2:16). *If* this had been done- which it wasn’t- “*then* will the Lord be jealous for his land, and pit his people...I will remove far off from you the northern army, and will drive him into a land barren and desolate” (2:20); and the rest of the chapter goes on to describe the Kingdom blessings which would then come to the people, with the Spirit poured out and salvation in Zion. Yet Israel would not; they didn’t hold that day of fasting and prayer, and so the northern army came and destroyed them. And the prophecies were given another application- the Spirit was poured out upon the apostles (Acts 2), and salvation was given in Zion in a spiritual sense. And the final realization of the Kingdom blessings was deferred until, hopefully, our own times. Is. 32:14-16 RV has a similar scenario- Jerusalem was to be depopulated, wild animals would live there, Ophel [i.e. Zion, the temple mount] would be desolate- and then the Holy Spirit would be poured out and the Kingdom conditions established in Israel. But these things didn’t happen at the restoration, because Israel didn’t want the Spirit “to be poured upon us from on high”.

9 Different Sequences Of Prophetic Fulfilment

The sequence of possible, potentially possible events as outlined in Ezekiel 35-48 is perhaps not the same sequence as found in say Zechariah, a prophecy given some time after it had become evident that Judah and “the prince” were not fulfilling God’s intended pattern.

Ezekiel 35-48	Zechariah 14	Daniel 9 & 11	Isaiah	Joel 3
<p>The returned exiles of Judah restore the Kingdom and build the temple as specified (Ez. 35-37, 40-48). The dry bones come to life in the restoration. They dwell in kingdom conditions without bars and gates.</p>	<p>The people have returned but not built the temple as they ought to have done, and are not living the Kingdom life.</p>	<p>The decree to rebuild the temple made by Cyrus. Within 70 literal weeks (about one a half years) it would be possible for the Kingdom to be properly established.</p>	<p>Judah return with joy from Babylon, Zion and no longer has the uncircumcised in it (cp. Tobiah!). “Your heart shall rejoice [for Zion], and your bones shall flourish” (Is. 66:14), in the fulfilment of the Ez. 37 vision.</p>	<p>The captivity of Judah return from Babylon and other places where the Babylonians transported them.</p>
<p>After 62 weeks, Messiah is “cut off” in order to bring about the final forgiveness of Israel..</p>	<p>Messiah, who also ‘comes up’ from the dry ground of Babylon [Is. 53:2 “grow up”], gives</p>			

his life to
obtain
eternal
forgiveness
for
Israel's
sins.

<p>Surrounding nations along with Babylon and Assyria make an unsuccessful attempt to invade them to take a spoil (Ez. 38).</p>	<p>All nations are gathered against Jerusalem and they capture it and murder many of the returned exiles. As a result of this, some repent (Zech. 12:14).</p>	<p>Another "prince", i.e. an anti-Christ, a fake "Messiah the prince", destroys the city and the temple sanctuary which the returned exiles had built. Dan. 11 defines him as a "king of the north" who has a confederacy of Arab nations with him. There is a desolating war. The offering of sacrifice ceases. The invader sets up <i>his</i> tent in the glorious mountain of Zion. It is the</p>	<p>All nations where the Jews were sent around Israel are gathered into the valley of Jehoshaphat. They come as a huge confederacy to fight against the revived state of Judah.</p>
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time of
trouble such
as never was
for Israel
(Dan. 12:1 =
9:25
“troubles
times”).

<p>Yahweh intervenes and destroys them, and establishes His Kingdom world-wide. All nations come to know His ways (Ez. 39).</p>	<p>Yahweh goes out to fight against those nations and establishes His Kingdom.</p>	<p>In the end, Judah has been punished enough for her sins. Everlasting righteousness is brought in, with the establishment of the Kingdom age. The dead are raised and those who turned many in Israel to righteousness are rewarded (Dan. 12:3; this is a reference to how the lips of the priests at the restoration ought to have taught others knowledge, Mal. 2:7).</p>	<p>There in the valley of Jehoshaphat, Yahweh sits to judge the nations. He roars out of Zion and the earth shakes.</p>
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People from all the surrounding nations become proselytes, and drink from the river that comes from Jerusalem, the water of which is for the healing of all nations (Ez. 40-48). Yahweh is “there”, dwelling in Zion.	Proselytes from all the surrounding nations come up to Jerusalem to keep the feasts in the temple.	A newly built “most holy” is anointed, seeing that “the sanctuary” had been destroyed in the invasion. “Everlasting righteousness” is brought in.	A redeemed Israel go forth into the Gentile world, proclaiming the joy of their restored relationship with God. Converts from all over the world come to worship Yahweh in the Jerusalem temple, bringing with them their various offerings.	Yahweh dwells in Zion (3:21). The hills flow with milk, and a fountain comes out of the temple.
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Bible students have sought in vain to reconcile these and many other different sequences of prophetic fulfilment. We have mused about there being several invasions in the last days to get all the details fulfilled, and have conceived the repentance of Israel as being in various stages to fit in with the sequences outlined in the various prophets. But it seems impossible to geographically and chronologically synchronise all these things together in terms of one universal fulfilment. My suggestion is that the above prophecies were all potential scenarios of what *could* have happened at the time of the restoration. The ideal intention was in the Ezekiel record- that an unsuccessful invasion such as that described in Ez. 38 would have occurred, rooted in jealousy at the rebuilt temple and Babylon feeling like Pharaoh that they had let the Jews go too far; and this would have lead up to the establishment of the Kingdom. But God foresaw that this was not going to happen. Judah simply didn't return with joy and righteousness as commanded / prophesied in Isaiah and Jer. 31:4 etc. And so another possibility opened up. The self-satisfied returnees would be invaded and Jerusalem captured, many of them

