

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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BIBLICAL THEOLOGY I

The Prepatriarchal Era

The study of Biblical Theology reflects the recognition that God's unfolding of His truth in history has been gradual. The New Testament writers knew more than their predecessors the prophets, who knew more than Moses, who knew more than the patriarchs, who knew more than Noah, who knew more than Adam. The study of Scripture is greatly enriched by putting God's revelation into its proper chronological context. Teachings in the Old Testament, in particular, are clarified greatly if we realize how much (or how little) the people of that day understood about God and His promises. In this course, we will be moving chronologically through the Bible and looking at the gradual unfolding of divine revelation concerning God's nature and God's plan. Today we will begin with Genesis 1-11 - the prepatriarchal period.

CREATION - GOD'S WORD AND GOD'S WORK

The work of creation was in itself a revelation of God. The work was accomplished by the speech of God, and in so doing God communicated to man truth about Himself. According to Romans 1:20, the creation revealed "His eternal power and divine nature." God also revealed Himself as a gracious God by blessing the creatures He had made (Genesis 1:22).

God then revealed Himself further in the creation of man. Man was made in God's image, thus revealing to man that God was a conscious being possessed of intelligence, will, and emotions. God also blessed man with dominion over the rest of creation (Genesis 1:28).

As Romans 1 tells us, however, much of the clarity of this revelation was lost to man at the Fall. While the creation still sang the praises of the God who made it, man became blind and deaf to its speech because of his own sin. The manifestations of sin in the early chapters of Genesis - the murder of Abel, the wickedness preceding the Flood, the self-worship at the Tower of Babel - are all examples of the consequences of man rejecting what should have been perfectly obvious to him from the world in which he lived.

WORSHIP - SABBATH AND SACRIFICES

As to the worship requirements revealed to prepatriarchal man, we know little. Genesis 2:3 mentions the hallowing of the Sabbath, but gives no instructions for its proper use. It is not mentioned again until the Mosaic era, leading some scholars to suspect that Moses incorporated the mention of it in Genesis 2 simply to explain what was to come later. In any case, it is by no means certain that prepatriarchal man knew of or observed the Sabbath, though he may well have done so.

Early man clearly understood that the worship of God involved sacrifices, however. Perhaps the pattern was established in Genesis 3:21 when God killed animals to make coverings for Adam and Eve's nakedness. However the instruction was received, the expectation of sacrifices in the worship of God was surely known. Cain and Abel offered sacrifices (the notion that Abel's was accepted because it was a blood sacrifice while Cain's was rejected because it was not requires reading back into the prepatriarchal era the revelation of a later time; we have no indication that God had specified the nature of the sacrifices), as did Noah.

SIN AND REDEMPTION - JUDGMENT AND GRACE

God's way of dealing with man's sin also revealed to man many things about Himself. God showed Himself to be a righteous God who would not tolerate iniquity, and at the same time a gracious God who sought to preserve man's life despite his repeated folly. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, but not killed. Furthermore, God gave them the promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15, where He indicated that a descendant of theirs would destroy the work of the Tempter.

Cain was also given gracious treatment in his sin, in that he was sent into exile rather than losing his life for the murder of his brother.

Man's wickedness at the time of Noah was punished with almost universal destruction, but God's grace was again revealed in that He spared Noah and his family from the Deluge. Furthermore, the events surrounding the Flood give further insight into God's plan of salvation, in that for the first time He indicates from what branch of humanity the chosen Redeemer is to emerge. In Genesis 9:26-27, Noah speaks prophetically of the fact that God would "live in the tents of Shem." [NOTE: The NIV translation, "may Japheth live in the tents of Shem," inserts a noun where the original text contains the pronoun "he." The intent of the text is that God, not Japheth, would dwell among the Semites.] God now reveals to man that His plan is to be worked out through the Semitic peoples.

The sin of Babel did not result in destruction, but in the division of the human race. Again, God showed His intention to preserve rather than destroy, while nevertheless taking action against man's rebellion.

THE SOCIAL ORDER - FAMILY AND STATE

God also revealed to man His intentions for the social order in the pre-patriarchal period. In Genesis 2:24, God established the nuclear family, in which one man and one woman would be joined together as "one flesh." This God-ordained pattern was quickly violated, however, by the practice of polygamy, first on a small scale (Lamech - Genesis 4:23), then on a much larger one (Genesis 6:1-4, in which the rulers not only arrogated to themselves the title "sons of God," but also made free with the sexual favors of the women in their kingdoms). The importance of this pattern would not become known until New Testament times, but the consequences of its violation are obvious early on.

As far as the larger organization of the state is concerned, God revealed very little in the pre-patriarchal age. In this era, tribal organization prevailed, especially after the division of the languages at Babel (it should be noted that the nations outlined in Genesis 10 were the result of the Babel fiasco and did not exist prior to it). Even this simple structure was perverted to sinful ends, however, both in the self-gratification practiced by rulers before the Flood and in the self-sufficiency revealed in the attempt to construct the Tower of Babel. God's revelation of proper human government in this age was limited to the basic principle of justice proclaimed in Genesis 9:5-6. Structures of theocracy and godly monarchy would not appear until later in the history of God's revelation.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY II

The Patriarchal Era

Last week we saw that God revealed Himself and His plan for mankind in the pre-patriarchal era in the realms of creation, personal discourse, judgment and grace, worship, and the social order. We also saw the beginning of the narrowing process (the singling out of the Semites) by which God intended to bring to pass the fulfillment of the promise of a redeemer given to Adam and Eve at the time of the Fall. The patriarchal era saw the continuation of the narrowing process, as well as a sharper definition of the content of the promise.

HOW DID GOD SPEAK?

In the era before us today, God spoke to man in four different ways. The first is simple verbal communication, though the specific means is undefined. In other situations, God is specifically said to have appeared to the person to whom He is speaking. These theophanies presumably took human form, as is most apparent in Genesis 18 and 32. On occasion, God's message was communicated by a person called the Angel of the Lord. This person was worthy of worship, yet was distinguished from God by being sent by Him (Genesis 21:17). Most theologians conclude that the Angel of the Lord was therefore a preincarnate appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity, though the patriarchs would hardly have been conscious of this.

In addition to personal words and appearances, God also communicated in this age by means of dreams (Genesis 20:3; 31:10-11, 24; 37:5-10; 40:5-16; 41:1-32) and visions (Genesis 15:1; 46:2). Note the variety of recipients of these revelations - from seasoned patriarchs like Abraham and Jacob to inexperienced young men like Joseph to unbelievers like Pharaoh, the cupbearer, and the baker. All of these means of communication appear to have been self-authenticating, and are the basis upon which the patriarchs are called "prophets" (Psalm 105:15).

GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF

God's revelation of Himself in the patriarchal era was largely by means of the names by which He spoke of Himself to the patriarchs. It is obvious from the incidents recorded in Genesis that names bore great significance in defining the character of the one being named. God thus enlightened men about His character when He gave names to Himself. These names included El Elyon (Most High God, Genesis 14:18-22), El Roi (God Who Sees, Genesis 16:13), El Shaddai (God Almighty or God Who Nourishes, Genesis 17:1), El Olam (Everlasting God, Genesis 21:33), and Jehovah Jireh (The Lord Will Provide, Genesis 22:14). The patriarchs thus came to understand, through specific situations and promises, the power, faithfulness, and uniqueness of the God they served.

