

SEARCH
THE
SCRIPTURES

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Volume 3

I Samuel - Esther

by
Cornelis Vanderwaal

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I and II Samuel

1. Kings, Priests and Prophets

Three offices. We confess that Christ (whose name means *the anointed one*) had three offices—king, priest and prophet. We know that He did not come into the world until His coming had been foreshadowed by various Old Testament figures.

Many people had already served in the offices of king, priest and prophet—faithfully and unfaithfully. Never was their work complete and perfect. Christ, as the Lord’s anointed, took over their work and completed it. That’s why the book of Samuel—originally I and II Samuel were one book—is so full of proclamation about Christ. This book tells us about the three offices in particular.

The promised king. Hannah sang her song at a time when there was not yet a king in Israel: “He will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed” (I 2:10). She opened her song by talking about herself, about how she had been exalted. God had greatly blessed her. But that was not a note on which to end.

At the end of her song Hannah mentioned the promised king, the Messiah. She did not have a clear and detailed picture of Him before her eyes, but she was firmly convinced that there would indeed be a king, and that her son would help prepare the way for Him.

Saul and David. I Samuel shows us how Israel got its first king—Saul. Saul’s rule began well, but in time he refused to listen to the demands of the Lord’s Word. Therefore he was rejected as king.

While this is going on, the figure of David emerges. David is a man after God’s own heart. In the course of time the throne becomes his. *He* is given the promise that his posterity will occupy the throne after him and that his kingship will be established.

Joshua (Jesus) of Nazareth was the eventual heir of David’s royal house. He could lay claim to all the promises made to David’s house. There would be no end to His kingship: He would occupy the throne of His father David forever (Luke 1:32-3).

“The LORD kills and brings to life,” Hannah sang (1 2:6; see also Deut. 32:39; Rev. 1:18). This is the theme of Hannah’s song and of the two books of Samuel. Yahweh killed Saul and brought David and Christ to life.

The meaning of grace. The Bible makes it clear that David’s high calling was not grounded in his character. Think, for example, of the ugly episode in which Uriah was murdered so that David could steal his wife. Here, too, the Lord is trying to teach us the meaning of grace. It was grace that upheld David in his office, regulated the succession, and prepared the way for Christ.

At the end of Samuel’s two books, we hear another song. This time the singer is David, who was about to die. He sings of the Messiah who was to come after him:

When one rules justly over men,
ruling in the fear of God,
he dawns on them like the morning light,
like the sun shining forth upon a cloudless morning
(II 23:3-4).

From Shiloh to Jerusalem. The two books of Samuel speak not only of the establishment of David's dynasty but also of the *priesthood*. Consider how I Samuel begins. We are given a look at the tabernacle at Shiloh and the corrupt conditions prevailing there. The Philistines destroy Shiloh and capture the ark. After a while the ark is returned to Israel, but it is never given its rightful place in Israel's national life. Not until the time of *David* is it brought to Jerusalem, then a newly conquered city. (The first attempt to bring it to Jerusalem fails, but the second is successful.) In the city of the king, a dwelling place is now prepared for the King of kings.

David himself was not allowed to build the temple. But at the end of II Samuel, we do learn that David bought the ground on which the temple was to be built—from a Jebusite named Araunah. On Mount Moriah, which had played an important role in Israel's past, Solomon was to build the temple. Blood would flow there when sacrifices were offered, just as Abraham had offered a ram there in place of Isaac.

Here we see the line running through the two books of Samuel. It runs from a *deformed* style of worship at Shiloh to a *reformed* worship sanctuary at Jerusalem, the center of the land. This line continues all the way to Jesus Christ, who came to take over the liturgy of the priests in Jerusalem. He brings *shalom*—a word that may be related to the name *Solomon*—through His blood.

The role of the prophets. Prophecy also plays an important role in the two books of Samuel. In I Samuel

2:27ff we read about a man of God who comes to Eli to tell him that he and his household will be punished. We read about the calling and work of the great prophet Samuel. The prophets Nathan and Gad likewise appear in the book. Repeatedly we see prophets intervening in Israel's national life. In the name of the covenant, they take action *alongside* the priests and kings, and sometimes even *against* them. They, too, are preparing the way for the great Prophet and Teacher, who at the same time is our Priest and King.

Taking all these factors into account, one can understand why such large sections are skipped over in the narrative. The books of Samuel are not intended to give us a biography of Saul or David or anyone else. No, the goal is to show how the Lord was busy turning His church into a kingdom of priests and kings (see Ex. 19:5-6).

The Bible was not written to satisfy our curiosity but to proclaim God's faithfulness. The promise made by God in Genesis 3:15 stands firm. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, is the Victor (Rev. 5:5).

2. The Lord Kills and Brings to Life

Eli and Samuel. Let's take a closer look at the content of the two books of Samuel. Of course I cannot go into all the details in a work of this size, but I do hope that my observations will help you keep sight of the main line running through the two books as you consider the people and situations described in them.

Samuel is the dominant figure in the first part of I Samuel. We read about Elkanah and his two wives—Peninnah, the jealous one, and Hannah, the childless one. We also make the acquaintance of Eli, at

Shiloh, and are given a glimpse of the moral degeneration there: Eli assumed that Hannah was drunk when he found her praying in the tabernacle (I 1:14). We see how Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord and personally brought him to Eli. It was on that occasion that she sang her song, a song that picks up some of the themes in the song of Moses (Deut. 32) and also parallels Mary's song (Luke 1).

Elevating the lowly. "The LORD kills and brings to life." That's also what Moses sang (Deut. 32:39). Isn't this an apt characterization of *all* God's deeds in redemptive history? And isn't the birth of Samuel out of a barren mother a striking illustration of it as well? The Lord turns the natural order of things upside down by elevating the lowly. Mary sang:

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away (Luke 1:51-3).

Isn't this the major theme of all of Scripture, the theme that comes through clearly in the two books of Samuel? By *grace* alone! The Lord does not always confine Himself to power and strength. He is not impressed with what the human eye is able to see. The Lord establishes His counsel and works toward the coming of the Anointed One (I 2:10). Only the eyes of faith are capable of seeing this.

Eli's sons. The sons of Eli represent the ultimate in apostasy, even though they functioned as priests. The laws governing sacrifices stipulated that the fat of the sacrificed animal was for the Lord. The priests could take only certain parts of certain animals for themselves (i.e. the

breast and the right shoulder). But Hophni and Phinehas did not concern themselves with such laws. They helped themselves to the best and choicest pieces of the sacrificed animals (2:12ff).

Moreover, they treated Shiloh as if it were a Canaanite cultic center and introduced temple prostitution (2:22). Eli did little to stop them. No wonder the prophet accused him of honoring his own sons more than the Lord (2:29). Therefore there would be judgment.

All the same, a *ray of light* breaks through in the words of the prophet: the Lord would raise up for Himself a faithful priest who would act in accordance with the Lord's wishes (2:35). This prophecy was a reference to Samuel, but it did not point to him alone. It was also a promise of a permanent priesthood to assist the Messianic king until the coming of the King and Priest Jesus Christ.

The capture of the ark. Young Samuel had to hear words of judgment (I Sam. 3), so that he could see how God fulfills His words. The judgment was carried out in the drama that unfolded.

At the place later called Ebenezer, the Israelites and the Philistines fought a battle. Shiloh lay just behind the Israelite lines, and that seemed to be an advantage. Nevertheless, the Israelites were losing the battle. They hit upon the idea of fetching the ark, the throne of Yahweh, the "ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts," as it is called in the text (I 4:4). Wouldn't the God of the covenant, who rules over hosts of stars and angels, then come to the assistance of His people in the battle against the uncircumcised Philistines?

There was something drastically wrong with this line of reasoning: the God of the covenant is also the God of *covenant wrath*. Israel was defeated, the priests were killed, and—worse still—the ark fell into the hands of the Philistines. As a trophy of war, it would now be hauled

triumphantly through the land and five cities of the Philistines. Hadn't Yahweh been defeated by Dagon?

The return of the ark. The procession through the Philistine cities did not turn out to be a triumph for Dagon. Israel had indeed been defeated, but it soon became apparent that Yahweh's power was *unbroken*. Dagon's head and hands were mysteriously cut off (I 5:4). The strong hand of the Lord weighed heavily on the cities of the Philistines (vs. 9). Because the ark had brought them nothing but trouble, the Philistines finally sent it back.

One day, at the time of the wheat harvest, the ark appeared unexpectedly in Beth-shemesh, an area assigned to the sons of Aaron. It was on a cart pulled by two cows, and with it were gifts intended by the Philistines as guilt offerings. There were Levites in Beth-shemesh, and they placed the ark on a great stone on the farm of a man called Joshua.

The Revised Standard Version goes on to say that 70 men of Beth-shemesh were killed because they looked into the ark of the Lord. The New English Bible, which accepts the Septuagint version of this passage reads: "But the sons of Jeconiah did not rejoice with the rest of the men of Beth-shemesh when they welcomed the Ark of the LORD, and he struck down seventy of them" (I 6:19). I suspect that this version is correct. Moreover, it is likely that the men who were punished belonged to a priestly family.

In any event, the ark was brought to the home of Abinadab, in the village of Kiriath-jearim. Perhaps this, too, was a priestly family. Twenty years went by. Eli, Hophni and Phinehas had been struck down by God in judgment, and Shiloh had been destroyed (see Ps. 78:60; Jer. 7:14ff; 26:6ff).

Ebenezer. During those twenty years, Samuel had become a true reformer. The eventual result of his appeal

to Israel to serve Yahweh was that the people assembled at Mizpah, where a great prayer meeting was held. When a sucking lamb was offered to the Lord, He answered the prayers of the Israelites by sending a great thunderstorm on the Philistines and throwing them into a panic. At the *same place* where the ark had been captured, another battle between the Philistines and the Israelites was fought. This time the Israelites won.

To remember this victory, a monument was erected and named *Ebenezer*, which means *stone of help*. Samuel explained: “Thus far has the LORD helped us” (I 7:12 NIV). As we read this passage, we think of the hands of Dagon, which had been cut off: “And the *hand* of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel” (vs. 13).

3. The Lord Is Rejected as Sovereign King

Like all the nations. We now come to a turning point in Israel’s history. When Samuel got old and it became apparent that none of his sons was fit to succeed him, the elders of Israel came to his home at Mizpah and asked him to designate someone as king: “Appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations” (I 8:5).

The important point to note is that the Israelites were asking for a king along *Canaanite* lines. They wanted a king who would rule as an autocrat, unifying the nation by his power. They wanted a king who would elevate himself above his brothers, a demigod who would decree that his will was law. Because the Israelites asked for such a king, the Lord said to Samuel that their request represented a rejection of His rule. After all, wasn’t Yahweh *the* King of Israel?

Theocratic kingship. Now, it was true that Israel's history cried out for a king. In the time of the judges, each man did what was right in his own eyes. What the nation needed was some central authority. Moreover, the Lord Himself had clearly promised Israel a king (see Gen. 35:11).

The law given before the entry into Canaan covered the conduct of kings (see Deut. 17:14-20). But the king promised by the Lord was not intended to be a tyrannical son of the gods. The office of king in Israel was not to be modeled after the ideals of the other nations.

Israel's king would be a ruler who subjected himself completely to the Lord's law and authority; he would be a brother to the Israelites and a servant of Yahweh. Such a king would establish a new form of kingship, following the lines laid down in the prophetic Word of the Lord.

Accepting a "theocratic" king would not mean dethroning God; on the contrary, *God* would rule through this subordinate king. Given the Lord's clearly expressed intentions, we can well see why an autocratic, independent king modeled after the heathen kings could not possibly represent and execute Yahweh's kingship. Israel was not supposed to desire such a king.

Samuel did his best to make it clear what sorts of demands such an autocratic ruler would make (I 8:10ff), but the Israelites did not want to listen to his objections. The Lord then declared to Samuel that He would give them what they asked for.

Israel's first king. The first king was Saul, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, which had almost been wiped out because of the sin of Gibeah. In I Samuel 9 we read of his calling and anointing by Samuel. Two chapters later we see him leaving his home to come to the rescue of the men of Jabesh-gilead.

From Judges 21 we know of the special bonds between

Gibeah and Jabesh-gilead. Judges also talks about the *isolation* of the tribe of Benjamin. This casts some light on Saul's symbolic deed in cutting his oxen into pieces to be sent throughout all of Israel with the call to mobilize: anyone who dared to ignore the call to serve in the army would be put to death. Saul's appeal was successful and had a unifying effect on Israel.

The rescue of Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonites led to another assembly of the people, this time at *Gilgal*. There the covenant with King Yahweh was renewed. Samuel, as the retiring judge, addressed the people, delivering a long speech reviewing redemptive history.

Like Joshua in his final speech, Samuel urged the people to follow Yahweh. In the past Yahweh had shown that He would stand by His people, and now He spoke to them in the voice of the thunder. "Only fear the LORD, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be *swept away, both you and your king*" (I 12:24-5).

A violation of the limits. These words hover as a threat above the rest of the story of Saul. We read that when Saul had been king for only a year, he violated the law governing the conduct of kings: he usurped the role of the *priest* during a wartime situation.

War is a holy matter. Israel could not go to war without first offering sacrifices (see Ps. 20). Isn't sacrifice the prayer of the church? Thus Saul, who hoped to settle some scores with the Philistines, could not proceed without sacrifices. Yet Samuel, who served as both prophet and priest, did not show up when expected. The soldiers were getting impatient, and they started to desert. Saul then decided to take matters into his own hands and offer the sacrifice himself.

By taking this step, Saul assumed the style and role of

the surrounding heathen rulers. Israel's neighbors were ruled by kings who were also priests. But this combination of offices was forbidden in Israel. Only *Christ* would be both king and priest. Saul's deed may have looked pious, but in fact it represented a violation of the limits imposed on his Messianic office by the Lord Himself.

That's why Samuel was so harsh when he finally appeared on the scene. Later he was to declare that *obedience* is better than *sacrifice*; here he made the same point in different words. Saul had not been obedient to the command of the Lord, and this would have consequences for his kingship. His dynasty would not endure. The Lord had chosen a man after His own heart and appointed him to be ruler over His people (I 13:14).

The principle of apostasy. "Was Saul's offense that serious?" we are inclined to ask. His son would not be allowed to succeed him on the throne. Since we know what happened to Saul and his family, we see the figure of *David* emerging. David would be king after Saul. Was David free from sin, then? No, not at all. Saul, as sketched for us in I Samuel, is a figure we can't help liking; the decline and fall of this stalwart warrior seems tragic.

David, of course, was no stranger to cunning and deception. His sinful ways cannot be excused on the grounds that he had been chosen by God. Yet, in Saul we see the principle of apostasy at work. He used God to advance his own interests: repeatedly we see this in his conduct in office. Sometimes he was formalistic, as in the case of Jonathan's unwitting transgression of his sworn command (I 14:24ff). But his formalistic approach shows that he had not grasped the meaning of the law.