would be killed, but a minority would endure through this invasion and be the basis for the Kingdom of God to be established. But so unresponsive were God's people that even this didn't happen. All these prophecies await some element of fulfilment in our last days. The essence of them will be fulfilled, but the local details, I suggest, were only relevant to their immediate context- e.g. that the wooden weapons will be burnt for seven years, and that they would invade with shields and swords. These wider principles explain much about Revelation. The judgments to come upon the earth / land of Israel are presented in four groups of seven. This is exactly the pattern of Lev. 26, where Israel are threatened with seven-fold judgments; and if they did not repent, then the seven-fold judgments would be repeated. Four times this is threatened; if they had repented after the first seven-fold judgments, there would have been no need for the others. It seems to me that the sequence of events in the last days is likewise impossible to predict in detail, because depending upon human freewill, the fulfilment of the various prophecies may be suspended or be realized in more symbolic ways, as we have already seen God working like this in the past. Thus Joel 3:2 says that God will "plead" with the nations He gathers to Jerusalem, plead with them for His people, plead with them to accept His Son, as outlined in Psalm 2. They may or may not respond, and how they do will doubtless influence the sequence and nature of prophetic fulfilment which then follows.

Micah 5 opens up too when approached from this angle. It was a prophecy given in the days of Hezekiah, concerning how the Assyrians would invade the land, and be saved by the arising of a Messianic figure- "seven shepherds and eight principal men" (5:5- probably these are to be read as intensive plurals for the great shepherd, the great leader). Judah under his leadership would then "waste the land of Assyria with the sword", and thereby "deliver us from the Assyrian, when he cometh into our land". Then "the remnant of Judah shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord". But what happened? The Assyrians invaded, Hezekiah was raised up as a potential Messiah, the Assyrians were destroyed by Divine theophany, Judah were delivered from the Assyrians. But then what happened? Hezekiah invited the Babylonians [often used interchangeably for 'Assyrians'] into his house, showed off everything, and provoked Yahweh's anger. He did the very opposite to leading Judah against Assyria, to the end that they became a blessing for all nations. But it *could* have happened. But Hezekiah and the people

didn't let it go as far as it could go; and therefore the full fulfilment of the prophecy will be in our last days. Earlier in Micah, the daughter of Zion was to be in labour pangs (symbolic of their troubles in the 70 years captivity- Jer. 6:24), and then give birth to a new nation as a result of this (4:9,10), as well as her Messiah (5:2), who would lead Judah in destroying Babylon (4:13; 5:5-8). But Judah didn't want to destroy Babylon. Most of them preferred to carry on living there. So, no Messiah. At that time. Another different sequence of prophetic fulfilment had to develop.

Closer study reveals the variableness of outworking of the time periods. Jer. 25:11,12 and Jer. 29:10 speak of a 70 year period of Babylonian rule over Judah, beginning with the invasion of BC597. But Babylon only ruled over Judah for 49 years, before Babylon fell to the Persians. This would connect with the way that Zech. 4:3 speaks of 7 menorah candlesticks each with 7 lamps, making 49 lamps. 49 is the cycle of 7 sabbath years that culminated in the jubilee year, and the jubilee year, the proclamation of liberty to the land (Lev. 25:8-12; 27:7-24) is a figure used so often in Isaiah to describe the freedom of Judah once released from Babylon. Lev. 26:34,43 speak of the land enjoying her Sabbaths whilst Israel were in exile for their sins- i.e. for 49 years. So it seems that there could have been some restoration after 49 years- but it didn't happen. But Dan. 9:2 and 2 Chron. 36:21 seem to reinterpret those 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecies as speaking of a 70 year period during which Jerusalem and the temple would be desolate. And yet there again, Ezekiel was asked to prophecy that Judah would suffer for their sins for 40 years (Ez. 4:6). Perhaps something could've happened after 40 years... Perhaps some restoration could have happened to the ten tribes after 390 years (Ez. 4:5), although there's no sign it ever did. And then, the starting point of the 70 or 40 years was somewhat flexible- for Ez. 22:3,4 records Ezekiel's prophecy that the desolation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians [the starting point of the time periods] was actually being hastened, brought forward, by the terrible behaviour of the Jews living there after the initial Babylon invasion of the land. In fact, if a person had been found who would have powerfully interceded for Jerusalem, 'stood in the gap' (Ez. 22:30), God wouldn't have destroyed Jerusalem - "that I should not destroy it" is an allusion to Abraham interceding for Sodom in Gen. 18:28. There were simply so many possible scenarios! Harry Whittaker in a pamphlet entitled *5 Minutes To Twelve* discusses the way that it seems the 2nd coming could have occurred at several points in the 20th