DEFINING THE COVENANT PEOPLE

In the pre-patriarchal era, God had indicated His intention to fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15 through the descendants of Shem, in whose tents He promised to dwell. God began to fulfill that promise when He called a descendant of Shem named Abram out of the pagan world of Ur, the chief city of the old Babylonian Empire, to go to a land that He would show him. The narrowing

process continued as God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau as bearers of the line of promise. The persistent problem of barrenness among the wives of the patriarchs only served to underscore the miraculous nature of God's provision of the fulfillment of His own promise. It is significant that those who were chosen by God were also named by God. In the same way that God revealed Himself through His names, He also revealed His plan through the names He gave to His chosen ones. Abram became Abraham ("the father of many"), while Jacob became Israel ("a prince with God").

With the designation of Jacob as the bearer of the line of promise, the Chosen People had been established. All of those who descended from Jacob would be bearers of the covenant and recipients of the promise (though not necessarily beneficiaries of it). The narrowing continued, however, at the end of the period when the dying blessings of Jacob became a basis for designating the royal tribe among his children. In Genesis 49:10, Judah is designated as the royal tribe, the source of the One to whom the scepter rightfully belongs. From Shem to Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Judah, the line of the one who is to crush the head of the serpent is gradually being defined.

THE CONTENT OF THE COVENANT

The covenant between God and His chosen people is expressed many times in the patriarchal era, and in many different ways, but the basic content can be boiled down to three ideas - a relationship, a posterity, and an inheritance.

The relationship that God established with the patriarchs was very simply that He would be with them (e.g., Genesis 26:3, 24; 28:15). This promise is the forerunner of the formal covenant stipulation so familiar in later years, that "I will be your God and you will be my people." The purpose of this relationship is also made clear to the patriarchs. God was establishing a relationship with them in order for them to mediate God's blessings to the human race as a whole. He was blessing them in order for them to become a blessing to the nations. Genesis 12:3 not only indicates the universal scope of God's intended work through the patriarchs, but also speaks of God's grace toward those who respond to the blessing and His judgment of those who turn from it. In the same way that not all Israelites will benefit from being part of the Chosen People, so not all among the nations will enjoy the blessing that God intends to give universal scope.

The posterity that God promised to the patriarchs was that He would give them a seed. Two ideas interact here: we find that God intends to make of the patriarchs a great nation, and also that He will bring from them a "seed" (singular) who will fulfill the promise given long ago in the Garden of Eden. The collective "seed" would be the beneficiaries of God's promise and would be greater in number than the stars of the heavens or the sands along the seashore. The singular "seed" who represented the corporate entity would be the bearer and fulfiller of the promise, who would bring the blessings of God to all nations.

The third aspect of God's promise to the patriarchs was that He would give them an inheritance. This inheritance was to consist of a land that He specifically designated for them (Genesis 15:18). Though the patriarchs never possessed what was theirs, they were the bearers of the promise that the land would be an everlasting inheritance for their descendants (Genesis 17:1-8).

It is also worth noting that the promises God gave to the patriarchs were unconditional in nature. This is most clearly seen in the vision of the animal parts in Genesis 15 (it was common practice when making treaties in that day that the parties to the agreement would pass together between parts of animal sacrifices, thus affirming their accountability to the gods for fulfilling the agreement; in this passage, God passes through the parts alone). As increasingly becomes clear, of course, reception of the promise was by faith (Genesis 15:6). God's promise surely would be carried to fruition, but only those who put their faith in the Lord would be among the beneficiaries of that promise.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY III

The Mosaic Era

Last week, in examining the revelation of the patriarchal era, we saw that God revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through His names and through His covenant promises of a blessing, a posterity, and a land. Now God's revelation of Himself, and the corresponding covenant, is extended to an entire nation - the posterity that had been promised to the patriarchs.

GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF - THE COVENANT NAME

As God's names had revealed His character to the patriarchs, so God reveals Himself to Moses by the dominant name associated with the covenant - Yahweh, I AM, the Self-Existent One. This is the name given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3, and later repeated in Exodus 6 as the name by which God wishes to be known among His people. The name, an obscure form of the Hebrew verb "to be," indicates God's uniqueness as the God of the entire universe, the only being whose existence is not derived from another; it also speaks of God as the One who is with His people, the all-seeing God who sees their suffering, hears their cries of anguish, delivers them from bondage, and makes them His own treasured possession. In other words, the primary characteristic of God by which He reveals Himself to the nation of Israel is as the keeper of the covenant He had made with the patriarchs.

COVENANT STIPULATIONS - THE LAW

In the giving of the law, God reveals Himself further. It is worth noting that the revelation of God is here for the first time recorded in written form, suitable for a covenant that is to apply to a large number of people over a long period of time. The law given by God is customarily divided into three parts.

The moral law provides the basis for the rest and is presented in Exodus 20 as a manifestation of the character of God Himself. Note that the moral law does not represent new revelation in any essential point. Almost every aspect of the Ten Commandments was known to man in the prepatriarchal and patriarchal eras, as may be illustrated by examples ranging from the account of Creation (the Sabbath) to Cain and Abel (murder) to Babel (idolatry) to Abraham (lying) to Joseph (adultery). The moral law must therefore be seen as universal, not merely applying to the nation of Israel, but codified for them by God as the basis for the society that was to be established. The fact that Egyptians and Canaanites alike were punished by God for violation of this law shows that its intent was not merely parochial.

The ceremonial law, which governed sacrifices, shows the gracious character of God's covenant with Israel. The ceremonial law makes provision for failure to keep the moral law, and does so by providing a system of substitutionary sacrifices by which the people could gain forgiveness of sins. It would later become apparent, of course, that these substitutes could not in themselves wash away sin, but represented that perfect sacrifice that God would provide in the person of His Son. The highly visual nature of the ceremonial law also gave it an instructive character. The Passover and the other stated feasts were intended as teaching tools to remind the people of what God had done for them.

The civil law differs from the moral law only in that it lacks the universality of the Decalogue. It constituted applications of the principles found in the moral law to the theocracy that God intended to establish in the Promised Land. The civil law, while useful for illustrative purposes, lacks the universally binding character of the moral law (i.e., Theonomists have missed the boat on this one). The civil law also has its accompanying punishments and curses - those individuals who violate it suffer exclusion from the people of God, and when the nation itself violates it, it suffers conquest in or even exclusion from the land of promise.

COVENANT BLESSINGS - THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Though the age of Moses continues to be filled with theophanies (from the burning bush to the pillars of cloud and fire) and miracles (plagues, manna, provisions of water in the desert, and destruction of God's enemies within and without the camp), the chief manifestation of God's presence with His people is seen in the Tabernacle. The tent of worship reminded them continually that God was among them, and its symbolism spoke of the holiness needed to approach Him.

A TRIBE OF PRIESTS AND A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

When confronted with the presence of God at Mount Sinai, the Israelites trembled and requested that God speak through a mediator (Exodus 19). God provided Moses and Aaron as His spokesmen to the people, and thus they serve as early examples of the mediatorial role of the prophet - the one who hears the Word of the Lord and speaks it to God's people.

The Mosaic era also saw the establishment of mediators between the people and God. The tribe of Levi was set aside for this purpose - they were to offer the sacrifices and oversee the worship of the Tabernacle. The priests thus provided the way for the people to enter into God's presence and served as a reminder of God's holiness through the purification ceremonies surrounding the office.