Another "troubler of Israel." This is also clear from the story of the war against the Amalekites. When the Lord decreed that the Amalekites were to be wiped out, Saul was

all for it. Yet, he quickly stumbled into Achan's sin. He allowed the people to keep some of the livestock of the Amalekites and even spared the life of Agag, the king. (*Agag* may be an Amalekite title for king, rather than a name.)

This made Saul a “troubler of Israel.” He plunged the people into misery and called down the wrath of the Lord. Samuel declared:

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to hearken than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king (I 15:23; see
also Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9:13; 12:7; Mark 12:33).

Thus there was a break between *Samuel* and *Saul* (I 15:24-35). Worse still, they went their separate ways because of a break between *the Lord* and *Saul*. It grieved the Lord that He had appointed Saul king.

God's repentance in this matter was not like human repentance, which rarely lasts long (vs. 29). Yahweh is the Unchangeable One. Saul should not have assumed that Yahweh would go along with virtually anything—even if Samuel, for the sake of the older people, did maintain the fiction that there was still a certain cultic unity in Israel.

*He chose David his servant, and
took him from the sheepfolds . . .
(Ps. 78:70).*

4. The Rise of David and Decline of Saul

A Messianic ring. We are all familiar with the “Christmas story” of Luke 2. One of the interesting things about this story is that the name *David* appears in it so often. We read about the city of David and the house and lineage of David. Even the angels speak of the “city of David.” In Luke 1, which describes events before the birth of Jesus, we also read about the house of David (vs. 27) and the “throne of his father David” (vs. 32).

The name *David* has a Messianic ring. As we saw, the book of Ruth ends with David. David is the bearer of the old kingly promises. It was from *David’s* “house” that the Redeemer would come (II 7:2ff).

From chapter 16 of I Samuel on, the name *David* dominates the narrative. The prophet is sent to Bethlehem, “the city of David,” to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as king. Contrary to Samuel’s expectations, it turns out that the youngest son is the one God had in mind.

Hannah had sung:

He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor (I 2:8).

These beautiful words can also be applied to the origins of David, Christ’s father. Jesse’s youngest son looked after his father’s sheep; he was a shepherd in the fields of Ephrath. After God’s Spirit was poured out on him, he became a king after God’s own heart.

David at Saul's court. From the moment the Spirit came upon David, it left Saul, who was then tormented by an "evil spirit from the LORD." David was summoned to try to give Saul some relief from his agony by playing the harp. The shepherd boy later became a hero by killing the Philistine giant Goliath. David became a close friend of Saul's son Jonathan and made a covenant with him.

Saul was filled with jealousy toward David, who achieved great successes as an officer serving in Saul's army. Hence he tried to get rid of him, first by throwing him into battle against the Philistines and then by throwing his spear at David as he played the harp (I Sam. 18).

Finally David had to flee. With the help of his wife Michal, who was Saul's daughter, he escaped (I Sam. 19). Then comes the sad story of David's fugitive period, when he moved from place to place trying to elude Saul's grasp.

David as a fugitive. Various episodes from David's life as a fugitive are recorded for us. David received holy bread (i.e. showbread) from the priests at Nob, who later had to pay for their generosity with their lives (I 21:1-10; 22:6-19). We should note that the man who betrayed the priests to Saul was an *Edomite*, a member of the nation that so often took pleasure in Israel's misfortune (see Ps. 52, 137, and the book of Obadiah). One priest managed to escape and joined David's men—Abiathar. More men joined him as time went by, and David became a kind of outlaw leader living by the sword.

Meanwhile, Saul's men were a constant threat. David's own people were also ready to betray him. The men of Keilah were willing to turn David over to Saul, even though he had saved their city (I Sam. 23).

What Nabal thought of David is clear from I Samuel 25, where we also see that David sometimes had difficulty controlling himself. Naturally, David was tempted to strike out against Saul's followers—and even against Saul

himself. Twice he had an opportunity to kill the king (see I Sam. 24 and 26), but the Lord kept him from committing the grave sin of striking down the Lord's anointed. Finally we see David asking the Philistine king at Gath for asylum and awaiting further developments there.

Saul at Endor. The prophecy that Saul's house would fall came true. As the Philistines were preparing to do battle with the Israelites, Saul turned to a witch at Endor for help. He, the anointed king, received no more revelations from the Lord in his dreams, nor did the Lord speak to him through priestly oracles or prophets (I 28:6). Saul was abandoned by God, so he turned to the false prophecy of the Canaanites.

The encounter between Saul and the witch may have taken place in a cave with two chambers. The witch was probably in a separate room, speaking to Saul through a hole in the wall. She may well have deceived Saul, perhaps through ventriloquy. Thus there is no need to assume that Samuel's spirit actually appeared. In any event, Saul heard his death sentence pronounced.

David's lament. Book I of Samuel ends with the macabre image of the suicide of Saul after the battle in which his sons were killed.

Thy glory, O Israel, is slain upon thy high places!
How are the mighty fallen!
Tell it not in Gath,
publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

So sang David in his lament for Saul and Jonathan (II 1:19-20). In this song we find no resentment of Saul.

This song, too, was given a place in Israel's national

hymnbook. Repeatedly we hear the refrain “How are the mighty fallen!” The end of the song touches on Jonathan, who, to the very end, recognized David as the next king:

I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
dear and delightful you were to me;
your love for me was wonderful,
surpassing the love of women.
Fallen, fallen are the men of war;
and their armour left on the field (II 1:26-7 NEB).

The citizens of Jabesh-gilead “rescued” Saul. They took down the bodies of the fallen members of the royal family from the wall at Beth-shan, where the Philistines had hung them (I 31:10ff). David appreciated this; in a special message to them, he thanked them for their service of love (II 2:5ff). Thus the “north” demonstrated its faithfulness to the house of Saul.

*. . . to be the shepherd of Jacob
his people, of Israel his inheritance (Ps. 78:71).*

5. David Becomes King over All Israel

King over Judah. After the death of Saul, David went to Hebron at the Lord’s command, where he was anointed king over the tribe of Judah. Of course the choice of David as king did not come out of the clear blue sky. To begin with, the prophetic promise made to David was well known; the people of Israel were well aware that Samuel had anointed him to be king. This is abundantly clear from the words of Abigail, who confronted David when he was

on his way to take revenge against her husband Nabal: “When the LORD has made good all his promises to you, and has made you ruler of Israel . . .” (I 25:30 NEB; see also 24:21).

When David operated as an outlaw chief at Ziklag, making raids on enemy nations, he made a point of sending part of the booty back to the elders of Judah (I 30:26). Thus, before assuming the throne, David developed close ties with the leaders of the tribe of Judah.

Abner and Ish-bosheth. The other tribes did not follow Judah’s lead. Abner, Saul’s chief general, proclaimed Ish-bosheth, one of Saul’s sons, king in the north. The result was a struggle between David and the house of Saul (with Abner as its army commander), a struggle in which it became apparent that David was the stronger. Because of a quarrel between Ish-bosheth and Abner, Abner decided to go over to David’s side with his army.

Although Abner had switched to the winning side, he met an unfortunate end: he was murdered. Joab, the commander of David’s army, killed him to avenge the death of his brother Asahel, whom Abner had earlier killed in self-defense (II 3:22ff; 2:18ff).

David made it clear that he had played no part in this ruthless deed. In a lament for Abner he declared: “As one falls before the wicked you have fallen” (II 3:34). Yet he kept Joab on as captain of his army, just as he did later when Joab murdered Amasa.

Here we see a weakness in David’s character. Was he too afraid of objections from his own tribe? Was his failure to act against Joab influenced by selfish considerations? Did he spare Joab because he reckoned that Joab had always helped him and could be counted on for help in the future?

Ish-bosheth also met a dreadful end: he was murdered in his bed by two of his officers, who assumed that David would reward them for their wickedness. Naturally, David

gave them the punishment they deserved. Yet the death of Ish-bosheth did open the way for David to be crowned king of all the tribes.

Israel's king and shepherd. It is clear that the Word of the Lord was the decisive factor behind the acceptance of David as king. The leaders of the eleven tribes said to him: "The LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd to my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel' " (II 5:2).

This is a beautiful characterization of the office of king. The king should lead his people as a shepherd leads his sheep. The figure of the Good Shepherd must be reflected in the Messianic office of the king.

The later prophets also emphasized this point: the King awaited by Israel would be a Shepherd to His people. Ezekiel declared: "And I will set up over them *one* shepherd, my servant David" (see Ezek. 34:1ff; Jer. 23:1ff).

David's coronation as king over all the tribes represents a high point in his life. This elevation was a gracious reward for the long period of humiliation and danger through which he first had to pass. In his period of oppression, he had to learn to look to the Lord as the sole source of help and relief. (Many a psalm shows that he learned this lesson well.) Deliverance was to be expected only from the Lord, who would elevate David in His own time.

The change in David's fortunes was not the result of any diplomatic maneuvering or any negotiation with the other side. No, the Word of the Lord, the Messianic Word about the Good Shepherd, brought the twelve tribes together.

The LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation (Ps. 132:13).

6. Jerusalem and the Ark

A mysterious victory. Another important event in the life of King David was the conquest of Jerusalem. This city, which was in the hands of the Jebusites (a Hittite tribe), seemed invincible—at least, as far as the citadel itself was concerned. Because of its geographical position, even invalids could defend it.

David somehow found a way to capture it. The text of the Revised Standard Version suggests that this feat was accomplished by making use of a tunnel dug by Jebusite engineers to bring water into the city from the pool of Siloam, a reservoir outside the city walls. (This tunnel still exists.) Other translations differ from the Revised Standard Version here. One argument against its reading of this text is that David's soldiers would have had to crawl through the tunnel one by one.

The city of David. In any event, David succeeded in capturing the stronghold and making Jerusalem his royal capital and residence. Jerusalem became the city of David—a fact of immense importance for the history of revelation.

From this point on, Jerusalem was the heart and center of Israel in Biblical thinking. This city was the site of the temple; it was the place where the ark was kept. No prophet would prophesy without mentioning Jerusalem. During the time of the exile, the Israelites began to speak of the “New Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem was the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. Christ was also to reveal Himself in Jerusalem, and there He was condemned to death.

Jerusalem was likewise the place where the Spirit was poured out and the testimony of the twelve apostles was first heard. Not long afterward, the temple was again destroyed. The members of Christ's church know that they are citizens of the New Jerusalem, the city that will descend from the heavens (see Gal. 4:26; Heb. 11:10; Rev. 3:12; 21:1—22:5).

The Jews continue their preoccupation with the earthly Jerusalem. But we Christians know of a city with firm foundations on which the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are inscribed. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!" (Ps. 137:5).

The city of Melchizedek. We do not read about any bloodbath or slaughter of the original inhabitants of Jerusalem. It's likely that they were incorporated into the nation of Israel.

It appears that David was able to take the city by surprise, which means that he must have captured the archives undamaged. No doubt he looked through them to gain more knowledge of his predecessor Melchizedek, who had once blessed Abram. Although David himself was not a priest, serving the Lord was a matter to which he devoted all his attention. In the distance he saw the outline of his Lord and Son, who was indeed a king but also a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110).

David was a great king, but his imperfect service cried out for someone greater, someone who would make the sun of salvation dawn, starting in Jerusalem, the center of the earth. In Jesus Christ, (Jeru)salem found its last and eternal King.

The throne of the Lord. We know that Saul did not always get along with the priests. He made no attempt to move the ark of the Lord from Kiriath-jearim. When we read in I Samuel 14:18 about an ark in the midst of Saul's

camp, what is meant is not the well-known ark of the covenant but an *ephod*, something the priests used when they consulted the Lord.

Saul was content to leave the ark, which had proven to be dangerous in the past, right where it was. But once David had consolidated his hold on the country, he saw it as his calling to restore the ark to its central position in the land. The ark, the throne of the Lord, would have its own resting place in the city of David, where the king also had his throne.

I will not enter my house
or get into my bed;
I will not give sleep to my eyes
or slumber to my eyelids,
until I find a place for the LORD,
a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob
(Ps. 132:3-5).

Not in a heathen way. David sent out a military party to bring the ark to Jerusalem from Abinadab's home. Hadn't warriors accompanied the ark in the old days in the wilderness?

The ark was transported on a new wagon. Was David thereby giving symbolic expression to the idea that this movement of the ark was a continuation of its return from the land of the Philistines? The two sons of Abinadab accompanied the ark.

David and many others walked ahead of it, with dancing, music and festivity. Of course David did not dance the sort of dance we are accustomed to in our modern world; it was a religious dance, in which people gave spontaneous expression to their joy.

The joy was brought to an abrupt end by an accident involving the animals pulling the wagon, which may well have been a two-wheeled cart. The ark was apparently in

danger of tipping over or sliding off the wagon, so Uzzah took hold of it to steady it. This seemingly well-meant deed cost him dearly: the Lord struck him dead.

Again it was driven home to the Israelites that one cannot deal with the holiness of the Lord in the same way as one deals with the things of daily life. Moreover, the Lord was making the point that He wished to be honored in His own way. The pagans often used wagons to transport idols representing their gods. If David used a wagon to transport the ark into Jerusalem, would the city's original heathen population get a clear enough impression of the difference between Yahweh, who led His people in the wilderness, and the false gods of the other nations?

Yahweh wanted to enter Jerusalem's gates not in a heathen way but in a priestly way, not in the manner of the Philistines (I Sam. 6) but in a ceremonial procession reminiscent of the days of Moses, when the ark was carried through the hot wilderness on *poles*. That's why David's enterprise ran aground when the harbor was in sight. Before Jerusalem was reached, David had the ark brought to the house of Obed-edom (i.e. servant of Edom), who was apparently a Philistine.

A living pathway. After three months, it was clear that the Lord's blessing rested on the household of Obed-edom. Therefore David made a new attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem. This time he didn't use a wagon but had people *carry* the ark instead. Sacrifices were offered en route: the throne of Yahweh entered the city of David by way of a living pathway of blood and flesh (see Heb. 10:19-20).

On this occasion David was dressed like a priest: he wore a linen ephod. He did not conduct himself like a proud and haughty king wearing an imperial uniform. No, he played the role of a *theocratic king*, a king who is one with his people and a brother to his subjects. In this way he

foreshadowed Jesus Christ, who also put on a linen ephod once, when He washed the feet of His disciples.

Michal's response. This side of David aroused the contempt of Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife. David was showing himself to be the very opposite of King Saul, who had never concerned himself with the ark and had elevated himself in his heart far above his people.

After David had blessed the people and distributed food among them in celebration, he returned to his own house to bless it too. His wife Michal made fun of him in a crude way for "uncovering himself" before the servant maids (II 6:20). Her behavior on this occasion was typical of Saul's spirit. But the answer she received was typical of David: "I will be abased in your eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor" (II 6:22).