century. 1917, 1948, 1967, 1988, the Gulf Wars etc. all had their possibilities of fulfilling Bible prophecy about the Lord's return. But, he suggests, He didn't return, because Israel [both natural and spiritual] didn't fulfil the necessary preconditions.

Radical Implications

If indeed Ez. 40-48 are conditional prophecies, this opens up the possibility that so too are many other prophecies- especially those which involve allusion to them. For example, Rev. 11:1 speaks of a command to measure the temple- and immediately our minds are sent back to the temple being measured in such detail in Ez. 40:10, 21,22 etc. Is this to be read as a sign that we are about to receive another conditional prophecy? Assuming that Revelation was given just prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD70, we could read the ensuing prophecy in Rev. 11 as saying that although Jerusalem and the outer court would fall to the Romans, the zealots in the inner sanctuary would be preserved, and a command to repentance would be issued by two prophets (1). Now of course, this didn't happen; but perhaps it could've done, potentially? Consider the possibility- both here and in so many other Bible passages.

This view of prophecy means that we need not get overly worried about the supposed discrepancies between prophecy and its historical fulfilment. Such differences don't negate the Divine inspiration of the original prophecy- rather do they show how God's intentions can be worked out in different ways because of the open-ended approach He takes to human response. Thus it's been observed that the siege of Jerusalem in AD66-70 doesn't exactly follow the descriptions in Lk. 19:41-44 and 21:20-24 (2). This would be because there were within the Olivet prophecy a number of possible scenarios of what could happen *if* the believers fled the city as commanded; and of course, *if* Israel repented and accepted Christ at His AD70 'coming' in judgment. Additionally we must remember that this prophecy was only having its initial fulfilment in AD70- the final fulfilment will be in our last days.

Notes

(1) For more on this, see R.H. Charles, *Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920); Arthur S. Peake, *The Revelation of John* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1919), p. 291; I.T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse Of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) pp. 584-8.

(2) See C.H. Dodd, 'The fall of Jerusalem', in *More New Testament Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968).

10 Hosea, Zechariah And Malachi: More Chances

Hosea And The Restoration

There's reason to think that many if not all the Old Testament books were re-written during the exile, highlighting their relevance to the Jews in captivity. Hosea's references to restoration and Gomer / Israel's "return" to Him (e.g. Hos. 6:11) indicate that the 'return' God had in mind was the return of Judah from captivity to Him and to His land. Hosea's failed marriage with the unfaithful Gomer spoke of God's terribly painful and tragic relationship with Israel. But like God, Hosea lived in hope of restoration. He fantasized about the day when he would re-live his romance with Gomer, they would again wander together in love in the wilderness, they would re-marry with a new covenant, the joy of which would be so great that the birds and trees joined in with them, and he would re-name the children born during their first marriage. Time and again he wished that Gomer would go back to how things were with them at the beginning; and he tried to engineer things so that she would wish to return there too (Hos. 2:9). All this reflected the fantasy of God for Israel's return to Him, for a restoration of things (Is. 1:26; Jer. 33:7,11). And yet both Gomer and Israel were unfaithful from the beginning; and yet as Hosea decided to view their early romance positively, so God decided to view Israel in the wilderness through the lens of His amazing grace.

As the whole creation would share the joy of Hosea and Gomer's remarriage, so Is. 44:23 and Is. 49:13 use similar terms to describe how all creation could have rejoiced in the reuniting of Yahweh with His people on their return from Babylon. As God longed to pronounce the words "You are my people" to them (Hos. 2:25), so Is. 51:16 speaks of how at the restoration God wished to use that very phrase to returned Judah. Hosea / God speak in the most shocking terms- "I will sow her... in the land" (Hos. 2:25). This means, bluntly, they would have sex, in the land of God. *But the Jews in Babylon just plain weren't interested in returning to the land.* They preferred to remain there where they were, and 'worship' God, criticizing others for their apostasy, but not really come back to Him with any passion. God wished that once again He