The timidity of the people did not foil God's overall purpose for His chosen nation, however. He had indicated from the beginning that they had been chosen in order to be a blessing to all nations. Thus, in Exodus 19:6, God reiterates the truth that the nation is to be a kingdom of priests - the people as a whole is to serve a mediatorial function, mediating God's revelation, His law, and His grace to the world as a whole. In the Mosaic era, this mediatorial function is displayed most clearly in the contest with Pharaoh in Egypt. What God does to Pharaoh and the Egyptians is intended to show them that He alone is God, and deserving of their worship and adoration. The plagues show the futility of the gods they worship, and in effect invite the Egyptian people to turn from idols and worship the living and true God. The fact that many did so is evidenced by the "mixed multitude" that left Egypt along with the Israelites.

COVENANT PROMISE - THE LAND OF CANAAN

In the Mosaic era, God continues to hold before His people the promise of the land given to the patriarchs. At this time, it was in the possession of a group of horribly wicked and perverse Canaanite tribes, but God indicated to Moses that He would drive out these people and give the land to the nation of Israel. As noted above, however, they would only keep that land as long as they were obedient to the stipulations of the covenant God imposed upon them.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IV

The Premonarchical Era

Unlike the Mosaic era, the premonarchical era was not one of written revelation (Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, the books describing the period, were probably written somewhat later). In the few examples of direct communication between God and man that do occur during this 350-year period, the message is transmitted by the Angel of the Lord (e.g., Joshua outside Jericho, Gideon on the threshing floor, and Samson's parents). The verbal communication of God's Word also occurs through prophets such as Deborah and Samuel. The focus of God's revelation in this era is not, however, on verbal communication.

THE FULFILLMENT OF PROMISE - THE LAND OF CANAAN

When God called Abram out of Ur, He promised to take him to a land that He would show him - and give to him. Abram never saw the fulfillment of this promise - he owned only the parcel of land in which Sarah was buried. During the bondage in Egypt, however, the iniquity of the Canaanite tribes rose as a stench in the nostrils of God, and the time was ripe for the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham. The nation now moved to seize its promised possession (though the full extent of the Promised Land did not come under Israelite control until the reign of Solomon). The persistent lesson taught in the conquest of the land, from the incident with the spies that led to the forty years of wandering in the wilderness to the defeat of Jericho, Ai, and the northern and southern confederacies was that the fulfillment of God's promise depended upon the grace and power of God alone. Israel was not to rely on its own strength to bring about what God had promised. This was a hard lesson for Israel to learn, and God found it necessary to reinforce it many times.

It is worth noting that, while the promise of God was unconditional, the enjoyment of it by any particular generation of Israelites was conditioned by that generation's faithfulness to God. The blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy make it clear that prosperity in the land depended upon obedience, and that disobedience would lead to conquest by foreign powers and exile from the land. Both of these factors underscored the basic truth that the land - not just the land of Canaan, but all the earth - belonged to God, and He was free to give it to whomever He desired.

THE EXTENSION OF THE PROMISE - REST FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Though the connection does not really become clear until the writing of the book of Hebrews, the premonarchical period also begins to relate God's demand for rest on the Sabbath and God's promise of rest in return for obedience. The writings describing the period persistently speak of God giving rest to His people in the land. This rest consists of several components, including conquest of their enemies, security from the threat of external attacks, and prosperity in the land. God's people not only possess the land, they also enjoy it.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD - A PLACE OF WORSHIP

The premonarchical era not only witnessed a settling of the people in the land promised by God, it also began a process by which the worship of God would become settled and centralized.

In the wilderness wanderings, of course, the worship of God centered in the portable Tabernacle. When Israel came into the land, altars were established to commemorate various appearances, communications, or great deeds of God. In Moses' final message to the people (Deuteronomy), however, he spoke frequently of a special place in which God would choose to place His Name. The premonarchical period witnesses a gradual move in that direction, as the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant remain for extended periods of time at places such as Shiloh. This promise of a central place of worship is finally fulfilled in the period of the United Monarchy, as David brings the Ark to Jerusalem and Solomon builds a Temple to serve as its permanent abode. God's presence among His people begins to take on a settled character, even as the people themselves begin to settle down in the land of promise.

GOD AS WARRIOR - THE CONQUEST OF THE LAND

The premonarchical period is one full of warfare, involving both the conquest of the land and the efforts to secure it against foreign invaders and hostile neighbors in the period of the judges. The gracious nature of the gift of the land has already been noted. The three major theophanies of the period (Joshua 5; Judges 6, 13) all serve to underscore the fact that God is the captain of Israel's army and their king as well (it was with good reason that God told Samuel that Israel's request for a king "like all the other nations" was a rejection of God, not of Samuel). Other incidents in the period, such as the defeat at Ai and the dedication of conquered cities to total destruction, also serve to emphasize the same point. It is worth noting that most instances of supernatural intervention in the affairs of men in the premonarchical period occur in battle.

THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE ROLE OF REPENTANCE

The gracious character of God was underscored in still another way in the premonarchical period. It is easy to look at the dismal record of failure in the period of the judges and think only of Israel's sin and the deplorable consequences of that sin for Israelite society. It may be more helpful, however, to look at the positive side of the picture. God, in the time of the judges, taught the people an important truth about Himself - the fact that He is a God who responds graciously when His people turn to Him in repentance. He will not cast them aside forever, but will instead lovingly bring them back when they turn from their sin. The repeated cycles of the book serve to underline again and again the patience of God and His willingness to listen to the heartfelt cries of His wayward children.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY V

The United Monarchy

In last week's study of the premonarchical period, we saw a number of themes that were moving in the direction of fruition, most notably the localization of the worship of God and the fulfillment of the promise of a mediatorial monarchy. Both of these themes are treated in considerable detail in the tenth century - the era of the United Monarchy.

THE HOUSE BUILT BY GOD - THE DAVIDIC MONARCHY

One of the key passages in the United Monarchy period that serves to extend our understanding of God's purpose is II Samuel 7 - the giving of the Davidic Covenant. Here, after David expresses his desire to build a house for God, God denies him the privilege, but in turn promises that He will build for David an everlasting house. David, unlike previous abortive attempts at kingship (Gideon, Abimelech, Saul), was a man after God's own heart, and thus could play the intended mediatorial role in the theocracy God had established.

The Israelite king was not to be an absolute monarch, but was to rule on God's behalf and in submission to His laws. When the king violated those laws or led the people into idolatry, the king and his people would suffer the consequences, but God's promise would not fail. It is also worth noting that the role of the king was not only mediatorial, but also representative - when the king was righteous, God blessed the people, and when the king was wicked, the people suffered judgment. From our perspective, it is easy to see that these monarchs, anointed by God as David was by Samuel, were pointing toward the Anointed One, the Son of David who would rule in perfect justice over God's people forever. In addition, because the Davidic monarchy was hereditary, we see another step in the narrowing of the line of promise leading to the Messiah - the last such narrowing until the Messiah actually arrives.

THE HOUSE BUILT FOR GOD - THE SOLOMONIC TEMPLE

If II Samuel 7 is the key passage for the delineation of the monarchy, I Kings 8 is definitive for the localization of the worship of God. David was not permitted to build the Temple, but his son Solomon did. Once this had been accomplished, the Temple served as a visible reminder of the presence of God among His people, and sacrifice in any other place was sacrilege. With localization came the renewed temptation to view God as a tribal deity, but Solomon made it clear in his prayer of dedication that the house he had built was to be a place of worship for all nations (I Kings 8:41-43). A visible Temple also provided a temptation to think of God as a being in a box - Solomon again acknowledged the falseness of this view in his prayer (I Kings 8:39).

As the establishment of the Davidic monarchy had been, the building of the Temple was viewed in connection with the promises given to Abraham. Solomon spoke of the promise in his prayer and saw the building of the Temple as a celebration of the fulfillment of the promise of peace in the Promised Land (I Kings 8:56).