Wasn't this attitude a reflection of the coming Servant of the Lord? Isaiah tells us: "He had no beauty, no majesty to draw our eyes, no grace to make us delight in him" (Is. 53:2 NEB; see also John 13:4, 14).

The high mount. Psalm 68 was probably written when the ark was brought to Jerusalem. Its opening words remind us of what Moses used to say as a "signal" whenever the ark set out: "Arise, O LORD . . ." (see Num. 10:35; see also Ps. 132:8). When we read, "Thou didst ascend the high mount," (Ps. 68:18), we are to take these words as a reference to bringing the ark *up* to Jerusalem. (Jerusalem was built on land elevated far above most of the surrounding terrain.)

Paul was later to apply this text to Christ's ascension into heaven (see Eph. 4:8), and rightly so. Just as the joyful entrance into Jerusalem with the ark symbolized Yahweh's seating Himself on His throne, so the ascension into heaven further revealed the kingship of the Lord.

For he has made with me an everlasting covenant (II Sam. 23:5).

7. The House of David

A temple for the Lord. What is a throne without a palace? David had a beautiful palace (see II 5:11; 7:2), but the ark of the Lord stood in a tent set up to house it temporarily. Therefore David wanted to build a temple for the Lord.

The prophet Nathan, who was sympathetic to the idea at first, was instructed by the Lord to keep David from carrying out his plan. David was not to build a house for the Lord; rather, the Lord would build a “house” for David.

The house to be built for David, of course, was not a palace but a *dynasty*; it was the rule of the “house of David” in Israel. “I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever” (II 7:13). In a prayer of deep gratitude, David poured out his heart to the Lord (vs. 18-29).

The Messianic line. Psalm 89 refers to this event as the making of a *covenant*. The promise made to David at this juncture occupies a very important place in the divine revelation as a whole: the coming of the Messiah is now tied to the house of David.

In Paradise the Lord had spoken in a general way of the seed of the woman. Later the Messianic line became clearer: it included Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Judah. Now it was narrowed down still further to the house of David.

Many a prophet was to return to this theme. “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Is. 11:1). And when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was to be the mother

of Jesus, she responded with words reminiscent of II Samuel 7:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High;
and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,
and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever;
and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32-3).

Jesus Christ is the Lamb of David (see Matt. 1:1; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9, 15; 22:42). Even in the so-called Nicene Creed of A.D. 325, we hear an echo of Nathan's prophecy when it is said of Christ that His Kingdom "shall have no end."

Bathsheba. It was during this era that David reached the climax of his life. He conquered many nations (II Sam. 8) and dealt graciously with the house of Saul (ch. 9). The Syrians and Ammonites were defeated by his army. But however great David was, he was not able to lead his people into glory. His great Son Jesus Christ, who would be sinless, would be the one to do that.

This became painfully clear when David arranged for the death of his Hittite staff officer Uriah, so that he could take his wife Bathsheba. It took the prophet Nathan to make him realize that he had committed a great sin. The king could not do without a prophet, which shows us how far he was from the ideal of a Messianic king.

Yet David, who was unlike Saul in this respect, manifested a genuine awareness of guilt: "I have sinned against the LORD" (II 12:13). Psalm 51 reveals the depths of his sin and guilt in the form of a prayer for forgiveness. It may be that Psalm 32 also points back to this event in David's life, for the assurance of the forgiveness of sin resounds there as well.

The Lord made it known through Nathan that He would

forgive David's transgression. He would not be subject to the punishment decreed for the offender in Nathan's parable (II 12:5). Yet he was told by Nathan that the child Bathsheba bore him would die, and that the sword would never depart from his house. The future of David's house did indeed include a lot of violence and bloodshed.

Despite this punishment, we see the Lord's unfathomable grace shining through. When a second son was born to David and Bathsheba, they were allowed to call him *Solomon*, a name in which we hear the word *shalom* (peace). The good relations between David and the Lord had been restored. We read expressly that the Lord loved Solomon and sent a message through Nathan that the child was to be called *Jedidiah* (i.e. the darling of the Lord).

This child, who was *younger* than all the other princes, was to be David's successor. His mother, who was not of royal or noble descent, was to bear the seed of David's royal line, which would end in Jesus Christ (see Matt. 1:6). Isn't this a prophecy that the last shall be first? Even in "Christ's family tree," we hear an echo of the words: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men *with whom he is pleased.*"

Absalom's rebellion. In the matter of the succession, it became apparent that Solomon was one of those people with whom God was pleased. Michal, David's queen, was childless. *Amnon* was the oldest prince, but he tricked his half-sister Tamar and seduced her. Her brother *Absalom* used this offense as an excuse to murder him two years later. Apparently David had not dealt with Amnon as he should have, and in the case of Absalom he took halfway measures. The intervention of Joab eventually brought about a reconciliation between David and his lost son, after seven years had passed. It was clear that David did not have the strength and fortitude to deal with such matters in a decisive way.

Absalom, who was now the oldest of David's sons, made use of this weakness. He strove to win the favor of the people and become very popular. That he was able to become so popular must have had something to do with the decline in David's popularity as a result of his sin with Bathsheba. (The Lord knows how to forgive a transgression completely, but for human beings this is often very difficult.)

In time Absalom increased his strength and popularity to such an extent that he could rebel openly against the king. In the historic city of Hebron, he was crowned. A great many Israelites rallied to his side. Even David's counselor Ahithophel, who may have been the grandfather of Bathsheba and the father of Eliam (who was a soldier, like Uriah), went over to Absalom's side.

The ranks of the rebels swelled. Therefore David had to act quickly. The king and his party left Jerusalem. With them went the king's guards, the Cherethites and Pelethites. His party was also joined by some troops from Gath. (David was not above hiring foreign mercenaries, like the Swiss bodyguards of the Pope and the German mercenaries used in the Eighty Years' War.) David sent the priests bearing the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem (II 15:24ff). "If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD," he reasoned, "he will bring me back and let me see both it and its habitation."

Betrayal and cursing. The penitent king then climbed the Mount of Olives. There he heard the news that his counselor Ahithophel had deserted him. His reaction was: "O LORD, I pray thee, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (II 15:31). Fortunately Hushai, another of his counselors, remained faithful. Hushai was instructed to form a "fifth column" inside Absalom's court, to counter whatever good advice Ahithophel might offer and report Absalom's plans to David.

Much later one of David's descendants also climbed the Mount of Olives. He, too, was betrayed by one of His counselors. But His New Testament Gethsemane was much different from David's plight in Old Testament times. When *David* fled from Jerusalem reproaching himself, he was burdened with his own guilt, but when *Christ* entered Jerusalem in an excited frame of mind, He was burdened with the sins of His chosen ones. *David* brought misery upon his people and plunged the nation into the agony of a civil war, but *Christ* gave His chosen ones nothing but grace.

We also think of the contrast between the two when we see Shimei, a member of Saul's house, cursing David from a nearby hilltop. Christ, who was totally blameless, was also cursed. Because David knew that the Lord had led Shimei to curse him (II 16:10ff), he refused to give the order to kill Shimei.

Absalom's defeat. Hushai's success in blocking the good advice offered by Ahithophel meant that David's men could do battle with Absalom's army under favorable circumstances. Contrary to David's wishes, Joab killed the rebellious prince, whose army was destroyed in the battle. So great was David's grief at the death of Absalom that Joab, the sober, practical soldier, had to rebuke David and remind him to thank his soldiers and officers for what they had achieved in defeating the rebels (II 19:1ff). "O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The king had allowed himself to be swayed by his blood relationship to Absalom. He lost sight of the sovereign favor of the Lord, who had rejected Absalom, the swaggering crown prince.

Favoritism toward Judah. In the church, spiritual affinities are much more important than natural bonds. "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is

not worthy of me,” declared Jesus (Matt. 10:37). This was precisely the mistake David made when he returned to Jerusalem.

At the time of his coronation, the other tribes had declared, using a covenantal formulation: “Behold, we are your *bone and flesh*” (II 5:1). David now traded his relationship with *all* the tribes for a closer relationship with the tribe of Judah alone. To Judah he said: “You are my kinsmen, you are *my bone and my flesh*; why then should you be the last to bring back the king?” (II 19:12).

David was certainly not acting in a Messianic way at this juncture. Whatever Judah’s attitude may have been after Absalom’s rebellion—remember that he lived in Judah’s territory—David was king of *all* the tribes and was not to choose favorites among them. He was supposed to act without respect of persons.

Naturally, the other tribes were disturbed by his favoritism toward Judah, especially since they were quicker than Judah to plan for the restoration of David as king (see II 19:9ff, 42ff). It’s no wonder that rebellion broke out again before long.

Here we catch a glimpse of the deep rift that was to split the kingdom in two after the death of Solomon. Sheba, a Benjaminite, blew the trumpet and declared:

We have no portion in David,
and we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse;
every man to his tents, O Israel! (II 20:1; see
also I Kings 12:16).

Thus the army had to mobilize for more warfare. During this campaign, Joab deceived Amasa, who had been Absalom’s general, and murdered him (II Sam. 20).

8. The Lord Kills and Brings to Life

The Gibeonites. At the end of the two books of Samuel, we find some appendixes. First there is the strange story of the Gibeonites and the house of Saul. Saul had left his house burdened with bloodguilt when he killed some Gibeonites and thereby violated the covenant which the Gibeonites had made with Joshua long ago (see Josh. 9:19). As a result, there were three years of famine in Israel.

At the request of the Gibeonites, David agreed that seven members of Saul's family should be killed and hanged before the Lord at Gibeah, Saul's home town. Rizpah guarded the dead bodies faithfully. The Lord then had mercy on the land, and rain fell again.

How can this event be reconciled with David's promise to spare Saul's house and the Lord's command not to leave a dead body hanging on wood overnight? In considering these questions, remember that the Lord Himself decided that the children of Saul would have to be punished for their father's sin. Furthermore, the Lord wanted to free David's kingdom from any guilt or curse.

David's census. We see the same sort of thing in the last chapter of II Samuel. David orders a census—against the advice of Joab, who was otherwise not so sensitive to sin. It was probably pride that induced David to count his subjects. Look at the great Israel I have built!

The prophet Gad came to David after the census to admonish him, telling him that he would have to choose one of three punishments: three years of famine, three months of flight from his enemies, or three days of pestilence. David chose the epidemic.

The people would have to suffer on account of the king's pride. But the Lord kept the angel of death from

doing his work in Jerusalem. David confessed his guilt and prayed: “Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but *these sheep*, what have they done? Let thy hand, I pray thee, be against me and against my father’s house” (II 24:17).

When David saw the suffering, he became the *shepherd* of his people again—a shepherd aware of his own guilt. At the command of the prophet Gad, David built an altar on the threshing floor he had bought from Araunah the Jebusite. There the king offered a sacrifice. “So the LORD heeded supplications for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel” (vs. 25).

Pure grace. With this episode, the books of Samuel come to an end. They include a great deal that is sinful and human, but they also tell us at length about God’s good pleasure, which came to expression in the work of kings, priests and prophets. The Lord was busy preparing the way for the coming of Christ.

The theme introduced by Hannah in her song at the beginning of I Samuel echoes throughout the two books: “The LORD kills and brings to life.” Saul and Amnon and Absalom fall. The Lord *kills* as the godless perish in the darkness. But He also *brings to life*, as the wavering ones are given strength. David, Jesse’s youngest son, the man who could never serve as Messiah, is accepted in favor by God. As the various crown princes are eliminated, the way to the throne is later opened for Solomon, who was born of David’s marriage to Bathsheba (Uriah’s wife). The Lord strengthens His king and exalts the power of His anointed.

In the two books of Samuel we see sovereign good pleasure. We are given a glimpse of pure grace as reflected in the sacrifices and the services in the sanctuary—the grace of the coming Christ.

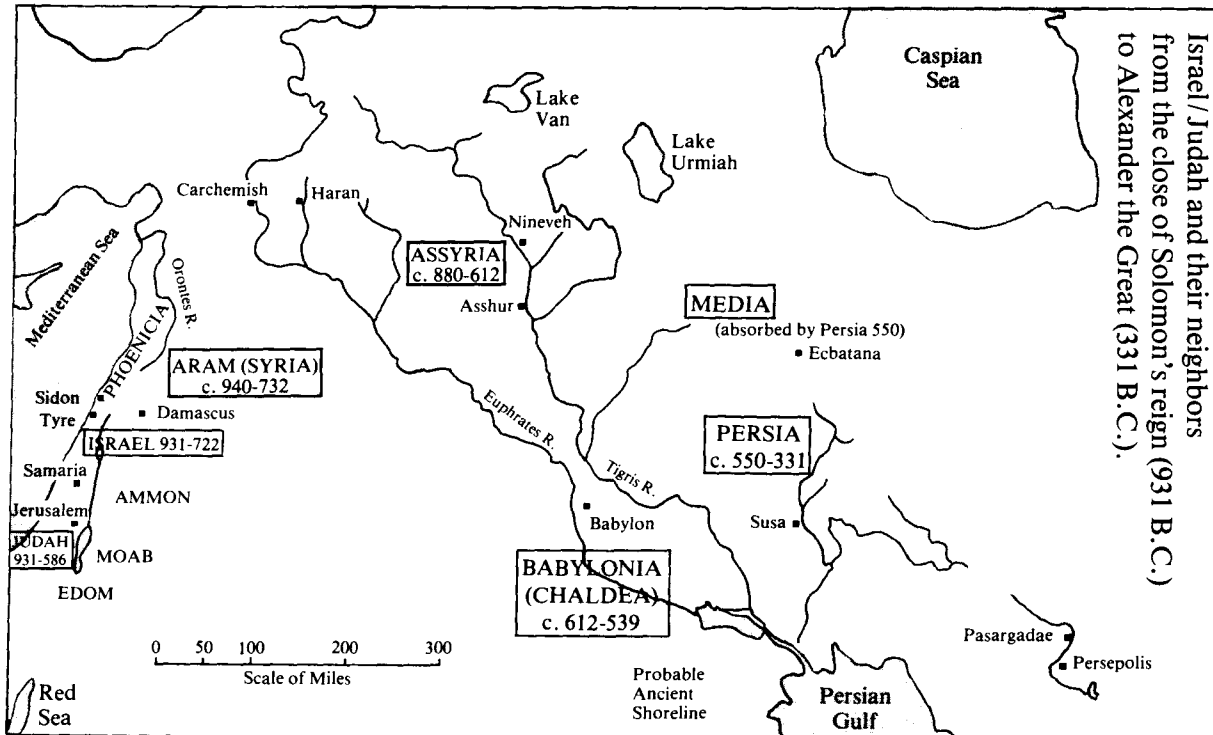
Isn’t the last chapter a proclamation of the coming of the One who was to complete the work of all the preceding

office-bearers? Consider David's action in buying Araunah's field: at the command of the prophet, he built an altar and offered a sacrifice at the same place where Abraham had earlier demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his son and where Solomon was later to build the temple.