would be with them in the wilderness as He was at the beginning of their national relationship, and then enter a new covenant with them, the joy of which would result in the physical transformation of the planet. It appears from Hos. 3:1 that Hosea tried to force through the realization of this fantasy by ‘redeeming’ Gomer. He dreamt of romancing Gomer again and remarrying her, and it seems he did actually redeem her a second time for marriage. The parallel of this in God’s relationship with His people would’ve been His ‘forcing through’ of His fantasy for them at the time of the return from Babylon. He forgave them without their repentance, and desperately urged them through Isaiah to return to the land, rebuild the temple according to the specifications of Ezekiel, and enter a new covenant with Him. God phrases the prophecies / commands / desire for that return from Babylon in language which is shot through with reference to the exodus from Egypt. In other words, like Hosea, Yahweh wanted to repeat the wilderness romance with which He had started His relationship with them. He wanted to again provide water in the desert (Is. 41:18); He wanted their return from Babylon across the desert to be like their exodus from Egypt and passage through the desert to the land. Hosea talks of starting a relationship again with his wife, a re-marriage; Ez. 37 expresses this same reality in another figure in speaking of how Israel would be resurrected, and this new person would return to Zion. Is. 41:19 speaks of how God would even line their route from Babylon to Zion with trees. In the wilderness, the place where God told Moses that Israel were not His people, there God intended to again tell them that they were His people (Hos. 2:1); God’s judgment against His people involved taking them into the wilderness and slaying them with thirst (Hos. 2:5); and yet there, through that judgment, they would again become His people. God’s plan therefore was to bring Judah out of Babylon / Persia, and reveal Himself to them as their God on their wilderness journey home, and then return together with joy to Zion.

The grace shown by God to His people, reflected in Hosea’s grace toward Gomer, was especially shown to the exiled Jews in Babylon. By grace, Hosea and God granted forgiveness to their women in order to lead them to repentance (Hos. 2:16; 7:1). Hosea wanted to call Gomer and her children “my people”, and to give them grain and all the good things that went with a marriage relationship (Hos. 2:24). But this is the very language of Ez. 36:24-31 about God’s intentions for the restoration from Babylon- the people would be cleansed, called “my people”, given

grain and all God's blessings- in the hope that *then* they would repent and loathe their immorality and unfaithfulness. Such is God's grace that His acceptance *leads to* repentance, rather than repentance being a condition of His grace and acceptance. Hosea's attitude to Gomer says it all.

A Redemption Refused

As Hosea 'redeemed' Gomer in His attempt to force through His fantasy for her (Hos. 3:1), so Yahweh is repeatedly described in Isaiah as Israel's *go'el*, redeemer (Is. 41:14; Is. 43:14; Is. 44:6,24; Is. 47:4; Is. 48:17; Is. 49:7,26; Is. 54:5,8). The redeemer could redeem a close relative from slavery or repurchase property lost during hard times (Lev. 25:25,26, 47-55; Ruth 2:20; Ruth 3:9,12). The redeemer was also the avenger of blood (Num. 35:9-28; Josh. 20:3,9). All these ideas were relevant to Yahweh's relationship to Judah in captivity. But the promised freedom didn't come- even under Nehemiah, Judah was still a province within the Persian empire. And those who returned complained: "We are slaves this day in the land you gave..." (Neh. 9:36). The wonderful prophecies of freedom and redemption from slavery weren't realized in practice, because of the selfishness of the more wealthy Jews. And how often is it that the freedom potentially enabled for those redeemed in Christ is in practice denied them by their autocratic and abusive brethren? And yet God was simply so positive about His people- Is. 51:14 appears to be a descriptive statement about the Jews, but in reality it wasn't true: "The bound down one hastens to be loosed". Sadly, they didn't respond to the exhortation to loose themselves from the bands upon them (Is. 52:2). They preferred to stay in bondage, as so many do today.

Tragically, neither Yahweh's nor Hosea's fantasy for their woman worked out. In God's case, it was rescheduled and reappropriated. Rev. 13 shows that it is us as the new woman of God who must leave Babylon in the last days. This is where all this becomes so biting relevant for us.

Zechariah And Malachi

We have observed that Is. 53:2 speaks of Messiah, in a restoration context beginning in Is. 52, as ‘growing up’, the same word used to describe the ‘coming up’ from the dry ground of Babylon. This potential Messiah was Zerubbabel, but one wonders whether when he failed to fulfil the prophecies, there was the possibility that another man could have fulfilled his role. Nehemiah ‘came up’ from Babylon, and was “the servant” who ‘prospered’ Yahweh’s work (Neh. 1:11; 2:20), just as the servant prophecies required (Is. 53:10; 48:15); and he was thereby the redeemer of his brethren (Neh. 5:8). He encouraged the singing of praise on the walls of Zion (Neh. 9:5; 12:46), surely in a conscious effort to fulfil the words of Is. 60:18- that Zion’s gates in Messiah’s Kingdom would be praise. He was “despised” as Messiah would be (Neh. 2:19; Is. 53:3 s.w.). He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, as Messiah would (Neh. 2:12 cp. Zech. 9:9); and Neh. 2:16 sounds very much like “of the people there was none with me” (Is. 63:3). The Gentiles round about came to sit at Nehemiah’s table to eat and drink (Neh. 5:17), just as Isaiah had prophesied could happen on a grander scale at the restoration of the Kingdom. One wonders if the potential fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies was transferred to him? And yet Nehemiah returned to Babylon at least once, and there is no record that on his second visit he stayed on, but rather, the implication seems to be, he returned again to the service of Babylon. The total lack of Biblical information about his later life may reflect this disappointing decision. This train of thought enables us to appreciate the joy and pleasure which the Father had when finally His beloved Son lived up to all that He sought and expected.