RELIGION OF THE HEART - THE FEAR OF THE LORD IN THE WISDOM LITERATURE

The unity of the historical books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles suggests that they were probably written at a later date, though undoubtedly dependent on contemporary records, as the title of Chronicles acknowledges. The United Monarchy period did provide written revelation, however - the wisdom literature (Job, which was probably written during this time, though it describes a story from the patriarchal era; Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon) and most of the book of Psalms, though it was probably compiled at a later date. The wisdom literature corresponds to the establishment of the monarchy in the sense that it describes in detail what it means to be a "man after God's own heart." Israel could look at the law of Moses and easily (though wrongly) conclude that it required only outward conformity. The wisdom literature, however, with its great theme of the fear of the Lord, makes it clear that God requires much more than outward conformity from His people. The fear of God is the only way to make sense out of this confusing world (Ecclesiastes) and its sufferings (Job), to enjoy the blessings of God in family life (Song of Solomon) and in the everyday routine (Proverbs), and to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant. What is required of the king is also required of the people.

The wisdom literature also makes explicit for the first time the idea of individual immortality. Job speaks of the resurrection, and Ecclesiastes distinguishes between the eternal destiny of man and the temporal existence of the beasts with whom he shares this world.

RELIGION OF THE HEART - THE WORSHIP OF THE LORD IN THE PSALTER

As the wisdom literature provides revelation corresponding to the house God built for David, so the Psalms provide revelation corresponding to the house Solomon built for the Lord. The book of Psalms contains more than worship hymns, of course, but its primary purpose was for use by the people in corporate worship. As the Temple spoke of God's presence among His people, so do the Psalms; as the Temple was symbolic of God's forgiveness, the Psalms record the repentance of God's chosen ones; as the Temple reminded the people of God's fulfillment of His promise, so the Psalms speak of the Messiah who will rule Israel forever; as the Temple was to be a house of worship for people of all nations, so the Psalms speak of the universal worship of the Lord.

Like the wisdom literature, the Psalms speak of the religion of the heart. In them we find the inner experience of the people of God, recorded with such variety that saints of all ages have found in the poems of the Psalter words with which their own hearts could identify.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY VI

The Ninth Century

The ninth century introduces the era in which God's primary means of communication was through a group of men known collectively as the prophets. The age of the prophets extends from the ninth to the fifth centuries B.C., and incorporates the entire era of the Divided Monarchy, along with the Babylonian Captivity and the century following. Though prophets do appear in the New Testament, their ministry is superseded by that of Christ and the apostles.

THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET

As we have already seen, the role of the prophet was to be God's mouthpiece in the midst of His people. God spoke to the prophet, who in turn delivered the message to the people. This was in accord with the people's request at Mount Sinai, where they had begged God to speak through mediators because they feared His presence. Moses had been the prototype of the prophet, though not the first to be referred to in that way (in Deuteronomy 18, the great fulfillment of all prophetic ministry is described as one who will be like Moses). Later, Deborah is described as a prophetess and Samuel as a prophet, and men such as Nathan brought God's Word to David and Solomon.

By the ninth century, there had arisen in Israel what were called "schools of the prophets." These were obviously training centers for young men who desired the prophetic ministry. While God's prophets were occasionally associated with such institutions, it was more common for God to choose men by other means (cf. Amos' claim that he was neither a prophet nor one of the sons of the prophets, but a plucker of sycamore figs, i.e., not a professional).

The prophets received their messages in a variety of ways - audible voices, visions and dreams - and spoke to a variety of people (some to the common people, some to royalty). Yet their messages, aside from the particularity with which they addressed specific situations, were remarkably similar.

THE MESSAGE OF THE PROPHET

The prophet's message may most easily be viewed as a further extension of the covenant promises made earlier to Adam, Noah, Abraham and the other patriarchs, Moses, and David. The same promises are reiterated (often in what must self-consciously have been the same language), and the warnings for disobedience are repeated. Only now, the promises of blessing and warnings of judgment are particularized in reference to specific situations, while also being expressed in sufficiently general terms as to be applicable to the broad scope of God's overall plan for the nations.

It has been all too commonplace among Christians in recent years to view the prophetic messages as some sort of cryptic keys to the divine interpretation of today's newspaper headlines. Such was never the intention of the words of the prophets. Their primary significance was to be God's voice for the people of their day. There can be no question that their words had significance for the future - after all, the writers of the New Testament saw the events of their day as embodying the fulfillment of prophetic messages - but this was true only in the sense that they encompassed the entire scope of God's plan for the history of mankind, which culminated in the coming of Christ.

THE NON-WRITING PROPHETS - ELIJAH AND ELISHA

The best-known non-writing prophets of the ninth century were Elijah and Elisha, both of whom ministered to the Northern Kingdom in an era of great wickedness. The great themes of the covenant appear both positively and negatively in their ministries. Elijah, whose work was chiefly of a negative character, repeatedly warns the people to turn from idols and worship the living and true God, and speaks of the judgment that will fall upon them if they fail to do so. Elisha, whose ministry was much more positive, illustrates the blessings that God showers upon the faithful, even in an age of general apostasy. In the New Testament, Jesus' ministry is pictured as an extension of the work of these two great men of God - Elijah, whose work was fulfilled by the preaching of John the Baptist, appears on the Mount of Transfiguration, and many of Elisha's miracles are duplicated by Jesus (feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead).

THE WRITING PROPHETS OF THE NINTH CENTURY - OBADIAH AND JOEL

The latter part of the ninth century witnesses the inauguration of the line of writing prophets, the first of whom were Obadiah and Joel. Though their messages were given in response to specific incidents - Obadiah wrote against Edom's mockery of Judah following a military defeat, while Joel wrote after the devastation of a locust plague and accompanying drought - both expand upon these incidents to address God's long-range plan for mankind. Both speak of the Day of the Lord, which is pictured as a day of wrath for God's enemies and blessing and restoration for God's people. Both picture such a day as imminent (curiously, later prophets do the same, though they undoubtedly were familiar with the earlier prophecies relating to the matter). We must conclude, then, that the Day of the Lord, like the promises and warnings given in the various manifestations of the covenant, is a concept that was to see many fulfillments throughout the history of mankind in anticipation of a glorious final fulfillment at the end of time. The same may be said of the pouring out of God's Spirit promised in the famous passage at the end of Joel 2. The restoration of God's people occurred many times, culminating in the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Will there be another, even greater fulfillment at the end of time? It is also worth noting that, as was true earlier, the blessings and warnings issued by the ninth-century prophets continued to refer to the promise of the land, as well as the other provisions of the covenant made by God with His people.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY VII

The Eighth Century

As we saw last week, the Divided Monarchy era was preeminently the age of the prophets. While the ninth century witnessed the transition from preaching to writing prophets, the eighth - the subject of this week's study - saw a great outpouring of prophetic revelation (Amos, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, and Isaiah), much of it directed toward the impending fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The prophecies of judgment were also accompanied by words of grace and eventual restoration, however, and it is in the latter that we find the great themes of the Old Testament covenants further expounded.

THE JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH

God, as the sovereign Lord over all nations, has a right to judge those nations according to His standards of justice. Their gods are no gods at all, and thus have no claim over the peoples who worship them. Both Amos, a mid-century prophet speaking in the time of Israel's prosperity, and Isaiah, who prophesies near the end of the century, address the matter of God's judgment of the nations. It is worth noting that, while frequent mention is made of punishment due because of mistreatment of God's people, it is also true that God's judgment falls because of violation of His laws in matters of pride, brutality in warfare, immorality, and other such areas. In fact, when Jonah pronounces God's impending judgment of Nineveh, no reason is given, nor need it be.