The question how God could be so gracious to David can be answered when we think of David's great Son:

Thou didst exalt me above my adversaries,
thou didst deliver me from men of violence.
For this I will extol thee, O LORD, among the nations,
and sing praises to thy name.
Great triumphs he gives to his king,
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
to David, and his descendants for ever (II 22:49-51).

Israel/Judah and their neighbors
 from the close of Solomon's reign (931 B.C.)
 to Alexander the Great (331 B.C.).



I and II Kings

1. Solomon: Builder of the Lord's House

Prophetic history. The book of Kings continues the narrative of the book of Samuel. (I and II Kings were originally one.) Kings and Samuel are prophetic books. It is not their primary purpose to give an account of the *history* of Israel and its kings, for then they would have to include much more. No, history is written from a particular standpoint in Samuel and Kings.

We are shown how the Lord dealt with His people and how the apostasy of the people and their kings led to judgment. As the fiasco of the throne and the altar, that is, the rift between the king and the priests, is described for us from a prophetic point of view, we sense a distinct yearning for the One in whom all three offices are united, namely, the Word, the heavenly High Priest who occupies God's throne, the root and offspring of David (Rev. 22:16).

Yes, Kings is a *prophetic* book. Watch for the prophetic emphasis in the many encounters between prophets and kings. "Give the king thy justice, O God" (Ps. 72:1).

Adonijah's rebellion. The opening chapter of I Kings does not present an edifying story. Adonijah, the oldest surviving son of David, schemed to succeed his father by arranging to have himself proclaimed king. Joab and Abiathar took his side. The prophet Nathan was not invited to join the rebellion. He would not have supported Adonijah's claim to the throne, of course, for he knew that David had promised Solomon that *he* would be the next king. Working closely with Bathsheba, Nathan persuaded David to have Solomon proclaimed king before Adonijah could carry out his plans.

Did Solomon succeed David because of scheming at the court? That there were machinations at the court of the aged king is not to be denied. As the king grew older, he seemed to lose control of the kingdom bit by bit. Yet, it was the Lord's sovereign will that passed over David's oldest surviving son and called Solomon to the office of prince of peace. This will of God in election made use of the prophetic Word (in the form of God's servant Nathan) to see that the right man occupied David's throne.

Unpunished sins. At the end of his life, David gave Solomon some instructions with regard to Joab and Shimei. Moreover, it had become clear that Adonijah still had some rebellious aspirations. Therefore both Adonijah and Joab would have to die. Their fellow conspirator Abiathar was banished to the priests' city of Anathoth, where Jeremiah was later to be born. With the removal of Abiathar, the prophecy made earlier about the house of Eli was finally fulfilled (I Sam. 2:27-36; I Kings 2:27).

It was as though the Lord wanted some old scores settled at the beginning of Solomon's reign. The prince of peace was not to see his way blocked by unpunished sins. There could be no innocent blood crying out to be avenged, for Solomon was to be the builder of the temple that would foreshadow the unity of the Lord and the people with

whom He was reconciled. The man who had been granted wisdom (I Kings 3) and possessed great wealth (ch. 10) was the right man to build the temple.

Solomon's temple. The building of the temple is another milestone in the history of revelation. From that time on, there would be a central sanctuary in the city of the kings. The ark would finally come to "rest" in the Holy of Holies.

Many years later, a conqueror was to turn Solomon's temple into ruins. A later temple built by Herod was also to be destroyed, in a sea of flames, but by that time the temple had performed its function. Christ is more than Solomon and the temple combined; He is the fulfillment of what the temple symbolized, that is, God's presence with us.

The Lord among His people. The New Testament church speaks of a heavenly temple. We enter that temple in faith, a faith that has not yet become sight. Yet, some day the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven. This heavenly city does not contain a temple: the whole city is a temple—a temple of God and the Lamb. In expectation of that day, each of us is to regard his body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and the church as a dwelling place of God, a dwelling place into which we are incorporated as living stones (see I Cor. 6:19; I Pet. 2:4-5).

Solomon's temple testifies to a great and wonderful truth: the Lord wishes to dwell permanently among His people. The element of permanence comes out clearly in the building of the temple, especially when we compare it with the tabernacle.

During the time of the great trek, everything had to be constructed in such a way that it could easily be *transported*. Therefore the tabernacle was built of wood and could be taken apart quickly and easily. This meant that it had to be

relatively small. But when it came time to build the *temple*, heavy materials could be used. The prospect of transport was not a factor in determining the size and components of the temple. The number of cultic objects could be expanded, and rooms outside the sanctuary itself could be prepared for special purposes.

Art in the temple. At the front of the temple were two great pillars representing firmness and strength. These pillars were called *Jachin* and *Boaz*. Art was not forgotten in the building of the temple. The interior walls were inlaid with gold, and many of the objects inside the temple were made of gold or were gold-plated. On the walls and doors were carvings of cherubs, palm trees, flowers, and fruits. The temple would remind people of God's paradise, the Garden of Eden, where the Lord had walked with man.

God now wanted to dwell with His people again—in the temple. Of course He still lived in a hidden spot—in a room behind a curtain. Even though there were cherubs before the Holy of Holies, symbolically preventing people from entering, God still wished to dwell in the midst of His people—thanks to the offerings that atoned for sin.

The temple dedication. When the temple was finished, it was dedicated by celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast, which was the final one in the Israelite year, was intended to remind the people of Israel of the journey through the wilderness and also of God's kingship. Thus it was an appropriate occasion to celebrate the fact that the Lord had found His rest and had established His throne among His people.

At the time of the dedication, the priests brought the ark to the temple in a solemn ceremony. The holy objects followed. The ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, which was symbolically guarded by the cherubs.

Then the priests left the temple. A cloud of the Lord's

holiness filled the temple complex, just as it had filled the tabernacle at its dedication. Solomon declared:

The LORD has set the sun in the heavens,
but has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.
I have built thee an exalted house,
a place for thee to dwell for ever (I 8:12-13).

The king then turned around and blessed the Israelites who had gathered in the outer court of the temple. He praised the Lord for keeping His word to David, whose son had built a temple to house the ark and the tables of the law of the covenant.

These words were followed by an opening prayer made up of seven moving petitions. Solomon kneeled before the altar of the Lord as he prayed. In his prayer he made it clear that the Lord is greater than any temple and can never be spatially confined. But the temple is the place where He is to be addressed. If prayers are uttered in the temple, the Lord in heaven might well listen and forgive sins. After this prayer, Solomon blessed Israel. The initial offerings were made, and a joyous celebration began.

*If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my
ordinances . . . (Ps. 89:30).*

2. The Splitting of the Kingdom

No guarantee. Right after the description of the liturgy used at the dedication of the temple, we read of a new revelation to Solomon. This event took place after the building of the royal palace, that is, some twelve years after the temple was completed.

In this revelation, which was clearly meant as a threat, Yahweh points back to Solomon's prayer at the temple dedication (compare I 8:29 with 9:3, and 8:24ff with 9:4ff). If Solomon and his sons turn away from the Lord, Israel will be driven into exile and the temple ("this house") will be reduced to rubble, something for the nations to laugh at. If the kings show any inclination toward *apostasy*, the *curses* of Leviticus and Deuteronomy will come into effect. The beautiful temple is no guarantee that Israel will always enjoy *shalom* (peace).

Altar and throne. Later the prophets used some strong language *against* the temple and the offerings. When we read their biting words, we think to ourselves, "The Lord Himself established the temple and the offerings. Why, then, these condemnations?" The way to untangle this puzzle is to remember that while worship activities might not be wrong *in themselves*, it certainly was wrong to regard the existence of the temple as a guarantee that Israel would never slide into apostasy. The Lord had never intended the temple to be a symbol reassuring a disobedient people that they were in no danger. Therefore His words of warning to Solomon are worthy of our attention.

In these words we find a major theme of the book of Kings: the altar does *not* protect the throne if the king and his house *go astray*. Christ pointed back to this ancient lesson when He, too, found that people were dangerously at ease. "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate" (Matt. 23:38). Obedience is better than sacrifice.

Solomon's decline. When we read the rest of the stories about Solomon, we see that the Lord had good reason to warn him. Solomon was prospering—as far as one could see. He did a lot of building, and his ships brought back gold and other costly materials from foreign lands (see I

9:26-8; 10:11-12, 22). He built up an impressive cavalry. (Excavators have uncovered ruins that may well have been his stables at Megiddo.) The queen of Sheba was amazed at his wealth and wisdom.

Yet, there is a darker side to Solomon's glory. Solomon did not imitate foreign rulers in trade and military matters only; he also collected wives and concubines until he had a huge harem (see Deut. 17:17). Some of these women made his heart turn away from his own God.

The many marriages to foreign princesses must have had something to do with the covenants he made with foreign nations. One rule to follow in getting along with foreigners is to respect their religious beliefs and practices. Hence, before long there were a number of holy places dedicated to the foreign gods worshiped by the various emissaries and foreign princesses. These holy places were visited regularly by Solomon's wives and their servants. When Solomon got old, he was even persuaded to go himself.

Jeroboam and Rehoboam. This idolatry cost Solomon the unity of his kingdom. The Lord was still gracious to him, but only for *David's* sake. The kingdom would not be split until the time of Solomon's son (I 11:12), but signs of the approaching split could already be seen.

Solomon's heavy demands on the people made the land ripe for rebellion. Outside Israel's borders the rebels began to flex their muscles. The prophet Ahijah promised Jeroboam, who was overseer of public works, that he would become king over all the tribes except Judah (vs. 26ff).

The story of Solomon slowly peters out. He was succeeded by his haughty son Rehoboam. An assembly of the people was held at *Shechem* (not in Jerusalem), just as in Joshua's days. Israel was ready to crown Rehoboam king, provided he would agree to lessen the heavy burdens

imposed on the people by Solomon. But Rehoboam refused to budge on this issue. Then some familiar words were uttered:

What portion have we in David?
We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.
To your tents, O Israel!
Look now to your own house, David (I 12:16).

The Israelites returned to their tents. Rehoboam was not crowned, and there was no prospect of saving the kingdom for him. Moreover, he was forbidden to try to subject the rebellious tribes by military means. "This is my will," the Lord declared through His prophet (vs. 24 NEB).

*Come to Bethel and transgress;
for so you love to do, O people of
Israel! (Amos 4:4, 5).*

3. The Northern Kingdom: Off to a Bad Start

A conditional promise. By this time Jeroboam had returned from Egypt, where he had been hiding. The northern tribes made him king (I 12:20). In Solomon's days he had "lifted up his hand against the king" (I 11:26). As a member of the tribe of Ephraim and a former government official, he knew what was going on in the "house of Joseph." Furthermore, his claim to the crown had the sanction of a prophet. No wonder he was crowned king at Shechem!

When Ahijah told Jeroboam that he would become king, he held a conditional promise before him: "If you will hearken to all that I command you, and will walk in

my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you, and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you” (vs. 38).

The temple at Bethel. Jeroboam did not always walk in the way of the Lord. It bothered him that the temple in Jerusalem, which was outside the territory he ruled, was a religious center for *his* subjects. He would have to do something about that; otherwise the house of David might someday be able to win the hearts of all the Israelites again. Therefore he established a worship center of his own at Bethel, a city with a rich history.

Abraham had built an altar in the vicinity of Bethel. The Lord had appeared there to Jacob in a dream. Bethel was one of the holy cities visited by Samuel when he was a judge. Wasn't it a gateway to heaven? Well then, Bethel would surely be a good place to erect a sanctuary.

The temple at Bethel held a special attraction—a golden calf! You recall how Aaron made such a calf at the foot of Mount Horeb while Moses was on the mountain. For the Semites (descendants of Shem in the ancient Near East, including the Israelites), the bull is an excellent symbol of a deity.

Another golden calf was made and brought in a procession to Dan, a city in the north where idol worship had been going on since the time of the judges (see Judges 17). Furthermore, the king appointed men who were not of the tribe of Levi to conduct the cultic activities, and he introduced his own calendar of festivals. The Feast of Tabernacles would not be celebrated in the seventh month, as in Jerusalem, but in the eighth month.

The king at the altar. The altar at Bethel was to be dedicated at the next Feast of Tabernacles. On this great festive occasion, the king himself served as high priest,

which was the custom in the nations around Israel. Thus it was Jeroboam who offered the sacrifice on the altar. While he was at the altar, he was approached by a prophet from Judah, who told him that a king named Josiah, to be born of the house of David, would sacrifice Bethel's priests on that very altar. As a sign that the prophet was indeed speaking the Word of God, the altar split and the ashes slid off it (I 12:33ff).

Solomon had also used the Feast of Tabernacles as the occasion for dedicating his temple. A cloud then filled the temple, to signify that the Lord wished to dwell there. But at Jeroboam's celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, the Word of the Lord announced *judgment*. Although Jeroboam wanted to hold on to the Lord, he proposed to serve Him in a Canaanite manner. That's why the man of God from Judah had to *curse* Bethel—which he did by his words as well as the manner of his death. Israel had been warned (I 13:4-34).

Two kingdoms. Bethel was to dominate the rest of the history of Israel's kings. They all walked in the ways of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who "made Israel to sin." This is the monotonous refrain running through the entire book of Kings. Jeroboam's dynasty was replaced by another, which was in turn replaced, only to give way to yet another dynasty, and so forth.

This is not to say, of course, that everything in the southern kingdom was perfect. But a comparison shows how little stability there was in the north:

Southern kingdom	Northern kingdom
Existed 350 years.	Existed 210 years.
19 kings.	19 kings.
One dynasty, that of David.	9 dynasties!
4 regicides.	About half the kings died violently.

Jerusalem as constant religious and political center.	Separate religious and political centers.
Various pious kings who introduced reforms, e.g. Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Hezekiah, Josiah.	Not a single pious king, apart from Jehu, who brought about a partial reformation.

What we see in the northern kingdom is a sorry spectacle indeed. Throughout the book of Kings, the histories of “Israel” (the northern kingdom) and “Judah” (the southern kingdom) are interwoven. For the sake of convenience, I will trace the events in the northern kingdom first. Then we will examine what the book of Kings reveals about the southern kingdom.

Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets (Hos. 6:5).

4. Israel in the Days of Elijah and Ahab

Baasha and Omri. Kings is a *prophetic* book, a book by prophets and about prophets. The Lord in His grace did *not* let go of the northern tribes but repeatedly sent them His Word. We saw an indication of this at the dedication of the altar at Bethel. There are other instances in the later life of Jeroboam. The same Ahijah who told him he would be king also prophesied that his dynasty would be overthrown and that Israel itself would be destroyed (I 14:7-16). The reason was Israel’s apostasy, in which Jeroboam led the way.

Baasha plotted against Jeroboam’s son and successor, killing him and the whole family of Jeroboam. But Baasha

followed in the footsteps of Jeroboam, who had caused Israel to sin. Therefore the prophet Jehu informed him that he and his dynasty would also be swept aside (I 16:4-7). That's exactly what happened, for rebellions at the court were the order of the day.