Even within some of the above prophecies, especially the hopeful, exuberant Isaianic prophecies of a successful restoration, there are hints that God foresaw that all would not be that rosy. Is. 63:18 even seems to have foreseen that the restoration would be interrupted by Gentiles again possessing Zion- just as happened before Nehemiah’s coming from Babylon: “The people of thy holiness have possessed it but a little while: our adversaries have trodden down thy sanctuary”. And Is. 66:1-5 seems to anticipate that the actual rebuilding of the temple would be nullified by an incorrect attitude to the sacrifices, and more important would it be that Judah trembled at God’s word: “Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite

spirit, and trembleth at my word. He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog's neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine's blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol [cp. Malachi's criticisms of restored Judah's attitude to the sacrifices]. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not. Hear the word of the LORD, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the LORD be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed". The double reference to trembling at Yahweh's word is a definite prediction of the situation in Ezra 9:4; 10:3, where the same rare Hebrew word is used regarding how those of the exiles who repented for their marriage out of the Faith trembled before the word in repentance. Then, at that point, the Kingdom blessings could have been brought about, as described in the rest of Is. 66. But again, there was no staying power in their repentance. By Nehemiah's time, and by Malachi's time even after his, marriage out of the Faith was still their weakness.

Is. 49:4-6 seems to foresee how the returnees would be discouraged in their work of rebuilding, and at the fact that not all God's people had been gathered back. And yet even then, provided they had the right spirit, the Kingdom blessings could still come: "Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God. And now, saith the LORD... Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength... I will also give thee [the servant, redeemed Israel] for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth". Isaiah 49 goes on to comfort the servant that the remainder of Israel would be regathered, and that the broken down walls of Zion were continually before Yahweh (Is. 49:16). This is exactly relevant to the situation in Judah after the first break in the rebuilding; the walls were broken down by the Samaritans, but Nehemiah was raised up to lead more back with him from Babylon and rebuild them. And yet sadly, this too failed, for Judah were still unwilling to completely forsake Babylon. "Thy walls are continually before me [even during the 70 years captivity]...[even while in captivity they were thinking that Yahweh had

forgotten them, v. 14]...thy builders (RVmg.) make haste...thy land that hath been destroyed [by the Babylonian scorched earth policy] shall even now be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants...then shalt thou say, Who hath begotten me these, seeing I am barren, an exile...?" (Is. 49:16,19,21 RV). This all implies there would be a population explosion at the time of the restoration. But there is no evidence this was the case. All this was potentially true; but it didn't come to pass in reality.

Is. 51:3-11 is clearly in a restoration context: "For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places...Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men [s.w. Neh. 1:3; 2:17; 4:4; 5:9 re. the reproach of the Gentiles against the partially rebuilt Jerusalem], neither be ye afraid of their revilings. For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool: but my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation from generation to generation. Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in the ancient days... Therefore the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their head: they shall obtain gladness and joy; and sorrow and mourning shall flee away". This passage seems to have foreseen the lagging of spirit in Zerubbabel and the builders, and the need to encourage them that a second group of exiles ought to have come with Nehemiah with great joy. A few came, but this yet further opportunity was again not realized by the returnees. Isaiah had repeatedly prophesied that Judah would come with joy to Zion, and would continue there with an everlasting joy. But the records give little indication that they were joyful; Neh. 8:9,10 shows Nehemiah encouraging them to be joyful, because "the joy of the Lord is your strength". They didn't want to have all joy and peace through believing; and so the Kingdom of joy didn't come. They didn't live the Kingdom life of joy, and so they didn't possess or experience the Kingdom. The lowness of their petty concerns deprived them of it.

"If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry...thou shalt raise up the foundations...thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach...if thou turn away thy foot from...doing thy pleasure on my holy day" (Is. 58:10,12,13) all shows that the rebuilding of Jerusalem was conditional upon Judah's spirituality. They didn't keep the Sabbath; they abused

their poor brethren; and therefore their rebuilding of Zion was merely an outward appearance of fulfilling the prophecies.