For the most part, however, God's judgment of the nations simply provides a universal context for His judgment of His wayward people. Both Israel and Judah deserve the wrath of God because they have violated the covenant He bestowed upon them; as He said through Amos, "You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins" (Amos 3:2). Thus the prophets warn the people that their status as the chosen ones of God will not protect them from judgment; instead, it makes judgment even more inevitable.

A BLESSING UPON ALL NATIONS

As we have seen throughout the history of the covenant, God's word of judgment is always accompanied by a word of blessing. What God has promised will come to pass, even if those who hear the words of the prophets will never live to enjoy that fulfillment. Thus the prophets of the eighth century leaven their words of judgment with promises of God's blessings upon His people. The promises include the eventual restoration of the tattered tent of David (Amos 9:11), the gracious seeking of the wayward wife of Yahweh (Hosea's symbolic relationship with Gomer), and the return of the people to the Promised Land following the predicted captivity (Isaiah 40-48).

While the hearers of the prophets would have been pleased if their messages had spoken only of blessing for Israel and judgment for their enemies - in fact, the messages of the false prophets of that era and all others have never failed to do so - God's messengers in this era also expanded on the ancient promise that Israel had been chosen so that through them all nations of the earth could be blessed. Perhaps the most familiar example of this in the period is the prophecy of Jonah, which showed God's merciful concern for the most wicked nation on the face of the earth (a message Jonah understood better than most, and therefore hesitated to deliver). Even more remarkable, however,

is the prophecy of Isaiah 19:16-25. Here we find that God intends to turn Egypt and Assyria to Himself, so that they, along with Israel, will worship Him and give Him glory. Almost as startling to the hearers of the prophets must have been the words of Amos 9:12, which speaks of the hated Edomites - the same scum condemned by Obadiah for their shameful treatment of the Israelites - as ones who “bear my name.” Thus, while the words of judgment directed against the people of God are placed within the context of God’s judgment of the nations, the words of blessing and restoration directed toward God’s people are sprinkled with promises indicating that all nations will be incorporated in the blessing God has prepared for those who are His.

The blessings promised by the eighth-century prophets have an eschatological dimension to them, especially in Isaiah, with the famous pictures of harmony between man and nature as well as among men and between man and God. As we saw last week, concepts such as “the Day of the Lord” are used by the prophets with considerable flexibility and represent principles of action carried out by God throughout the ages. The same may be said of such predictions of peace and harmony. While the return from Babylon may have fulfilled certain aspects of these prophecies, and while they certainly find their final fulfillment in the perfect harmony of the eternal state, scholars wrangle in vain when they attempt to pin down the specifics of how God will put these principles into practice in the remainder of human history.

THE COMING SEED - THE MESSIAH

The greatest extension of divine revelation in the eighth century, of course, comes in the prophecies relating to the Messiah - the Seed, the Prophet, the Son of David, the Anointed One. While Micah identifies His birthplace (Micah 5:2), the great Messianic passages of the Old Testament come from the pen of the prophet Isaiah.

Though the early chapters of Isaiah are devoted primarily to God’s judgment on the nations, they do include a number of Messianic references. These include the description of the Branch (Isaiah 4); the prediction of the Virgin Birth (Isaiah 7; though in the context it is doubtful that any of Isaiah’s listeners would have had in mind what actually happened), which primarily refers to God’s presence among His people (“Immanuel”); and the prophecy of the Child who bears the names Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. These descriptions tell the hearers that the Messiah was to be the fulfillment of the Davidic kingship, was to represent the presence of God among His people, and would bring to fulfillment the promises of victory and eternal peace.

The great Messianic passages are found in the second part of Isaiah’s prophecy, however, in which the emphasis is on restoration and redemption. It has often been noted that the last twenty-seven chapters of Isaiah may be divided into three groups of nine chapters each, and seen as having a Trinitarian structure. Chapters 40-48 speak of God as the Creator and mighty Sovereign of the earth, beginning with the majestic description of Isaiah 40. He is the God who will bring peace to His people, and will do so through a deliverer named Cyrus (named two centuries before he appeared on the scene). The section also speaks of the gentle Servant through whom the Sovereign God will bring peace and justice to the earth (Isaiah 42). Note that, as in the other Servant Songs of Isaiah, the Servant is pictured both as corporate Israel and as the Individual who represents Israel. The representative character of the Messiah is thus established, in a form that leads not only to the idea

of substitutionary atonement expressed in chapter 53, but also to the concept of federal headship utilized by Paul in Romans 5.

The second group of nine prophecies (Isaiah 49-57) speaks of the Suffering Servant, and includes the famous description of the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross in chapter 53. The idea that the Messiah, the great promised King, could suffer for the people was new, and for that reason, astonishing. In fact, Jews have never been able to accept the idea. Most have simply rejected the whole concept of the Messiah as an individual who is representative of the people, and have instead viewed all the Servant Songs as referring to corporate Israel (although the frequent contrasts between Israel and the Servant make such exegesis extremely problematic).

The third section (Isaiah 58-66) speaks of the ministry of the Servant as the Spirit of God is poured out upon Him (see especially Isaiah 61, quoted by Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum in Luke 4). The blessing that results is for all nations and is accompanied by a final judgment of the wicked, leading to an eschatological conclusion to Isaiah's prophecy that extends greatly the Old Testament understandings of eternal bliss and eternal punishment (see especially Isaiah 66:22-24, so reminiscent of the book of Revelation, and quoted by Jesus in His description of hell).

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY VIII

The Seventh Century

If the eighth century was the period in which God sent prophets to warn the Northern Kingdom of Israel of its unfaithfulness and impending judgment, the seventh had the same significance for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The prophets of the era - Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah - spoke the same message of judgment and ultimate blessing enunciated by the messengers of the previous century, yet did so with some new areas of emphasis that, while not entirely novel, extended the people's comprehension of the nature of God's plan.

GOD'S JUDGMENT - NAHUM, ZEPHANIAH, AND HABAKKUK

We already saw last week that God had established Himself as the sovereign Lord who judges the nations against His absolute standard of righteousness. The three Minor Prophets who ministered in the seventh century expanded upon the concept of God as Judge of the Nations in a variety of ways.

In Zephaniah, we find again the concept of the Day of the Lord brought into service in a description of judgment. The language is apocalyptic and more universal in scope than that used earlier by Obadiah and Joel.

Nahum and Habakkuk, however, deal with different aspects of another question - the matter of God's justice as He judges the nations. Nahum speaks of God's judgment on the city of Nineveh. This Assyrian metropolis, which had repented at the preaching of Jonah almost a century earlier, had played a role in the vicious destruction of Samaria under the Assyrian monarch Sargon in 722 B.C. Nahum now announces that God will judge them for their brutality, their callous treatment of conquered nations, and their idolatry and immorality. While God had used the Assyrians to punish the idolaters of the Northern Kingdom, He also held them accountable for their conduct, both during and beyond that military action. How could God judge the Assyrians for an action that had been part of His righteous judgment? Nahum makes it clear that God had the right to judge them on two grounds. God punished them because they acted unjustly in their treatment of those they conquered; there is a difference between war and war crimes. Secondly, God judged them for their own immorality, which characterized these ungodly people far beyond the scope of their warfare. Nahum's prophecy was fulfilled when Nineveh was destroyed by the rising Babylonian Empire near the end of the seventh century.