Finally Omri, who turned out to be a strong ruler, became king. He made Samaria his capital city. His son was the infamous Ahab, in whose time the city of Jericho, which had been cursed, was rebuilt. The rebuilding of Jericho shows that the dynasty of Omri did not care at all what the prophets said or thought.

A temple for Baal. Ahab's queen was a Sidonian princess named *Jezebel*. Because of her bad influence, Ahab carried his apostasy further than any of his predecessors. Not only did he maintain the worship of the golden calf at Bethel, he also introduced the worship of the Phoenician god Baal, building a temple for this idol in Samaria. Under his leadership, Israel fell back into Canaanite religious practices (I 16:30ff).

But the Lord did not abandon His people. Suddenly His Word was heard in Israel through the mouth of Elijah, who prophesied that there would be a drought (I 17:1). At this point, the focus of the book of Kings shifts to Elijah, that amazing man of God who addressed a powerful appeal to the Israelites to return to the service of Yahweh.

A "troubler of Israel." The Lord sustained Elijah in an amazing way. Outside the boundaries of Canaan he found a hiding place, where he did wonders, signifying that God's grace could pass from Israel (see Luke 4:26). This prophet, whom Ahab called a "troubler of Israel" (I 18:17), an Achan plunging Israel into misery, arranged an assembly of the people at Mount Carmel.

Carmel was a mountain dedicated to Baal, the god of rain. Apparently Baal had let Israel down for three years,

for there had been no rain. On Mount Carmel the people were to see which god was capable of sending rain—Baal or Yahweh.

Yahweh emerged the victor from this dramatic contest, for He consumed Elijah's offering with fire after it had been thoroughly soaked. The prophets of Baal were put to death, as Mount Carmel resounded with the cry "Yahweh is God!" At Elijah's command, the rain finally fell. Yet, it soon became apparent that the enthusiasm of the people was only temporary. Moreover, the impression these events made on Ahab faded quickly. Jezebel had plans of her own: she wanted the worship of Baal restored and the man of God put to death.

Revelations at Horeb. Because of these setbacks, Elijah slipped into a deep depression (I Kings 19). The same sort of thing happened to other prophets after a dramatic vindication (see I 13:14; Jon. 4:6ff; Jer. 20:7ff). Elijah went to Horeb, the mount of God's revelation. There he lamented Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant and his own loneliness.

The Lord knew how to instil fresh hope in this man so weary of life by opening new perspectives before his eyes. The Lord revealed Himself in natural phenomena and gave an explanation of His revelations. There was a strong wind, an earthquake, and a fire. These revelations are reminiscent of the revelations at the time when the law was given at Sinai (Ex. 19:16-18). They point to Elijah's task, which was to anoint Hazael as king of Syria, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his own successor.

These three signs symbolized God's judgment on those who abandoned the covenant. But the last sign also testified of grace: the Lord "was" in a still, small voice. This corresponds to the promise: "Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (I 19:18).

This text is referred to in Article 27 of the Belgic Confession, which deals with the preservation of the church in the face of the world's angry opposition: "And this holy Church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though it sometimes for a while appears very small, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing; as during the perilous reign of Ahab the Lord reserved unto Him seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal."

God's way of counting is different from ours. Even if the church is forced to become "invisible" for a while, God continues to gather His own. That's the meaning of the symbolic number 7000 used here and the number 144,000 used in the book of Revelation.

The role of the prophets. When we read further in Kings, we are struck by the great influence of the prophets. We see that the Lord did *not* let go of the northern kingdom. Elisha was called to prophesy, and Elijah's feeling of hopelessness passed once he gained the proper perspective on the prophetic Word.

In I Kings 20 we read about a mighty struggle. Here again the prophets are decisive in the decision to go to war against the enemies of the church (see vs. 13-14, 22 and 28), but they also pronounce judgment (vs. 35ff) when the antithesis is suddenly replaced by a false fraternal spirit (vs. 32).

Naboth's vineyard. I Kings 21 and 22 show us how Ahab was finally condemned by the prophetic Word. The occasion was the famous annexation of Naboth's vineyard, which Ahab wanted to add to his royal land holdings. We are accustomed to regarding this incident as an exercise of brute power on Ahab's part—which it was. But there is more to the story.

The Canaanites were not familiar with the idea of land

belonging to a family as an inheritance never to be given up. To them, a king had dictatorial powers and could not be prevented from taking what he wanted. Israel was different in this respect. The free citizen had an inalienable right to keep his land and could not be compelled to sell it. The king did not hold office to lord it over his subjects but to *serve* them. He was to reflect the coming Messiah, who would see to it that everyone in Israel could safely sit under his vine or fig tree. That's why Ahab's conduct in this matter is so despicable: he deliberately chose a Canaanite approach to land and inheritance and tried to set himself up as an autocratic king, adopting the same style as the kings ruling the countries around Israel.

Sheep without a shepherd. Because Ahab had turned himself into a caricature of the Messiah, he found that the Word was against him. The king who had accused Elijah of being a "troubler of Israel" was himself an *Achan* who plunged his nation into *misery*. The prophet Elijah was not afraid to tell him so.

Later the prophet Micaiah came with a similar message of judgment (I 22:8ff). The Israelites would be scattered like sheep without a shepherd, for a lying spirit was misleading Ahab's prophets. Not long afterward, the king was wounded in battle and bled to death in his chariot, near Samaria.

Under Ahaziah, Ahab's successor, the conduct of the house of Omri did not improve. When the new king became ill, he decided to go to Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, for advice. Before he could do so, he was stopped and admonished by Elijah. Anyone who looks to *Baal* for *life* will meet *death* at the hands of *Yahweh* (II Kings 1).

Elisha. Prophecy continued. Elijah, whose career

reminds us in many respects of Moses,* cast his mantle over the shoulder of Elisha. As soon as he “took over,” Elisha demonstrated the *life-giving* power of the Word as well as its *power to destroy*. In Jericho the Word was sought to purify the water, and it did so, revealing the blessing of the Lord in the city that had earlier been cursed. But in Bethel, which had witnessed so much grace (e.g. the revelation to Jacob), a mortal curse struck a group of jeering boys (II 2:19ff).

In II Kings 3 we are taught a remarkable lesson: if a *prophet* does not abide by the Word of the Lord, he, too, brings a curse on his people. Consider what happened. Elisha helped King Jehoram, who, like his father, allied himself in battle with King Jehoshaphat of Judah. The campaign against Moab went well. But Elisha did not oppose the “scorched earth” tactics of the two kings, as he should have, since these tactics were a direct violation of the Lord’s gracious laws for warfare (see, for example, Deut. 20:19-20).

King Mesha of Moab was driven to a deed of despair by the barbaric conduct of Israel and Judah: on the wall of the city he sacrificed his first-born son to the god Chemosh. Then “great wrath” (presumably the wrath of Yahweh) came upon the Israelites, who withdrew their armies. Thus, even the word of Elisha had to bow before the revelation of the Lord. The spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets (I Cor. 14:32); they do not possess any authority of their own.

*Think of how both Moses and Elijah encountered God at Mount Horeb; the period of 40 days; Yahweh passing before the face of each; the struggle of Moses against Egyptian magicians and the struggle of Elijah against the servants of Baal on Mount Carmel; Moses’ dealings with Pharaoh and Elijah’s dealings with Ahab; Moses’ passage through the Red Sea and the passage of Elijah and Elisha through the dry bed of the Jordan.

The purpose of miracles. The prophetic Word is capable of great wonders, even in a situation of deformation. This truth is illustrated by various incidents from chapter 4 of II Kings on. Essentially the lesson is always the same: it is the Word that gives life.

The miracles performed by Christ have rightly been compared to those performed by Elisha. The similarity between Elisha's miraculous feeding of the hundred men and Christ's feeding of the thousands is indeed striking (compare II 4:42ff with Matt. 15:31ff and John 6:5ff).

The intent of such miracles is never to put on a show; Elisha was not giving a demonstration of his powers as a magician. His miraculous assistance was intended to benefit the church of the Lord—then and in the future. Christ's miracles were performed for the same reason. He refused to do miracles to satisfy the curious, for His purpose in coming was to be a shepherd to the lost sheep of Israel.

Judgment on Ahab's house. We must not neglect the reverse side of the Word, which is also able to judge people, and even kill them. We must not play off Elisha against Elijah, for the thunder and lightning of Sinai were also reflected in *Elisha's* prophetic activities. Isn't this clear from the incident at Bethel at the beginning of Elisha's "career" as a prophet? Consider also what happened to the captain at the gate when Samaria was liberated (II 7:17). Furthermore, think of the anointing of wrathful King Hazael, who weakened the Israelites to the point of exhaustion just when the Assyrians were moving in their direction (II 8:7ff), and of the anointing of Jehu (II 9:1).

Jehu saw to it that Elijah's words of judgment were completely fulfilled. Even though the house of Omri was so great that Israel was referred to in Assyrian documents as *Omriland*, it remained true that those who followed the

ways of the Canaanites suffered the *judgment* of the Canaanites. The passionate, vindictive conduct of Jehu must be seen first and foremost as a judgment brought about by Israel's own apostasy (II Kings 9 and 10).

Samaria's king shall perish, like a chip on the face of the waters (Hos. 10:7).

5. The End of the Northern Kingdom

Jehu's dynasty. There were limits to Jehu's zeal for Yahweh. He eliminated the service of Baal, but he did nothing about the worship of the golden calf at Bethel. He destroyed the house of Ahab, but in such an eager fighter's way that Hosea later spoke of the need of punishing the house of Jehu "for the blood of Jezreel" (Hos. 1:4). Because of his zeal, Jehu did receive the promise that his house would rule for four generations (II 10:30), but once a century had passed, the rule of his dynasty ended.

This is not to say that Jehu's dynasty did not produce some capable kings. These kings were in contact with the prophets, as we see at the time of Elisha's death, when King Joash comes to visit the prophet. Elisha promises him a great victory against the Syrians (II 13:14ff), a promise that Joash does not seem to take too seriously.

Prosperity and degeneration. Joash's son was Jeroboam II. In accordance with the prophecy of the well-known prophet Jonah, this king was sent to deliver Israel and restore the kingdom (I 14:25ff). Jonah's prophecy brings out the fact that Jonah was a committed nationalist, which makes it easier for us to understand his reluctance to

preach repentance to the Assyrians at Nineveh and his eagerness to see their city destroyed.

Nationalism was on the rise in Israel during the time of Jeroboam II. The boundaries of the kingdom once ruled by David were restored, as Damascus had to submit to the house of Jehu. Zechariah, the son of Jeroboam II, represented the fourth generation of the house of Jehu.

The prophets Amos and Hosea sketch the degeneration of Israel in those days of prosperity. The Israelites continued in the sins into which Jeroboam I had led them:

They made kings, but not through me.
They set up princes, but without my knowledge.
With their silver and gold they made idols
for their own destruction.
I have spurned your calf, O Samaria.
My anger burns against them.
The calf of Samaria
shall be broken to pieces (Hos. 8:4-5, 6).

They set up kings, but *the Lord* was not consulted. Each usurper was pushed aside by another.

The fall of Samaria. Meanwhile, the Assyrian threat came closer and closer. First the Israelites made a treaty with the Assyrians, in which they agreed to pay tribute. When they later broke this covenant, the Assyrian army turned on them.

Yet the Assyrian takeover was gradual rather than sudden (II 15:29). The outcome, of course, was that the people went into exile. Israel's last king made another agreement with Assyria, but because the pro-Egyptian party won out in the internal power struggle, Shalmaneser put an end to Israel's existence as a nation. The king of Israel was deported as a captive. After an awe-inspiring siege of three years, Samaria fell. The entire nation was then subject to deportation and exile in a faraway land.

The epilogue makes it clear why the Lord allowed all of this: these things happened because the voice of the prophets was *ignored*. The religion of the Israelites was Canaanized, as Molech was served and the golden calves were worshiped. In short, the Israelites “would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them” (II 17:14-15).

The Samaritans. What became of the territory occupied by the tribes sent into exile? The Assyrians let other peoples colonize it, who quickly intermarried with the few Israelites that were left. To free themselves of attacks by ferocious lions sent by the Lord, the people in Samaria called for a priest.

A priest was sent back to Israel from the land of exile. (It must have been someone who was not regarded as politically dangerous.) This priest made his headquarters at *Bethel*, which gives us an idea of the sort of thing he must have taught interested listeners about “the law of the god of the land.”

The old sin at Bethel was reintroduced. Moreover, the people sent to colonize Israel continued to cling to the gods of their beloved homelands. Should it surprise us, then, that Ezra and Nehemiah did not want the help of the Samaritans in rebuilding the temple? Yet, the day of salvation came for the Samaritans too (see John 4 and Acts 8).

6. Deformation and Reformation in the Southern Kingdom

Hardening in Judah. When the southern kingdom is compared with the northern kingdom, there are a number of good things to be noted—fortunately. Some of the kings instituted reforms and knew the secret of all blessing. In those great days, the throne and the altar went hand in hand—the throne of David and the genuine, legitimate altar dedicated to Yahweh.

In many ways, however, Judah behaved like Israel; that is to say, it also imitated the other nations in religious respects. We see a continuous hardening among the people of Judah. Reformations may have put a veneer on the life of Judah, but prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah made it apparent just how far the corruption had gone.

Rehoboam. Things started to go wrong under Rehoboam. The typically Canaanite religion with its emphasis on blood and the soil seemed to be coming into favor everywhere. The conduct of Naamah, the king's Ammonite mother, must have had something to do with this: queen mothers generally had a good deal of influence at the court. But we should not expect too much of this Ammonite woman, given Solomon's great tolerance of the religious practices of his many wives. It's not likely that Naamah ever followed Ruth's example and said, "Your God shall be my God!" Her easygoing husband even let her have her own chapel!

Once conditions in Judah deteriorated to this point, the last of Solomon's glory faded away. King Shishak of Egypt went to war against Rehoboam and took Jerusalem. He allowed Rehoboam to remain king, but he carried off the treasures of the palace and the temple, including 500 shields of gold from the House of the Forest of Lebanon,

which Rehoboam later replaced with copper shields.

This episode has given orators and poets something to ponder as they turn their attention to the dangers and difficulties of keeping alive the glory of distinguished predecessors. The church parade with copper shields that Rehoboam tried to hold when he went to the house of the Lord was indeed a foolish show. Rehoboam upheld the state religion and allowed all sorts of heathen religious practices to flourish alongside it.

Asa. Abijam, Rehoboam's successor, was no better (I 15:1ff). Yet we read: "*For David's sake* the LORD his God gave him a flame to burn in Jerusalem, by establishing his dynasty and making Jerusalem secure" (vs. 4 NEB). Abijam was soon succeeded by his son Asa, who walked in the ways of his forefather David and did away with the idolatry. The queen mother, who actually supported the worship of images, was stripped of her power, and the temple was again furnished with consecrated gifts.