Zechariah and Malachi repeatedly criticise the shepherd-priests of Judah for not leading the people as they should have done, and thereby enabled the restoration. Zech 10:3 implies that because Yahweh had visited His people and (potentially) made them capable of establishing His Kingdom, *therefore* the priests were at fault for not enabling Judah's spiritual revival: "Mine anger was kindled against the shepherds, and I punished the goats: *for* the LORD of hosts hath visited his flock the house of Judah, and hath made them as his goodly horse in the battle". Zech 13:7-9, in the context of preceding chapters speaking of how the shepherds of Israel had so failed to play their potential part in God's purpose of restoring His people, prophesies: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones. And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God". This could well be speaking of how God cut off men like Zerubbabel who were poor shepherds, although potential Messiahs; and it *could* have then happened that during the 'cutting off' of Jewish population during the Antiochus invasions, a minority could have repented and ushered in the true restoration. But this didn't happen, and so the prophecy had a deferred fulfilment, although humanly speaking somewhat out of context, in the cutting off of the good shepherd, the scattering of the disciples, and their spiritual refining.

Finally Malachi offered Judah their last chance. The willingness of Yahweh to work with His people and bring about His Kingdom with them is really amazing. They had failed to live the Kingdom life for well over 100 years since Ezra first returned from Babylon. All sorts of potential Kingdom opportunities had slipped through their fingers. Finally Malachi appealed for their repentance, for them to pay the tithes, and then their land would be "delightful" and all nations would call them blessed (Mal. 3:10-12); Messiah would come and purge a corrupt priesthood, so that "then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be

pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old” (Mal. 3:1-4). But only a remnant “hearkened and heard” (Mal. 3:16), their future salvation was guaranteed, but “the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven” to judge the heedless majority. He had offered them the Gospel of His Kingdom, had manoeuvred and manipulated the greatest nations of the day to enable them to take up the offer, affecting the lives of millions of people throughout the Middle East...but they were more worried about their little farm and storing up their crops for themselves, too mean spirited to look out of themselves, too self-satisfied with their own religion, too sure of their own righteousness. Instead of subduing the nations around them with the victory of Israel’s God, they brought their own brethren into subjection unto them, that they might gain out of them (Zech. 9:15 s.w. Neh. 5:5). It could’ve been the Kingdom, Israel could have become the joy of the whole earth and her people a joy. But instead, they were obsessed with their petty, miserable little kingdoms, and the next few centuries had nothing of the joy which Isaiah had repeatedly prophesied as being possible for them. And so with Malachi, the sun went down over the prophets, and the Father’s appeal to His wayward sons came to an end, until the coming of His Son.

Out of all this comes a powerful lesson. We put God to endless pain and labour in order to fulfil His wish to save men, if we don’t fulfil what in prospect we could fulfil. In the context of the restoration, Yahweh truly said that “...so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa 55:11). His word will have fulfilment in the end, but it can have its fulfilment in us, here and now. Nehemiah twice stated that Yahweh was prospering him in his work of restoring Zion [Neh. 1:11; 2:20 s.w.]; but generally, the word of prophecy was deferred in its fulfilment. Let’s not be satisficers as Israel were, minimalists happy so long as we have our bit of land to live on, our cieled roof to dwell under...and neglect *His* house. Let’s be aware that God will confirm us in the way we chose to take. Ezra 4 says that the reason the temple was not further rebuilt was because of the decree of Artaxerxes suspending the building programme; then Haggai came and told Israel that the temple wasn’t built because they had preferred to build their cieled houses (Ezra 5:1). So God had confirmed the people in the way they chose. They preferred to build their houses rather than His, so He stopped them from building His house altogether until they wholeheartedly recommitted themselves to Him. Throughout this period

of their history, Israel knew what they ought to do, and they knew very well their weaknesses. They should *all* have returned from Babylon; but many remained, although they gave those who returned material support. Far more of them should have lived in Jerusalem, but they didn't- lots had to be drawn to get enough people to live there. And yet the people blessed those who willingly offered to live there (Neh. 11:2). They rejoiced with joy in Nehemiah chapter 8 that they were forgiven, but in chapter 9 they were back to realising that they had seriously sinned in other ways; in chapter 12 they dedicated the wall, but this gets overshadowed in chapter 13 by the realisation that again they had mixed with the surrounding nations. Several times they entered into solemn covenants not to marry Gentiles, and soberly recounted the miserable history of their failures, how as a people they had sinned, repented, and done the very same again. But then they simply lived out that cycle themselves, having just lamented it. They divorced their Gentile wives, and then took more (in the times of Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi). They vowed not to forsake the house of their God, and yet Nehemiah concludes with the record that this is exactly what they did (Neh. 10:39; 13:11). They were slack paying the tithes, then they paid them, they slacked again, then they paid them- several times this cycle is recorded. Likewise the withholding of agricultural blessing occurred several times- in Neh. 5:2,3 (as prophesied in Is. 51:19), in Haggai's time, and later in Malachi 3:10,12; when the restored Zion could have been as the garden of Eden, i.e. paradise restored on earth (Is. 51:3). Here we see frightening similarities with ourselves. We know, but often don't do. We sense this cycle of failure, crying out for mercy, receiving it, failing again, crying for mercy, receiving it, failing again...we see it in Israel, in our brethren and those around us, and in ourselves. We can expound it, lament it, feel the shame and tragedy of it all...and yet continue to have a part in it. Eventually, the people stayed in this groove so long that they degenerated into how they were at the time of Malachi- self-righteous, with no sense of failure any more, living self-centred lives of petty materialism, earning wages as they did in Haggai's time, to put into pockets with holes in, life without satisfaction, achieving nothing, passively angry. This is what Malachi clearly portrays. It's a terrible picture, and one which we can sail dangerously close to identifying with.