Habakkuk viewed the same problem from the other end. He had no difficulty with the judgment of Judah for its wickedness, but wondered how God could use an even more wicked people - the Babylonians - to carry out that judgment. God made clear to him that the Babylonians in turn would be judged for their actions, and that Habakkuk, and all believers, would simply have to leave the matter in God's hands and trust Him to do what was right. Habakkuk thus provides a further extension of the emphasis on the need for heart religion that had been introduced earlier, and in the process provides one of the clearest statements of heart religion in the Old Testament - that maxim, cited twice by Paul, that "the just shall live by faith."

THE NEW COVENANT - JEREMIAH

Jeremiah also speaks extensively of judgment, and does so in a way that emphasizes the expanding awareness of the need for religion of the heart. The people of Jeremiah's day were convinced that God would never permit the destruction of Jerusalem because it was the site of the Temple, God's dwelling place. The city was full of false prophets and sycophantic royal advisers who insisted that God would keep them safe and in peace, while hedging their bets by advocating an alliance with Egypt. Jeremiah cried against these false prophets by insisting that the alliance with Egypt showed lack of faith in God, and declaring that, no matter what the king or the people did, the judgment of God would fall, and with it the Holy City and its Temple. The shallow externalism of the people, with their empty religious forms, was revolting to God, who wanted the allegiance of their hearts, not their half-hearted sacrifices.

The climax of Jeremiah's prophecy is found in his proclamation of the New Covenant that God is going to establish with His people. In Jeremiah 31:31-40, God declares this New Covenant, which is quoted extensively in the New Testament book of Hebrews and also cited elsewhere. In what senses is this covenant "new," and in what ways does it simply represent the true fulfillment of what had been promised to Abraham, Moses, and David earlier? In verses 32-33, it is specifically said to be different from the Mosaic covenant, which, though impressed on tables of stone, had been broken repeatedly by the people. The New Covenant, on the other hand, was to be impressed on the heart, and thus be inviolable. It is worth noting that this is a point of continuity as well as difference, since true believers under the Mosaic Covenant surely took the law to heart, and did so not because of their own wisdom, but because of the sovereign work of God in them. The difference lies in the fact that the people of the New Covenant are to be defined by an internal religion of the heart and forgiveness of sins rather than by the framework of an external code (verse 34), though the latter remains part of the substance of the former.

The remainder of the passage (verses 35-40) speaks of the fulfillment of other aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant - the permanence of God's relationship to Israel and the restoration to and permanent possession of the Promised Land. It is worth noting that this promise is given to the faithful remnant (verse 37). Jeremiah then demonstrated his faith in the promise of restoration by purchasing a field, despite the fact that the destruction of the city was imminent (he obviously did not believe the parts of the promise referring to the land and city of Jerusalem were to be interpreted in a purely spiritual manner). From our perspective, we should also note that, as Paul makes clear in Romans 11, Gentiles are to be grafted into the stump of Israel represented by the remnant, and thus become recipients of the covenant promises as well.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IX

The Exile and Beyond

We have seen that the prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. had dealt largely with two themes - the coming judgment of God upon the nations in general and on His own people in particular, and the necessity of heart religion in opposition to mere formalism. In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., after the predicted judgment had fallen, the matter of heart religion became a practical necessity rather than a theoretical construct. Every visible reminder of the people's hope, and of God's promises to them, lay in ruins. Even after the return in the time of Cyrus, the situation was bleak at best. The prophets who ministered the Word of God in this era needed to communicate to the people the existence of three fundamental realities - the presence of God, the promise of God, and the kingdom of God.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The supreme symbol of the presence of God had been, of course, the Temple. With its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar, the people wondered whether God's presence had departed from them as well. Ezekiel, carried off to Babylon during the second deportation in 597 B.C., saw clearly in his magnificent opening vision the fact that the throne of God was mobile, easily capable of preceding His people to Babylon. Ezekiel also was shown a vision of the Temple prior to its destruction, in which the glory of God departed from the site of various syncretistic abominations. Obviously, the presence of God with His people did not necessitate a building.

Ezekiel also continued the theme of heart religion initiated by earlier prophets when he spoke in Ezekiel 36:24-32 of God putting a new heart in His people by means of His Spirit. This could have been the passage Jesus had in mind when He rebuked Nicodemus for not knowing about the promise of the New Birth in John 3. But Ezekiel's greatest expression of the presence of God among His people is found in the marvelous temple vision in the closing chapters of his prophecy. In language that has left scholars debating for centuries about which aspects of the prophecy are literal and which are figurative, Ezekiel describes a beautiful temple in the midst of a restored Holy City in language that anticipates in many respects the description of the New Heavens and the New Earth at the end of the book of Revelation. Of the basic meaning of the prophecy, however, there can be no doubt; it is expressed in the last verse of the book, where we are told that the name of the city is "The Lord is There."

With the return from Babylon, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were sent to stimulate the project of rebuilding the Temple, but the purpose of this was not because God needed a temporal abode. In fact, the Temple drew its meaning only from the presence of God within it. The people of Haggai's day thought the rebuilt Temple a poor replacement for the majesty of Solomon's structure, but the prophet insisted it would be far grander than Solomon's - not because of the huge renovation project that would eventually be undertaken by Herod the Great, but because the Messiah Himself would grace its environs with His presence. The post-captivity historical books, particularly the books of the Chronicles (according to Jewish tradition compiled by Ezra), also emphasize God's presence among His people through their focus on the Temple built by Solomon. They give a picture of true worship while portraying worship that, in most instances, was far from the ideal.

THE PROMISE OF GOD

The promise given to Abraham long ago had indicated that the descendants of Abraham would be God's people, that He would give them a land, and that through them He would bless all nations. With the people scattered and the land in ruins, these promises looked rather empty to the generation of the exile. Ezekiel spoke of the fulfillment of these promises in chapter 37, in the famous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, where God promised to bring His people back from the dead (nationally, not individually) by His Spirit, unite them once again as one people, and restore them to their land. It is also worth noting that the theme of restoration to the land accompanied by spiritual renewal is also sounded in Zechariah 10:9-12, well after the return from Babylon, indicating that the promise of a reunited people of God in the Promised Land was not completely fulfilled by the events surrounding the end of the Babylonian Captivity. Furthermore, God's providential care of His people while they remained scattered among the nations is revealed by example in the book of Esther, which also dates from this era.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

When Ezekiel spoke of the promise of a reunited people in chapter 37, he also said that they would be ruled by one king, and that a descendant of David. The expansion of the messianic promise continues in the era following the destruction of Jerusalem and reveals much that was new about that coming ruler.

In Daniel's prophecy, the theme of the kingdom of God is developed against the backdrop of the might of the kingdoms of this world. The dreams of statues and beasts picture the great empires of the ancient world, their leaders agents of the Evil One and precursors of the Antichrist, arrayed against God and His people, but ultimately destroyed by One who was yet to come. In Daniel 7:13-14, that Coming One is described as the Son of Man (this favorite term used by Jesus to describe Himself has its roots in this passage and is no mere assertion of humanity), and sovereign power is delivered into His hands. Furthermore, in the same way that Micah revealed the birthplace of the Coming King, Daniel revealed the time when He would be unveiled in the controversial prophecy of the Seventy Weeks in Daniel 9.

Zechariah expanded on the promise of the Messiah by picturing Him as both king and priest, fulfilling the offices occupied by both Zerubbabel and Joshua, and ruling over a society of peace, justice, and harmony with God's creation. Like Isaiah, however, Zechariah recognizes that the Messiah must suffer for the sins of His people, being rejected and struck down by the very ones He came to deliver. In the end, though, He will defeat His enemies and establish His throne, where all nations will gather to pay Him homage and give worship to the true and living God.