Yet, these holy objects soon disappeared when Baasha, the king of Israel, made war against Judah. Asa sent them, together with further gifts, to Ben-hadad of Syria, to bribe him to break his treaty with Israel. (Ben-hadad went along with this proposal.)

The strategy of Asa here reflects a lack of confidence in the Lord, something we see repeatedly in the rest of Judah's history. The words of Luther's adaptation of Psalm 46 apply to Asa as well as to us: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing."

Jehoshaphat. Asa was succeeded by his son, Jehoshaphat. He, too, served the Lord and continued the struggle against the heathen worship forms of the Canaanites. But this king, who *knew* what was right in the eyes of the Lord, followed the wrong path in his dealings with the northern kingdom. He put an end to the war

between Judah and Israel and instead undertook extensive *cooperation* with the godless house of Ahab. He allied himself with Ahab in war (I Kings 22) and was far from reserved in his declarations of friendship (see vs. 4).

Later Jehoshaphat allied himself with King Jehoram of Israel (II Kings 3) and even arranged a marriage between his son, who also bore the name *Jehoram*, and Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel (see II 8:18). No good came of this outrageous covenant with the house of Omri. Only the Lord's promise to David made Him spare Jehoram (vs. 19).

Athaliah. Jehoram's son Ahaziah also took the wrong path. His relationship to Ahab's family became fateful for him, for when Jehu seized power in Israel, Ahaziah was killed while visiting the king of Israel (II 9:21ff).

At this point Athaliah saw her chance. As queen mother, she seized power. Following the lead of many another usurper in the ancient Near East, she tried to murder every last member of the royal family. Only Joash, a son of Ahaziah, was saved; he was hidden in the temple complex.

Joash. When the crown prince reached the age of seven, the high priest Jehoiada organized a *coup d'état*, in which the godless Athaliah lost her life. Under Jehoiada's leadership, a partial reformation took place. The temple of Baal was torn down, and the Lord's temple was restored, thanks to offerings brought by the people (II 12:7ff).

Joash, who is also called *Jehoash*, did not end his reign successfully. He was overthrown in a rebellion. He had given the temple treasures to Ben-hadad of Syria. It is clear from what we read in Chronicles that the change in the conduct of Joash came *after* the death of Jehoiada. Joash turned his back on the service of the Lord.

Amaziah. Joash's son Amaziah, who succeeded him,

did serve the Lord. The worship services in the central sanctuary continued, but the “separatist” local services offered heathendom a fine opportunity to infiltrate Judah slowly. As a result, Jerusalem lost its hold on the people. This eventually led to the fall of the temple, the city, and the whole country.

The coming catastrophe was foreshadowed in the capture of Jerusalem by the king of Israel (i.e. the northern kingdom), who had accepted Amaziah’s challenge to do battle (II 14:8ff). Jehoash, Israel’s king, had responded at first with a fable, but Amaziah would not take no for an answer.

Through this chapter in Judah’s history and in many other ways as well, the Lord showed that Jerusalem would only be saved *by grace*. If the belief in grace disappeared, a Shishak, a Nebuchadnezzar, a Pompey, or a Titus would come along to break the pride of the people of Judah.

Ahaz. After Ahaziah and Jotham, the famous Ahaz became king. During his time, Judah sank to the level of the Canaanites. Ahaz even sacrificed his first-born son to Molech, a god whose name means *king*.

When Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel made war against him, he used the treasures of the temple and the palace to buy the help of the Assyrians, who then rescued him from his foes. This assistance rendered by a great foreign power led Ahaz to accept foreign *religious* influences as well. He made a copy of an altar he saw in Damascus and placed it in the temple in Jerusalem (II 16:1ff).

Like Jeroboam I, Ahaz assumed the role of *priest-king* and offered the first sacrifice on the altar. The copper altar of the Lord was no longer needed and was pushed aside. Henceforth all sacrifices were to be made on the new altar built along Assyrian lines.

Judah was moving rapidly toward its destruction. The

Messianic king, who was supposed to foreshadow Christ, promoted and led the continuing deformation. He was a *caricature* of the coming Priest-King after the order of Melchizedek.

Hezekiah and the Assyrians. Under Hezekiah and later under Josiah, the light broke through again. Hezekiah served the Lord and carried out a powerful reformation (II 18:1ff). He broke off Judah's friendship with Assyria, thereby freeing his land from the unneeded foreign influence that had been so harmful during his father's reign. It was during his time that Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and carried off its inhabitants.

Ten years later, Assyria appeared at the gates of Jerusalem. Hezekiah had already tried to escape the danger by paying the Assyrians the tribute they demanded, but it didn't work (II 18:13ff). The Assyrians accepted the payment but made war on Zion anyway.

At this point in Judah's history, we are shown once more what the grace of the Lord can do. Against the proud boasts of the Assyrians, the Word of the Lord now proclaimed through the mouth of Isaiah:

She despises you, she scorns you—
the virgin daughter of Zion;
she wags her head behind you—
the daughter of Jerusalem.
Whom have you mocked and reviled?
Against whom have you raised your voice
and haughtily lifted your eyes?
Against the Holy One of Israel! (II 19:21-2).

The promise of a remnant. Up to this point in Kings, there is frequent mention of the work of the prophets in the northern kingdom, but little mention of prophets in the southern kingdom. Now, however, we see that the prophetic Word *lives*—and *saves*—in the south as well.

Assyria may have stripped a number of countries bare, and a sea of misery may descend on Judah, but there will be a remnant, a band of survivors, going forth from Jerusalem (II 19:31). This promise should provide comfort to the church today, for the words of Isaiah were borne out: just as on the night of the first Passover, the angel of Yahweh passed through the ranks of Israel's enemies. Thousands of Assyrian soldiers were slain, and Jerusalem was spared from Sennacherib's assault.

This event may well have occasioned the writing of Psalm 46. In any event, this mighty act of deliverance often drew Judah's attention in later years.

Unfortunately, the people of Judah tended to forget about the *faith* and *trust* the Lord requires of His people when they contemplate His acts of deliverance. They reasoned that since Jerusalem had been spared earlier when Hezekiah was king, the same thing would happen in their time: there would be some sort of miraculous deliverance. That's why they did not seem overly worried at the approach of Nebuchadnezzar, and that's also why the Jews fought with such intense courage to hold Jerusalem when they were attacked by the Romans in A.D. 68-70.

Their mistake was forgetting that only those who actually keep the covenant are entitled to sing: "The Lord of hosts is on our side; with Jacob's God we safely hide." Where that faithfulness is absent, not one stone will be left standing on another.

Hezekiah and the Babylonians. II Kings 20 tells us of Hezekiah's fatal illness and recovery. The prayer prayed by the king at that time has been preserved for us in Isaiah 38.

Hezekiah's miraculous recovery had political repercussions. Emissaries came from Babylon to congratulate him. Full of pride, the king showed the representatives of this rising world power his glory. He even expressed a

willingness to enter into an alliance with Babylon, hoping to form a counterweight to the power of the Assyrians. Naturally, Isaiah had to admonish him for the unbelieving attitude manifested in his willingness: Babylon would one day carry Judah into exile!

During the reign of Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, the prophets also had some dark and threatening things to say: "And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab. And I will cast off the remnant of my heritage" (II 21:13, 14). Manasseh piled idolatry upon idolatry. His son Amon, who was killed when his own servants conspired against him, did the same.

Josiah. Not until the time of Amon's son Josiah did things take another turn for the better. Josiah brought about another reformation. The temple was restored. During the repairs, a book of the law was found (II 22:8ff).

The content of this book, which may have been Deuteronomy, made a profound impression on Josiah, who now understood that the Lord was angry at His people for living in violation of the law. The prophetess Huldah confirmed this suspicion on the part of the king: "Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place and upon its inhabitants, because they have forsaken me (vs. 16, 17). A careful reading of II Kings 23 makes it clear just how far the decline and degeneration had progressed: every apostate king had made a contribution to the polytheistic worship of the people of Judah.

I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple (II Kings 23:27 NIV).

7. The End of the Southern Kingdom

An external reformation. The reformation of Josiah affected even Israel's northern territory, but it was not enough to change the *hearts* of the people. It is clear especially from the prophecies of Jeremiah just how corrupt the nation was. Unfortunately, the reformation had only been external. The Lord did not soften His fierce anger.

Josiah finally died in battle against the army of Pharaoh Neco of Egypt, who was on his way to Assyria to support the Assyrians against the growing power of Babylon. Judah's prospects as an independent nation died with him. On the age-old battlefield of Megiddo fell the last Davidic king who sought to be faithful to the Lord.

Egypt and Babylon. The circumstances surrounding Josiah's death show us how confined Judah's position was between such mighty powers as Egypt and Babylon. First it was Egypt that controlled Jerusalem. Jehoahaz was taken captive by Pharaoh Neco and replaced by Jehoiakim. During his rule the might of Babylon continued to grow, and Judah became subordinate to Babylon. Later Judah broke away from Babylon: the pro-Egyptian party, about which we read so much in the book of Jeremiah, had apparently won out.

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon then besieged Jerusalem. The new king, Jehoiachin (not to be confused with Jehoiakim), gave himself up to the Babylonians, presumably hoping for gracious treatment. The treasures

of the palace and the temple were taken away, together with the king's court and the leading citizens. Zedekiah was made king to rule over the "proletariat" left behind. But he, too, disobeyed Babylon by refusing to pay the tribute demanded.

In July of 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar's troops seized Jerusalem once more, and there was a second deportation. This time the city, including the temple, was thoroughly destroyed. The copper pillars and the temple wares were taken away to Babylon. Some of the Jews who were not deported continued to live in Judah, but many fled to Egypt because of the uncertainty of the situation.

A future for David's house. Kings ends by telling us that a later Babylonian king graciously freed King Jehoiachin. Thus David's line was not wiped out but continued to exist. The Lord was faithful to His covenant with David. Kings points beyond the period of the exile to the coming of the King who was also a true Prophet, the King who would restore "the kingship of Israel."

Kings was probably written during the time of the exile. It shows that the Lord was justified in allowing the northern kingdom to go into exile, for Israel continued in the sins of Jeroboam and even committed worse transgressions. This book tells of God's judgment on David's house, but also of His grace toward that dynasty. The portrayal of such reforming kings as Hezekiah and Josiah is designed to arouse hope: David's house was *not out of the picture yet.*

The elevation of Jehoiachin to the position of an honored guest at the Babylonian court was also a reason for hope. The prophetic Word would be fulfilled: Israel would surely return from exile. There was a future for David's house!

I and II Chronicles

1. A Messianic Book Comforting the True Church with Old Promises

A time of reconstruction. The book of Chronicles was clearly written after the time of the exile. (It was later split into two books by the Septuagint translators.) Since its ending blends in so smoothly with the beginning of the book of Ezra, it may well be that Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah once formed a single book.

The author of Chronicles lived during the time of reconstruction after the exile. Therefore we can well understand that he had a particular *message* to drive home to his people.

The situation after the return from Babylon was far from rosy. Israel had not been restored to its former glory. Some of the tribes had returned, but no tribe came back with all its members. From the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it is clear how often deformation reared its ugly head. The services in the temple were restored, but where was the glory of the restored house of David? Foreign rulers governed Judah; a series of world powers succeeded

each other in controlling Jerusalem. But that's not all that was wrong.

An interpretive account. It is against this background that we must view the author of Chronicles with his interpretive account of the history of the kingdom of Judah. He tries to comfort his people by placing Judah's history in a worldwide context. The first word in his book is *Adam*. What he writes about the people of Israel and the ravaged kingdom of Judah is history of *mankind*, that is, history relevant to the lives and destinies of us all.

We could perhaps characterize the beginning of Chronicles as stressing the universality of the gospel. From Adam it proceeds to Abraham and his descendants. The covenant with the patriarchs receives strong emphasis: the Lord is spoken of no fewer than thirty times as the "God of their fathers." It is shown in detail how the covenant with Abraham received meaning in the covenant with David. Through David, "Israel" had a future, for David and his great successors maintained the theocracy, that is, God's rule over His people.

"All Israel." Where did the Lord dwell but in His temple? The great tragedy of the northern kingdom was that it had cut itself off from the temple. Therefore, however few tribes were actually gathered around the temple, Chronicles calmly applies the name *Israel* to them (see, for example, II 15:17; 24:16; 28:19). "All Israel" was again to be blessed through this small congregation.

The same way of thinking prevailed when the repatriated Israelites dedicated the rebuilt temple. A sin offering of twelve he-goats was made, "according to the number of the tribes of Israel" (Ezra 6:17). Only some parts of a few tribes had returned, but this remnant represented all Israel. Chronicles uses such reasoning to encourage the

repatriated Israelites: “all Israel” gathers around *David and the temple*. This Israel is the true church.

Chronicles also shows how the prophets were needed to draw the kings’ attention to the law of the Lord. When the testimony of the prophets was ignored, the house of David faced a bleak future.

Here the *Messianic* message of the book of Chronicles comes through strongly. Someday there would be a Messiah who would keep the law of Yahweh perfectly and completely, whose work would not be fragmentary but would complete the temple service and usher in true rest for all Israel. Chronicles *cries out* for Jesus Christ, the great Priest-King. Remember that as you read all the genealogies and stories recorded in Chronicles, many of which are not included in Kings.

2. A Messianic Kingdom of Singing Priests

God’s electing grace. On the basis of this general understanding of Chronicles, we will take a closer look at the text. As we have seen, it begins with a global perspective on Israel—a genealogy that starts with Adam and leads to Abraham. This genealogy represents a statement on the unity of mankind.

God’s electing grace comes to the fore in this account of Israel’s ancestry: Israel is a descendant of Seth, and not of Cain. The line runs through Isaac, but not through Esau and Edom (a land explicitly mentioned in the genealogy).

The statistical information about the tribes of Israel (beginning with I Chron. 2) has a certain slant and emphasis. The tribe of Judah, from which King David came, receives a great deal of attention. The genealogies of the tribes of Benjamin and Simeon, which were also part of

the southern kingdom, are described in detail as well. The information about the priestly tribe of Levi is given a place of honor (ch. 6), while the other tribes are dealt with more briefly (ch. 7).

Noble descent. Bear in mind that the writer of Chronicles could give genealogies extending only up to his own time. In I Chronicles 9 there is even a general description of the population of Jerusalem at the time of Nehemiah (as we learn from a comparison with Neh. 11:3-19).

The purpose of all this information is clear. The writer of Chronicles is trying to show the Israelites who returned from exile that they are of noble descent or, to put it in stronger terms, that they have *rights* rooted deeply in the past.

Israel had a great and glorious past. Despite God's judgments, Israel was able to continue that history—even during the perilous times in which the writer of Chronicles lived—through the tribes of Judah and Levi and the remains of the other tribes. Israel still had the temple and the promises made to the house of David.*

A singing church. Starting with chapter 10 of I Chronicles, which is introduced by a genealogy in the preceding chapter, we are given an account of Saul's decline and David's elevation to the throne—first at Hebron and later at Jerusalem. Lists of heroes and supporters of David are given. The names on these lists are drawn from all the tribes.