11 The Returned Exiles

It has been demonstrated that the record of the exile from the land is framed in terms of the exile from Eden; the offer of return to the land is therefore an offer of paradise restored, fellowship with God renewed- for those who wanted it. Let's remember that the exiles were symbols of us. We in this life are passing through "the time of our exile" (1 Pet. 1:17 RSV). Paul exhorts us to pray for kings and governors, in the very language of the LXX in Ezra 6:10 about the returnees praying in the new temple for the kings of Babylon. They were commanded to spread the knowledge of Israel's God to all in the dominion of Babylon (Ezra 7:25 LXX), and thus they would have fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies about the spreading of the Gospel to all peoples. Yet we have a similar commission, which we must take heed to live up to; for the exiles who returned became so caught up with their own lives that they again failed to be a light to the nations.

Time and again the Lord Jesus reapplies the language of the restoration from Babylon to what He is doing to all men and women who heed His call to come out from the world and follow Him. The ideas of bringing His sheep, "other sheep of mine", who will hear His voice and form one flock under one shepherd (Jn. 10:16)- all these are rooted in the restoration prophecies (Ez. 34; Ez. 37:21-28; Jer. 23:1-8; Jer. 31:1-10). When the Lord spoke of His people as being raised up put of the stones, as living stones, He surely had Neh. 4:2 in mind- where the stones of Zion are described as reviving, coming alive, at the restoration. The second coming is to be the restoration *again* of the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), as if the first restoration is to be understood as a type of that to come. When the Lord speaks of a change of yokes for the weary and a granting of rest in Him (Mt. 11:28-30), He is using terms taken from Isaiah's restoration prophecies. The offer of rest was rejected by the exiles then; but is taken up now by all who accept Christ, realizing that they are in the same state as the exiles in Babylon. "Come out from among them and be ye separate" (2 Cor. 6:17) is picking up the language of Is. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; Zech. 2:7 concerning the return of the exiles from Babylon. The edict of Cyrus for the Jews to return to the land is in a sense pointing forward to God's command to us to leave the spirit of Babylon, the Gentile world, and go up to do His work. The returned exiles are us. Those who left Babylon did so of their own freewill (Ezra 7:13), and yet providential events stirred up their spirits to

do this (Ezra 1:5); and the way was prepared in miraculous way. And so it is for us, in our exodus from this world and from the flesh. Judah in Babylon were as captives in the prison cell, waiting to be released and return to their land, according to Isaiah's images. And these pictures are picked up and applied to all who know the redemption and restoration of Christ. There in Babylon they were as the vine tree, burned up and fit for no work; and yet, still used to perform God's work, by grace alone (Ez. 15:5). And these men were truly types of us. Sitting there in captivity, God offered His people a new covenant (Ez. 11:19,20,25 cp. Heb. 10:16); they could have one mind between each other, and a heart of flesh. But Israel would not, and it was only accepted by those who turned to Jesus Christ. Their being of "one heart" after baptism (Acts 4:32) was a direct result of their acceptance of this same new covenant which Judah had rejected. In the hearing of offer of the new covenant, we are essentially in the position of those of the captivity, hearing Ezekiel's words, and deciding whether or not to remain in cushy Babylon, or make a painful and humanly uncertain aliyah to Zion.

The whole of Paul's exhortation to zealous service in the ecclesia in 2 Tim. 2 is based on the returned exiles, confirming that they are indeed 'types of us'.

2 Tim. 2

"If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the master's use" (:21)

"A workman that needeth not to be ashamed" (:15)

"The foundation of God standeth sure" (:19)

Nehemiah

"I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should come and keep the gates...thus cleansed I them from all strangers" (Neh. 13:22,30). Also a reference to the cleansing of the Jews from mixed marriages.