Malachi, the last of the writing prophets, expanded on Isaiah's promise of a forerunner, speaking of him as another Elijah whose preaching would call God's people to repentance. Meanwhile, Malachi warned the people that their shallow formalism was far from the heart religion demanded by the kingdom of God.

The historical accounts of the era - Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Chronicles - illustrate the growing perception of the nature of the kingdom of God. The Chronicles do so by emphasizing the

true nature of kingship in contrast to the weaklings and idolaters who had occupied the throne of David throughout most of Judah's history. These books, along with Ezra and Nehemiah, give great attention to the role of the Word of God as the standard by which God's kingdom is to be ruled. Examples include the importance of the discovery of the book of the law in the Temple during Josiah's revival, and the reading of the law and its direct application to such matters as mixed marriages in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY X

The Intertestamental Period

This week's study is a peculiar one, in that we are talking about the history of God's revelation of Himself in an age in which there was none. Obviously, then, the subject of our discussion must involve, not what God revealed about Himself or His plan to His people, but how their understanding of that plan developed during the four hundred silent years between the Testaments.

A FAMINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

The prophets of the Old Testament had made it clear that part of God's judgment upon His wayward people would involve a hiatus in prophetic revelation (Amos 8:11). The heavens would be closed, and prophets would no longer appear to proclaim God's Word among the Israelites. One of the consequences of this was the closure of the Old Testament canon. Though books were written during the Intertestamental Period, none was accorded canonical status by the Jewish people. They knew that God was not speaking through the authors of these books (though the Catholic Church eventually arrived at a different conclusion). The distinction may be seen in the content of the books themselves, which make no pretension to divine inspiration, and thus must use other approaches (discussed below) to gain a hearing among the Jewish people.

Secondly, it is important to note that the religious leaders of the age are interpreters of the Word of God rather than those through whom it is channeled. Scribes and Pharisees come to the forefront of the Jewish religion, which quickly becomes a battleground between those who would keep the faith firmly rooted in the revelations of the past and those who would cast off those revelations in favor of accommodation to modern culture.

THE LITERATURE OF THE AGE

The awareness of the Jewish people that the age of prophecy had come to an end is reflected in a number of ways by the literature of the period. In the first place, we see the rise of the pseudepigrapha - books written under assumed names, usually those of patriarchs of the past such as Enoch or Moses. The reasoning behind such appellations was that, if God were no longer speaking in the present age, one must find the Word of God in the past; consequently, those who wished to gain an ear for their messages had to express them as coming from the mouths of the ancients, and as newly uncovered or brought to light. Thus, much of the religious literature of the age is accredited to sources from past eras when God was still speaking to His people through His prophets.

Secondly, some of the writers of the age attempted to gain credence for their messages by claiming that they had been revealed to them by angels (though not by God Himself, of course). Though the distinction was only a technical one, some authors apparently thought it sufficient to gain a hearing for their works without having them immediately dismissed as spurious. Despite these efforts, however, the Jews never gave a thought to recognizing the literature of the Intertestamental Period as having equal authority with the prophetic and other canonical writings.

THE LEGALISM OF THE TRADITIONALISTS - THE LAW

In the struggle for the heart of Judaism between the traditionalists and the modernizers, the traditionalists sought to bolster their position by protecting the law, viewed as the essence of the covenant between God and Israel. The scribes did this by preservation, through developing a complex technique for assuring the accuracy of copies of the Torah. The Pharisees did this by “fencing,” the practice of augmenting the law with human traditions designed to keep people from violating the edicts of God. The first practice was laudable, but the second was disastrous. It not only reduced the interpretation of the law to a wooden literalism that obscured the heart religion that was the essence of the prophetic message, but also added human strictures that completely contradicted the intention of God’s commandments.

The law thus metamorphosed from a revelation of God’s character and a blueprint for a godly society into a tool by means of which the religious leaders of the nation could impose their control and manipulate Jewish life for their own benefit. They used the law to gain and maintain power, meanwhile burdening the people with legal minutiae and using the traditions to rationalize their own selfishness.

The sacrificial system, too, was perverted during the Intertestamental Period. With the advent of the synagogue during the Babylonian Captivity and its continued role in Jewish life even after the rebuilding of the Temple, prayers and works of charity replaced, for the Jews of the Diaspora, the sacrifices that had been at the center of religious life for Jews for almost a millennium. Though prayers and works of charity are important for the godly man, the focus on these things completely destroyed the image the sacrifices were intended to convey - the necessity of the shedding of blood in order to accomplish the forgiveness of sins. Is it any wonder that the suffering and death proclaimed by Jesus as the central aspect of His mission came as such a surprise, even to His disciples? Meanwhile, the place of sacrifice, the Temple, fell under the control of the hopelessly corrupt and politically motivated Sadducees.

THE GROWTH OF MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS - THE PROMISE

The promise, too, became what it was never intended to be. God had promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, and that through him all nations would be blessed. During the Intertestamental Period, emphasis on the former to the exclusion of the latter produced a rabid nationalism that viewed Israel as the exclusive object of God’s pleasure and the coming Messiah as a political deliverer who would raise the nation to the pinnacle of world power. It was against these expectations that Jesus’ proclamation of Himself as Messiah met such widespread resistance, as we will see next week.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY XI

The Gospels

With the advent of the Son of God, we have, of course, the pinnacle of God's revelation to man. All that the prophets foretold, all that the Old Covenant prefigured, was fulfilled in the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. But in what specific ways did the ministry of Christ extend God's revelation of Himself, and of His plan for mankind?

RELIGION OF THE HEART - THE MEANING OF THE LAW

When Jesus' enemies accused Him of violating and destroying the law, He insisted that He was doing no such thing. In fact, His life was the clearest possible exposition of the law given in the Old Covenant. Jesus persistently rejected the traditions and wooden literalism of the scribes and Pharisees, and both lived and explained the law in a way that emphasized the inner obedience and love that it required. The greatest exposition of this is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus contrasted the true meaning of the law with the tortured interpretations given to it by the religious leaders of His day. When asked to summarize the law, He did so in terms of love for God and love for one's neighbor. In His own ministry, He steadfastly refused to succumb to the prevailing traditions, but regularly had contact with those considered "unclean," did not hesitate to heal on the Sabbath, and criticized the religious leaders for their convenient additions to the law of God. As the Old Testament prophets had implied, the law meant little if not written on the heart, and Jesus' life and teaching ministry expounded repeatedly on that theme.

THE THEOCRATIC OFFICES - THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES

Like the prophets before Him, Jesus spoke the Word of God to the people. Unlike those who had gone before, He did so on His own authority rather than professing special communication, visions and dreams, or angelic visitations. He spoke the Word of God because He was God. He fulfilled all of the qualifications of Deuteronomy 18's description of the great coming Prophet. His words caught the people of His day by surprise, not only because there had been no prophets on the scene for over 400 years (except John the Baptist, who was recognized by all too few as a legitimate messenger of God), but also because His teaching style contrasted so markedly with that of the religious leaders of the day. While He spoke without embarrassment the very words of God, they contented themselves with quoting earlier rabbis in support of their opinions and traditions.