The moving of the ark receives a great deal of emphasis in this priestly book, which sketches the church as a singing

*For typical passages in the genealogies, see I 2:7 (*Achar*, like *Achan*, the name used in the book of Joshua, means *troubler*); 2:34; 4:9-10; 5:18ff; 7:21ff.

and music-making congregation. This characterization echoes throughout Chronicles. Today's readers must be sure to understand this point and take it to heart, for a singing church is far from powerless. The liturgy of the church contains a power that can shake heaven and earth. (This point is emphasized in the book of Revelation.)

Preparation for the temple. Because the liturgical element is so important in Chronicles, we are given the text of the worship service celebrating the transfer of the ark to Jerusalem (I 16:8ff). This liturgy, which draws on Psalms 96, 105 and 106, was also to be used at Gibeon's tabernacle and altar of burnt offering.

A central theme in Chronicles is the Lord's promise to David regarding his son Solomon, who was to build the temple (I 17:1ff). David's house existed for the sake of a future house of the Lord. Once there was rest, once all the enemies had been overcome (I 22:9), Solomon could begin building.

Therefore the account of David's conquests should not be regarded as dry and dull. His struggles with the sword and his extensive military organization (see I Chron. 18-19, 22) served to prepare the way for the future building of the temple. Wasn't Israel in need of rest, *shalom*, peace? The temple gives us the proper perspective for grasping the meaning of these events. This is also true of David's sin with regard to the census.

When David saw an angel on the threshing floor of the Jebusite Ornan (elsewhere called Araunah), he made offerings there, despite the fact that Gibeon was the place to bring offerings at that time. From this episode David drew the conclusion: "Here shall be the house of the LORD God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel" (I 22:1). *The Lord Himself* had indicated the place He had chosen (see Deut. 12). It was this fact that made David eager to gather materials for the temple.

Reorganization. The Levites, singers and other temple servants were reorganized and divided into new groups. We should note that the priests and singers were divided into 24 (2 x 12) groups. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, belonged to the division of Abijah (see Luke 1:5; I Chron. 24:10). When we read in John's Revelation of the 24 elders in white garments, we are not just to think of angels. This number also reflects the number of orders of priests and singers.

I Chronicles closes with Solomon's commission to build the temple, an account of all the contributions toward this project, David's song of praise afterward, and the anointment of Zadok to be high priest. It also records a statement of David in which the position of a theocratic king is clearly defined: "If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will cast you off for ever" (I 28:9; see also I Sam. 12:24-5). The kingship is made secure by *servicing the Lord*.

We read that Solomon "sat on the *throne of the LORD* as king instead of David" (I 29:23). The king was to be *Yahweh's* representative: that was the meaning of his office.

If David's house should be untrue to its calling, it would lose its right to the throne. The second half of Chronicles (i.e. II Chronicles) does in fact end with a house of David that is driven off the throne of the Lord.

Chronicles and Kings. In II Chronicles, the "priestly" motif is very strong. We are given a great deal of detail about the building of the temple and its dedication. Solomon's other deeds as king are given little attention: in Chronicles he appears mainly as *the builder of the temple*. His unfaithfulness to the Lord is not even mentioned.

In many places the text of Chronicles is close to that of Kings. If details and incidents are left out that are included in Kings, we are not to assume that the historical record is

being distorted. The author of Chronicles refers repeatedly to his sources and presupposes the content of Kings as already familiar to his readers.

The relationship between Chronicles and Kings is like that between the Gospel according to John and the three “synoptic gospels.” John doesn’t include the institution of the Lord’s supper in his “gospel”; he simply assumes that his readers already know about it from the other “gospels.” All he includes in his “gospel” is what he regards as necessary for his purpose in writing.

The same considerations apply in the case of Chronicles. Its author points to certain incidents to provide the context and background of the theme of his book, focusing the attention of his readers on David and the building of the temple. That’s why he includes a lot of material not found in Kings, just as there is much in John’s “gospel” that is not to be found in the “synoptic gospels.”

3. The Prophets: Servants of the Lord

Prophets in the southern kingdom. The book of Kings devotes a great deal of attention to the work of the prophets in the *northern* kingdom, while telling us little about their activities in Judah. The book of Chronicles, on the other hand, goes into the role of the prophets in the *southern* kingdom.

Even though Chronicles is a “priestly” book, it shows us how important the prophets were to the kings: they gave them guidance, advised them, checked up on them, and admonished them. Some of the prophets also recorded the deeds of the kings; the writer of Chronicles apparently drew on the works of prophets when he composed his written account (see, for example, I 29:29; II 12:15; 20:34).

Shemaiah, Azariah and Hanani. To bring out this relationship between the prophets and the kings more clearly, I will draw your attention to certain passages in II Chronicles. We already see a prophet intervening in the time of Rehoboam, when the king proposes to make war on his Israelite brothers in the north (II 11:1ff). Shemaiah, the prophet who stood in his way, also called for repentance when Shishak, the king of Egypt, approached with his armies (II 12:5).

The prophet Azariah encouraged King Asa to continue the work of reformation after his victory over the Cushites, a people (possibly Arab Bedouins) who rode on camels (II 15:1ff). Later, when King Asa got involved in political treaties with Syria and allowed the covenant with the Lord to slip more and more into the background, it was Hanani who admonished him. This deed cost the prophet his freedom. Kings do not like to be contradicted!

Micaiah, Jehu and Eliezer. In the story of the reign of King Jehoshaphat, we encounter the prophet Micaiah, who is also mentioned in Kings. Micaiah foretold the death of Ahab, Jehoshaphat's military ally (II 18:6ff).

When Jehoshaphat returned after he and Ahab had been defeated in battle, Jehu, the son of Hanani, raked him over the coals: "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Because of this, wrath has gone out against you from the LORD" (II 19:2). When this king later wished to join with Ahab's son in building up a fleet for trade purposes, it was Eliezer who informed him that the proposed expedition would fail (II 20:37). Jehoshaphat had not maintained the "antithesis"!

Zechariah. We even read of a letter from the prophet Elijah to godless King Jehoram, who was married to a daughter of Ahab (II 21:12ff). When Joash went astray after the death of his foster father Jehoiada, *prophets ap-*

peared to admonish him, one of whom was Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada.

Zechariah's boldness had drastic consequences: he was denounced by the people, who were hostile to his prophecies. The king didn't even object when this prophet was executed right in the court of the temple (II 24:20-2).

But the prophet's blood was not at rest. As he died, Zechariah declared: "May the LORD see and avenge!" Later Jesus was also to speak of "the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah," who was murdered "between the sanctuary and the altar." Jerusalem, the city that killed the prophets, would one day have to pay for this innocent blood (Matt. 23:29-39).

Alongside the kings. The Lord also spoke through prophets to Manasseh and his people (II 33:10), but after a while the people simply refused to listen. That's why the punishment with which Judah was so often threatened was finally carried out. The Lord's anger at His people had grown so strong that the punishment could not be revoked (II 36:16).

I have deliberately followed this line of thought at some length (see also II 20:15; 26:5; 29:25; 32:20) in the hope that you will profit from it as you read Chronicles for yourself. Alongside the king stands the prophet. The less the king listens to him, the more events cry out for the King who is Himself the Highest Prophet and Teacher—Jesus Christ.

4. The Power of the True Church's Liturgy

Pure service. Alongside the king's service, there is the service of the priests with their offerings and songs. Chronicles is a *priestly* book, after all. Attention is focused repeatedly on the lawful, true service of the Lord, as various prophets and kings demand reformation. Think of Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah, who were all reformers.

It is shown clearly that the church becomes strong politically only when it serves the Lord purely. The worship of the church helped to defeat the enemy. Think of the trumpeting priests (II 13:14) and the singers with their songs of praise on the battlefield (II 20:21).

These episodes contain a message for the church of our time. We may not beat our breasts and declare that this is the Lord's temple, where we are safe! Outward service in itself is no guarantee of safety or deliverance.

Yet, this truth should not lead us to underestimate the significance of serving the Lord. Much is accomplished through prayer. The liturgy of the church can make the whole world sit up and take notice. It is not without reason that the book of Revelation depicts a singing church surrounding the Lamb on Mount Zion, while there is judgment all around. The song of Moses does not fade away but will be heard eternally.

All of redemptive history resounds with the song of the church. This song is not an idyllic intermezzo in the midst of the tumult of war, nor is it an impotent sound issuing from the throats of pale, weak individuals far removed from the mainstream of life. *Prayer* is the secret of the church's power; it is prayer that enables the church to overcome its enemies.

Enrichment. At the end of his life, David, who was not

an autocratic ruler, met with the leaders of Israel to broaden the service of the Levites in anticipation of the temple to be built by Solomon (I Chron. 23). He also arranged for the service of songs and for the music to accompany them (I Chron. 25). He was the author of many psalms himself. In II Chronicles 29 we hear mention of the “instruments of David” (vs. 26-7). “Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises to the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer” (vs. 30).

This enrichment of the liturgy introduced by Moses is worthy of our attention. The Lord was moving events ahead toward the time when the service offerings in the temple would be dropped but the service of prayers and songs continued. “Be filled with the Spirit,” urged Paul, “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Eph. 5:18-20). Elsewhere in the New Testament we read: “Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer up to God the sacrifice of praise, that is, the tribute of lips which acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15 NEB; see also Ps. 50:14, 23; Is. 57:19).

Thus it’s not just a matter of singing a hymn while the collection is being taken. Now that Christ has made His atoning sacrifice, we are to continue the temple’s praise and thanksgiving in a New Testament setting!

This, too, is included in the mighty message of Chronicles. Now that Christ has placed all of us in the office of priest, the psalms and prayers of the righteous can have a tremendous effect. Power has been conferred upon them (see James 5:16).

5. Emphasis on the Covenant Relationship

The covenant with the patriarchs. In his song of praise after gifts were received for the building of the temple, David referred to the Lord as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers” (I 29:18). In the temple liturgy, we read the following words:

He is mindful of his covenant for ever,
of the word that he commanded, for a thousand
generations,
the covenant which he made with Abraham,
his sworn promise to Isaac,
which he confirmed as a statute to Jacob,
as an everlasting covenant to Israel (I 16:15-17).

In other words, “He will remember and uphold His covenant made in days of old.”

This idea comes to the fore repeatedly in Chronicles. “Didst thou not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and give it for ever to the descendants of Abraham thy friend?” (II 20:7). Later generations could always point back to the covenant once made with the patriarchs. “The LORD is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. For a long time Israel was without the true God, and without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their distress they turned to the LORD, the God of Israel, and sought him, he was found by them” (II 15:2-4). We also read: “O people of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria” (II 30:6).

The Horeb covenant. The covenant made with the

patriarchs was renewed and confirmed in the covenant the Lord made with His people Israel at Sinai after their exodus from Egypt. Chronicles also points this out. The “God of our fathers” is the same as the *God of Israel*. David prayed:

And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself, and to make a name for yourself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You have made your people Israel your very own forever, and you, O LORD, have become their God (I 17:21-2 NIV).

Time and again Chronicles shows that the Lord upholds His covenant and that Israel is to maintain the covenant made at Horeb. The Lord even remains open to the northern kingdom of the ten tribes, despite all the apostasy there.

The prophet Shemaiah referred to those who backed Jeroboam’s claim to the throne as “brethren” (II 11:4; see also 28:11). The prophet Oded spoke to the soldiers of the northern kingdom of “the LORD *your* God” (II 28:10). And King Hezekiah of Judah sent a proclamation to Israel in which he said: “Yield yourselves [stretch forth your hand] to the LORD, and come to his sanctuary, which he has sanctified for ever, and serve the LORD *your* God” (II 30:8).

The covenant with David. The covenants with Abraham and Israel (i.e. Jacob) were not the only ones to be remembered: there was also the covenant with David. Great emphasis is placed on this covenant.

It is significant that the same characteristics are attributed to this covenant as to the others. It is an “eternal covenant,” one that extends to the Messianic era (see I

17:14, 23, 27; 22:10; 28:4, 7). “Ought you not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingship over Israel for ever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?” (II 13:5).

This covenant, too, is a covenant of *grace*. The issue here is divine *election* (see I 16:13; 28:6, 10; 29:1). Even during the reign of godless King Jehoram of Judah, the Lord would not allow the house of David to perish, “because of the covenant which he had made with David, and since he had promised to give a lamp to him and to his sons for ever” (II 21:7). This covenant involved further obligations and punishments (see II 6:16).

The house of David did not exist for its own sake. The covenant with David cannot be separated from the covenant with Israel. David declared that the Lord had made him king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom highly *for the sake of His people Israel* (I 14:2). Both Hiram of Tyre and the queen of Sheba declared that Solomon had become king over Israel because the Lord loved His people (II 2:11; 9:8). Through the kingship of David’s house, the covenant between the Lord and Israel grew and developed.

God’s authorized representative. It is in the light of this covenant that we should view David’s interest in the ark and the coming temple, as well as the zeal manifested by Solomon when he built the temple. This covenant also motivated Asa, who renewed the altar, Jehoshaphat, who furthered instruction in the law, and Joash, who restored and repaired the temple, as well as Jotham, Hezekiah, Manasseh, and Josiah, each of whom promoted the services in the temple in his own way and imposed limits on the idolatry in Judah.

The word *covenant* comes to the fore repeatedly. In each reformation, the old covenant was renewed under the leadership of the Davidic king. This illustrates how the covenant with David functioned within the covenant with Israel.

The house of David was called to maintain the covenant between the Lord and Israel and to restore it to its central position in Israel's national life whenever it was neglected and forgotten. The king from the house of David was God's authorized representative; he was the one seated on the "throne of the kingdom of the LORD," that is, the throne of Yahweh's kingship over Israel (see I 28:5; 29:22-3; II 9:8). The descent of the fire to the altar after Solomon's prayer at the temple dedication represented divine approval of the alterations in the form in which the covenant made at Sinai was to be continued (II 7:1; see also Lev. 9:24; I Chron. 21:26).

Confirmations of the renewed covenant. The covenant with the Lord was renewed under King Asa, as a seal on the temple purification. This renewed covenant contrasted sharply with the covenant Asa made with Syria (II Chron. 15-16).

Under the leadership of the high priest Jehoiada, King Joash, who was still a child at the time, entered into a covenant in the house of God (II Chron. 23). In this covenant, Israel agreed to be a people of the Lord (vs. 16). Moreover, the great Passover feasts that both Hezekiah and Josiah organized in the context of temple reformation can be seen as confirmations of the renewed covenant (II Chron. 30).

Chronicles was written after the exile, when there was no longer a king in Israel. Were the Israelites of that era to assume that God would now forget His gracious promises to the house of David? Could the Israelites still use the words of Psalm 89 and sing, "Our king belongs to the Holy One of Israel"? (vs. 18).