The workmen rebuilding Zion

The laying of the foundation stone

- “The Lord knoweth them that are his” (:19) The spirit of Is. 44:5- that although at the time of the restoration not all knew their genealogy, they were accepted in any case, being surnamed with the Name of Jehovah and that of Jacob
- “A great house” (:20) The temple (1 Chron. 22:5)
- “Vessels of gold and of silver” (:20) “Vessels of gold and silver” (Ezra 5:14)

Isaiah 40-66 is full of encouragement to Judah in Babylon to “fear not” and make the move back to the land. They are encouraged that “I have redeemed thee...thou art mine...for I am the Lord thy God...thy saviour; I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee” (Is. 43:1,3). As a reward for allowing the Jews to return, the kings of Persia were given Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba. The Jews were doubtful as to whether God would really accept them now, after all their sin; and they were trapped in the good life, and the difficulty of uprooting from the world they were in. *They were just like us!* They had to be reminded that their Saviour had paid the ransom to redeem them, and therefore they must do their part and leave. And the blood of Jesus should work a like inspiration for us, all too loaded down with our burden of sin, unworthiness, spiritual dysfunction...Their fears about the way back were allayed: “I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert” (43:19). They were constantly encouraged that as God had redeemed His people from Egypt through the water, fire and desert, so He would and could redeem them from their Egypt. The returned exiles are encouraged to forget their former sins as God also has done: “Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old” (43:18). Their fear that they could no longer prove their genealogy was likewise calmed: “One shall say, I am the Lord’s: and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel” (44:5). They had lost their birthright, in a sense, but the essential and joyful thing was that they were Jehovah’s, they were of Jacob and not of the Gentile world...Nothing could get in the way. Even the rumours they must have heard of Samaritan opposition were to be discounted, for “There is none that can deliver out

of my hand: I will work, and who shall let it?" (43:13). Every conceivable encouragement was given to the people, to go up and be part of the Kingdom work; nothing could stand in their way, if only they would go forward in joyful faith. They had been redeemed, they simply had to believe this and act as if they had been saved from Babylon and translated into the Kingdom which was to be established. The similarities with us are *exact*.

The great restoration prophecies of Jer. 23:1-8 and Ez. 34:1-31 speak of the flock of Israel going astray due to bad shepherds, being saved by the good shepherd, being delivered / gathered, and then returning to the land. The Hebrew word *shub* means both 'to return' in the sense of returning to the land, and 'turning' in the sense of repentance. But these restoration prophecies are packed with allusion to the great shepherd Psalm 23. Here, David says that the good shepherd 'causes me to repent' (Ps. 23:3 Heb.). This is matched in Ez. 36 by the idea of God *giving* Israel a new heart. And the Lord's amazing parable of the good shepherd (Lk. 15:1-7) brings together Ps. 23 and also these restoration passages, in speaking of how He goes out and finds the lost sheep and brings it back home(1). The sheep is found, and accepts being found- there is no actual mention of repentance. Thus the 'return' of Judah to their land was intended as a work of God- He would make them return, He would give them repentance [note how Acts 11:18 speaks of God granting men repentance]. This is all such wonderful grace. The even more incredible thing, though, is that Judah refused to accept this grace; they didn't 'return' to the land because they saw no need to 'return' to God. They willingly forgot that they were only in Babylon because of their sins; to 'return' to the land was a 'return' to God, which He had enabled. But they were like the lost sheep refusing to sit on the shepherd's shoulders, preferring to sit in a hole and die... and this is the warning to us. For truly, absolutely all things have been prepared for us to enter the Kingdom. It's only those who don't want to be there who won't be.

The suffering of God over the exiles all points forward to His later experience in the death of His Son. But note that God's suffering was particularly because Israel would not return to Him. Had they done so, the hurt of their past sins would have been erased in a moment. God redeemed and ransomed Jacob, thereby enabling them to return from Babylon (Jer. 31:11)- but the majority preferred to ignore the call to return because they were so caught up in the good life. And likewise the

hugely costly redemption of the world in the blood of Christ is painful for God insofar as so many, the majority, refuse it. The pain of providing this ransom and the hurt of human sin was one thing; the refusal of the offer of a way back to relationship with Him is far worse. From this we can perceive how thrilled God is when we turn to Him. And further, appreciating it should inspire our preaching, knowing the Father's joy over just one true convert who will accept His ways in Truth and enter into loving relationship with Him. We read in Jer. 33:11,26 of God 'causing' the captives to return. The Hebrew in this phrase is intriguing and impossible to adequately translate- the idea is 'I will cause by my very own self and will'. The whole force of God's personality and His passions and emotions was behind His causing Judah to return to the land. But most of them withstood it. And so as we spread the appeal of God to men to return to Him, there is a huge Divine 'will' behind our message, God Himself in all His passion is behind our appeals.

Notes

(1) Kenneth Bailey brings together all the many points of similarity between Ps. 23, Jer. 23:1-8, Ez. 34:1-31 and the parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:1-7) in his book *Jacob And The Prodigal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) p. 70.

Other books by Duncan Heaster:

Angels

A World Waiting To Be Won

Bible Basics

Bible Lives:

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- 2) Prophets: Moses, Joshua, Samson, Jonah, Daniel
- 3) Kings: David, Solomon, Jeroboam
- 4) Restoring The Exiles
- 5) Paul And Peter
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