THE THEOCRATIC OFFICES - THE PRIEST AND THE SACRIFICE

Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament office of priest, not only by offering the perfect sacrifice to God for the sins of His people, but also by being that perfect sacrifice. [NOTE: At first glance, Jesus would not seem to qualify for the office of priest, since He came from the tribe of Judah; it is for this very reason that the writer of Hebrews goes to such great lengths to demonstrate that Melchizedek was not only a legitimate priest, but was also greater than Aaron and the priesthood descended from him.] As a sacrifice, Jesus was spotless in every way. In offering Himself, He paid completely the debt contracted by those sinners for whom He died. Thus the idea of the death of a substitute to reconcile the sinner to God moves from symbol to reality. Because the reality was accomplished in the death of Christ on the cross, the symbol was no longer needed. Christ thus

brought an end to the sacrificial system and the priesthood, as the writer of Hebrews makes abundantly clear.

THE THEOCRATIC OFFICES - THE REIGNING SON OF DAVID

Jesus' ministry was a complete contradiction to the Messianic expectations of the people of His day. They had convinced themselves that the Messiah who was coming would be a political and military leader - one who would throw off the odious yoke of the Roman oppressors and lead the Israelites to a position of world prominence. From His birth in a manger in Bethlehem (a fact apparently unknown to most of His contemporaries, who believed He was from Nazareth) to His humble lifestyle to His refusal to challenge the political powers of His day, Jesus fell far short of the expectations that were repeatedly thrown in His face by a nation hungry for a charismatic savior. When He announced that He had come to die, even His closest followers were taken aback. The kingdom that He came to establish was a spiritual kingdom. He did, however, hint at a coming day when the evil powers of this world would finally and irrevocably be destroyed. He was a King whose kingdom was not of this world.

A BLESSING TO ALL NATIONS - MEMBERSHIP IN THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Who was to be part of this kingdom? Again, the answer was not what the people of Jesus' day expected. They fully believed that the kingdom was for Jews and Jews alone, and that all true children of Israel would find a place at its banquet table. Jesus, however, made clear in His ministry that His kingdom involved unexpected exclusion and inclusion. He pointedly excluded the self-righteous religious leaders and those who sought favor with God by following their traditions, but included the poor, the sinners, the despised Samaritans, and even a few Gentiles. He included those who repented and trusted God, while excluding those who thought to earn a place in the kingdom. His very preaching ministry was divisive - particularly the parables, which pointedly had the purpose of separating those who came in faith from those who came merely out of curiosity. In the sermon on the Bread of Life following the feeding of the 5000, Jesus did everything possible to alienate those who were following Him for the wrong reasons, and by all accounts succeeded in doing so. At His death, He left behind about ten dozen followers - little more than an uneducated rabble. But these few soon multiplied, as the kingdom grew and conquered, even as Daniel had prophesied.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY XII

The Apostolic Era

Since Christ was the climax of God's revelation of Himself to man, we would expect that little fresh revelation would follow the advent of the Son of God. Indeed, this is the case. The apostolic era brings with it virtually nothing completely new, but does involve significant interpretation of the revelation given in Christ. While Paul is the major vehicle through whom this divinely inspired interpretation is given, the other apostolic writers contribute also.

A NEW ERA - THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT

Part of the promise given through the prophets in the Old Testament was that one day God would pour out His Spirit on His people. This, of course, was an integral part of the New Covenant promise that God's law would be written on His people's hearts - it was through the Spirit that this was to happen. In addition, the coming of the Spirit fulfilled the covenant promise that God would be with His people. The Spirit not only superseded the Shekinah in the wilderness, He also went far beyond the tables of stone given to Moses. Again, what we see is a more complete manifestation of that which had existed already in the past. God had always been present among His people, and had often sent His Spirit to empower specific people for specific tasks. But the new era ushered in by the death and resurrection of Christ was one in which God's Spirit dwelt in the hearts of all Christians permanently, and bore witness within them to the will of God and the work of God in their lives.

BLESSING ON ALL NATIONS - JEWS AND GENTILES UNDER THE NEW COVENANT

God had promised from the very beginning that His intention was to pour out His blessing on people from every nation. Most of the Jews, however, had long ago forgotten that they were merely a vehicle through which universal blessing was to be poured out rather than the sole recipients of that blessing. As we saw last week, the ministry of Christ on earth foreshadowed the universality of the kingdom, not only through His work among Samaritans and to the occasional Gentile, but also through such small but significant incidents as the visit of the wise men at the time of His birth.

The man chosen to bring the Gospel of this universal kingdom to the world, however, was a Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. Paul was uniquely commissioned by Christ to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles, despite the fact that all the disciples had been instructed by the Savior to preach to all nations. Paul carried this work out in practice through his widespread preaching ministry. He justified the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles from his own experience at the Jerusalem Council, and James pointed out that what had happened was a fulfillment of Amos' prophecy that Gentiles would be called by God's Name.

Paul often speaks in his writings of the mystery (out of the 27 uses of this term in the New Testament, 20 are in the writings of Paul) of the Gospel - something that had previously been hidden but had now been revealed. This mystery was the major piece of new revelation given to Paul, and in fact was the most important advance of the Apostolic Age. We can understand the nature of the mystery more fully if we examine some of the passages in which Paul refers to it.

Romans 16:25-26 provides the basic definition of the term *mystery*. In Romans 11:25, Paul uses the term in the midst of perhaps the most important explanation of the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the kingdom to be found in the New Testament. As he seeks to justify the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, he points out that the Jews have been the vehicle through which the Gospel has come to the Gentiles, and that the Jews, though they had largely rejected their Messiah, would eventually turn to Him in faith through the Gentiles.

I Corinthians 2:7-10 speaks of the mystery as having been revealed by the Spirit, while 4:1 indicates that the revelation had been entrusted to the apostles. I Corinthians 15:51 speaks of the translation of believers at the time of the Second Coming as a mystery. We noted last week that the Second Coming had been unknown before the first advent of Christ; Paul now fleshes out our understanding of that event by tying it to the resurrection of the dead and the translation of living Christians. Also, in II Thessalonians 2:7, he speaks of the mystery of the growth of evil in the world as the end of time grows nearer.

Ephesians 1:9 indicates that the incorporation of Jews and Gentiles alike into the universal kingdom of the Messiah is for the purpose of bringing all things into submission to Christ, the Lord of all. Ephesians 3:1-11 indicates that Jews and Gentiles are to be brought together to form the Church, and that the Church is to be the vehicle through which the Gospel is proclaimed to all nations.

Colossians 1:26-27 indicates that the presence of God in His people in Christ by means of the Holy Spirit is also an aspect of the mystery, through which all God's people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are united in one body.

CHRIST AND THE NEW COVENANT - THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

The fact that we have referred to the book of Hebrews so frequently as we have gone through the history of revelation indicates its importance in the interpretation of the fulfillment of God's covenant promises in Christ. The unknown author of the book pictures Christ as the fulfillment of the prophetic institution - He is superior to the angelic messengers who brought the word of God in the Old Testament, and He is superior to Moses, through whom the Old Covenant was given. The book also pictures Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood - the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice all in one, and a priest after the order of Melchizedek who brings an end to the Aaronic priesthood and its sacrifices forever. The book also explicitly explains how Christ fulfills the New Covenant promised through Jeremiah. Later, in the famous passage on faith in chapter 11, the author shows that religion of the heart has always characterized God's people, even though they had very limited understanding of the promises in which they were placing their faith.

CONCLUSION

God has given us all we need to know of Him and His purposes in His Word. Christ is God's final Word to man, and that Word has been given divine interpretation in the apostolic writings. Though men have often rejected God's Word by casting all or part of it aside, there has been an even greater tendency to add to it, by claiming further divine writings, inspired traditions, or prophetic messengers. Is it any wonder that John concludes the book of Revelation by warning, not only

against those who would take away from the words God has given, but also against those who would add to, and thus distort, God's divine revelation?