Chronicles ends by quoting part of the edict issued by Cyrus in which he allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem, thereby raising their hopes of restoring and rebuilding the temple. (This ending ties in neatly with the

beginning of the book of Ezra, which comes next in the Bible.) Thus the Israelite exiles saw a new future ahead of them.

We read that this event took place so that “the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished” (II 36:22). Jeremiah, too, had indicated that the Lord would surely keep His promises to David (see Jer. 25:5-6; 33:19ff). Was the Lord’s promise to David in Psalm 89:36 a lie?

A proclamation about Christ. Because of its emphasis on God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises, Chronicles is a continuous proclamation of the coming era of the Messiah. Jesus Christ, the great Son of David seated on David’s throne and on the throne of the Lord, has opened this new era; He has established a *new* covenant in His blood. Through Him, the old covenant with Abraham, Israel and David has entered a new phase since Pentecost. The Messianic age has come (see the songs of Mary and Zechariah in Luke 1:55, 69-73).

The message of Chronicles is highly relevant for us. We, too, live in a time when the complete fulfillment of God’s promises has not yet come. In opposition to the spirit of accommodation and doubt, the true Israel is exhorted to remain faithful to the God of its fathers, the God of David.

The dawning of the Messianic era is imminent. “Let them say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns!’ ” (I 16:31; see also Ps. 96:10; Ex. 15:18). When that Messianic age comes, Ezekiel’s prophecy will be fulfilled: “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David” (Ezek. 34:23).

He read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant (II Chron. 34:30).

6. Rules and Norms for Covenant Keeping

God's written Word. In the days when Chronicles was written, prophecy had all but ceased. If the remnant of Israel had been completely dependant for guidance on the appearance of new prophets, it would have been subject to every wind of doctrine. Therefore it is important to note how much attention the written Word of the Lord receives in Chronicles. Because Israel possessed this written Word, it was not without firm guidance. There was an established, written norm to appeal to.

David had impressed on Solomon and the various officials the importance of abiding by the statutes and ordinances which the Lord had told Moses to introduce in Israel (see I 22:13; 28:8; II 8:13; 33:8). Under King Josiah, the finding of the “book of the law of the LORD given through Moses” (II 34:14), which is called the “book of the covenant” (vs. 30), brought about a renewal of the covenant (vs. 32). Josiah's pious deeds are spoken of as “good deeds according to what is written in the law of the LORD” (II 35:26).

The keeping of the covenant was not to be a matter of intuition, improvisation or imagination. There were established rules and norms. Therefore the proper path could always be found in times of decline and sinfulness, for the people could consult the *book* of the covenant.

Perseverance and faithfulness. The law or torah or testimony pointed constantly to the blessings to be gained through obedience and piety, as well as to the curse that would result from apostasy. When Joash was crowned king, he was handed the “testimony” (II 23:11; see also

Deut. 17:18). Because he turned away from the Lord later in life, the curses of the covenant came into effect and he was punished. When King Uzziah entered the sanctuary to burn incense, which was contrary to the provisions of the law, he was stricken with leprosy (II 26:19).

On the other hand, Chronicles also gives us many examples of faithfulness to the law of the Lord. Note carefully how many kings got off to a good start but later went astray (e.g. Asa, Joash, Uzziah, Hezekiah). They did not persevere in what they had begun! Here we are shown how important it is for believers to be constant in their faithfulness.

Ezra

1. Historical Background

King Cyrus. The very first verse of the book of Ezra already speaks of redemptive history: we are told that the Lord fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah (see Jer. 25:12; 29:10). When the Babylonian empire was overthrown, the Jews were allowed to return to their own land, after an exile that had lasted some 70 years.

This background information immediately places the return of the exiles in the setting of *world history*: it was Cyrus, the king of the Persians, who gave the Jews permission to return. The first chapter of Ezra quotes his edict in full. (Part of the edict was cited in the last chapter of Chronicles as a “happy ending” to the book.)

After Nineveh fell in 612 B.C., the position that Assyria had once occupied in the ancient Near Eastern world was usurped by Babylon. Although the Israelites in the northern kingdom were deported by Assyria in 722, Jerusalem fell to the mighty hand of Babylon (in 597, and again 586). Its inhabitants, too, were deported.

Then along came Cyrus, who put an end to the later

Babylonian empire. As the ruler of the small kingdom of Anshan, Cyrus had succeeded in uniting seven Persian tribes. By virtue of this accomplishment, he became “king of the Persians.” He then incorporated the Medes and defeated Croesus. In the process, most of the country now called Turkey fell to him, and he started to expand in the direction of India, which meant that Babylon was next in the line of march. Because the current Babylonian emperor was on poor terms with the priests of the god Marduk, Cyrus managed to capture the Babylonian capital—with the help of the fifth column. In the year 539 B.C., the Persian king entered the city in triumph.

The anointed servant of the Lord. It is typical of Cyrus’s style that he took part in the new year’s feast in Babylon, thus honoring Marduk as the supreme deity. His rule was not a time in which entire nations were destroyed together with their religion and culture. Cyrus was content to let everyone seek salvation in his own way, and he even encouraged the peoples under his rule to hold on to their own mores and religions—provided, of course, that the king of Persia was recognized as supreme ruler.

Cyrus’s sympathetic and conciliatory attitude toward the Jews was nothing exceptional, then. He encouraged the Jews to return to their homeland and believed that it was in the interest of the Persian state that the temple in Jerusalem be restored and the service of offering re-established.

This policy made him an anointed servant of the Lord (see Is. 45:1ff) whom the Lord used to bring about a second exodus. His humane rule, which encouraged the nations to develop separately under Persian leadership, was used by the Lord to make the continuation of redemptive history possible.

More Persian rulers. After his death in 529, Cyrus was

succeeded by Cambyses, who was in turn succeeded by Darius, who was not only a great organizer but also stimulated the various peoples under his rule in their own worship and religion, just as Cyrus had done. It was during the confused period at the beginning of his rule that the building of the temple in Jerusalem, which had come to a temporary halt, was successfully completed (520-515).

Darius was succeeded by Xerxes (486-465), who is called *Ahasuerus* in the book of Esther. At the court of Xerxes, plots and intrigues against the Jews and others were the order of the day (see 4:6). When Xerxes was murdered in 465, Artaxerxes I took over after the usual period of confusion and rebellion. Egypt, which Cambyses had conquered, was in rebellion, which made Judah a border province of the Persian empire. Thus we can well see why the Persian authorities considered it important that there be no chaos in Judah.

It was for this reason that Artaxerxes sent Ezra to Jerusalem. As religious leader, Ezra was to see to it that God's law was maintained. Later it appears that the king was persuaded to turn against Ezra.

Because the situation in Jerusalem remained desolate, Nehemiah, who was employed by Artaxerxes at the court, informed the king of conditions in Judah and received official permission in 444 to go to Jerusalem for a temporary period as governor, with the aim of furthering the rebuilding and restoration. In the book of Nehemiah, we are told of his work among his brothers during the twelve years he was governor and also during a second period as governor.

The temporal framework. The following chronology gives us the temporal framework within which not just Ezra and Nehemiah but also the other books of the Bible dealing with the Persian period (i.e. Esther, Daniel, Haggai, and Zechariah) stand:

- 722: The people of the northern kingdom of Israel are deported by Assyria after the capture of Samaria.
- 597: Jerusalem is captured for the first time by Babylon. King Jehoiachin, the priests, and various important figures are deported (including Ezekiel and Daniel).
- 586: Jerusalem is captured for the second time, and most of the inhabitants are deported to Babylon.
- 539: Cyrus conquers Babylon. In 538 the Jews are given permission to return to their homeland. The altar is re-established, and the foundations of the temple are laid. Because of plots and intrigue, the work comes to a halt.
- 529: Cyrus dies and is succeeded by Cambyses.
- 521: Cambyses dies, and Darius takes over.
- 515: The temple in Jerusalem is completed under the leadership of Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua, who are encouraged and stimulated by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.
- 486: Xerxes (Ahasuerus) succeeds another emperor named Cambyses. Accusations are made against the Jews by other peoples living in Judah (see 4:6). Because of the intervention of Esther and Mordecai, Haman's attack on the Jews fails.
- 465: Artaxerxes I becomes emperor.
- 458: Ezra goes to Jerusalem with a group of exiles to bring about a reformation there. (The building of the walls was being delayed.)
- 444: Nehemiah becomes governor of Judah. He brings about reforms. Under his leadership, the walls and gates of Jerusalem are restored.

2. The Archives Are Opened

Government documents. The Bible is an amazing book containing a great deal of variety—proverbs full of wisdom, psalms full of feeling, glowing prophecies, and even some “dry” documents. The book of Ezra quotes and reproduces a number of documents drawn from archives.

Now, this fact should not scare us away from reading Ezra. Here again the Bible reveals itself as fully authentic. You don’t expect a driver’s license or a university diploma to be written in beautiful poetic language; the issue is the content. In a government document we expect a certain “official” style. Well then, in the book of Ezra we are confronted with the style used in Persian government documents. Without relying on the work of archeologists, we are afforded a peek inside the Persian archives.

Jewish civil servants. Cyrus’s “Third Reich” took over the traditions of its predecessors. The Assyrian and Babylonian archives were preserved, and their chronicles kept up to date. Any new decisions made were immediately recorded, placed in the archives, and published in various parts of the empire—thanks to the efforts of a host of civil servants and an excellent courier service.

In the books of Esther and Daniel we find some examples of the way these things were done. It appears that there was a “Department of Jewish Affairs” within the Persian government, in which Jewish civil servants were able to give a certain Jewish coloration to documents pertaining to Jerusalem.

Cyrus’s edict. When we open the book of Ezra, we find Cyrus’s edict reproduced in the first chapter. Now, we should be thankful that today’s Bible translations print the poetic parts of the Bible in verse form rather than in prose

form or in the format used in the King James Bible. Perhaps something similar could be done with documents and edicts reproduced in the Bible. If they were indented a certain distance from the left-hand margin and printed in smaller type, it would be much clearer to the reader that they are quotations—and not the author's own words. (The recently published New International Version of the Bible takes some steps in this direction.)

The format in which most Bibles are printed allows for no effective distinction between the text itself and the documents quoted. Therefore twentieth century people, who are oriented more to reading and visual appearance than to hearing (in our time, proclamations are printed rather than read aloud), often have difficulty determining just what is going on in a book like Ezra. In this respect, our Bibles are old-fashioned.

A petition to the king. The format I have suggested would help us particularly in understanding Ezra 4:8—6:13. What we find in this passage of Scripture is the partial text of a certain document—a petition sent to King Artaxerxes by a Jew named Tabeel.

This part of the book of Ezra is written not in Hebrew but in Aramaic, the language introduced by King Darius I to serve as the diplomatic language throughout his empire, just as English serves as the international language today. (Daniel 2:4—7:28 is also written in Aramaic.) It is apparent from II Kings 18:26 that Aramaic was already used as a language for diplomats in the days of Sennacherib, the great king of Assyria. The ordinary people did not understand Aramaic, but this had changed by the time the book of Ezra was written. By the time of the Lord Jesus' ministry, Hebrew had been replaced in Palestine by a form of the Aramaic language, as we see from such New Testament phrases as "Talitha cumi" and "Ephphatha."

Because the people of his time were able to understand

the documents in the official language, the author of Ezra reproduced them just as they were. Within the petition presented by Tabeel, documents are again quoted. (In a modern edition of the Bible, this could perhaps be indicated by further indentation.) Tabeel approaches his request gradually, pointing back to history.

The “good hand” of God. To understand the Aramaic section of Ezra, in which various documents are quoted, we must keep the following structure and divisions in mind.

- (1) In 4:8-16 we have a petition, a protest against the Jews who were busy strengthening the city of Jerusalem under Ezra’s leadership. This petition was drawn up by the governor of Samaria and was addressed to King Artaxerxes I.
- (2) In 4:17-22 we have the king’s response. A search of the archives revealed that Jerusalem had in fact rebelled often. (Here we see the value of preserving the archives of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires.) The result was that the Jews were forbidden to continue the work of strengthening the city.
- (3) In 5:7-17 we are given the official report of Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the Euphrates River, about the building of the temple begun in a much earlier time, i.e. under Darius. A request is made that the archives in Babylon be searched to see whether Cyrus did in fact issue an edict permitting the rebuilding.
- (4) In 6:3-5 the edict of Cyrus permitting the rebuilding is quoted. The scroll was not found in Babylon, the obvious place to look, but in Ecbatana, which is in Media. The civil servants and couriers had done their work well!
- (5) In 6:6-12 we are given the decision reached by Darius

the Great: the rebuilding of the temple is not just to be permitted but is to be supported.

When we bear all of this in mind, we see that what Ezra 4:8—6:13 gives us is not a “dry” story at all. The book of Ezra tells us that the Great King Yahweh worked in the hearts of earthly rulers and controlled their deeds and decisions as precisely as a computer controls a rocket in flight through outer space. We are shown the “good hand” of God mentioned so often in Ezra and Nehemiah. In the light of what the New Testament teaches, we think of Jesus Christ sitting to the right of that “good hand” of God. Because He is our King, the church is safe.

Ezra's credentials. In 7:12-26 we have a copy of the letter which Artaxerxes I, King of kings—note the use of this ancient Eastern title—gave Ezra to take with him when he returned to Jerusalem. In this letter, which represents Ezra's official credentials, we find a quotation (vs. 21-4) from a decree to all treasurers of the province beyond the Euphrates River, instructing them to be of all possible help to the Jewish priests and temple servants and ordering them not to impose any taxes on them. After this letter comes Ezra's song of praise to Yahweh, the “God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers” (7:27-8).

From the use of the word *me* in this passage, it is clear that the person who composed the book of Ezra was again quoting from a source, for elsewhere Ezra is referred to in the third person. He must have been drawing on the memoirs of Ezra, or perhaps his diary. The same thing happens in the book of Nehemiah: it contains quotations from the memoirs of Nehemiah.

The interesting point here is that the Bible lets us into the archives, thereby telling us more than any carefully prepared story could do. The Bible gives us some authentic documents to examine, documents that speak to us in unequivocal language about the recognition of Israel's privileges and the reformation that was undertaken.

Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. It is generally assumed that Ezra and Nehemiah originally formed *one* book, a book that is in turn an extension of Chronicles, which ends just where Ezra begins. The name *Nehemiah* would then be a later addition.

In the Vulgate, the official Latin translation of the Bible long used by the Roman Catholic Church, Nehemiah is called *II Ezra*. The series continues with two apocryphal books, called *III Ezra* (which coincides in part with "I Ezra") and *IV Ezra*, which is an apocalyptic book. In Article 4 of the Belgic Confession, which deals with the question of the canon, the book of Ezra is still referred to as the *first* book of Ezra.

If Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah originally formed one long book, we must rule out Ezra as the author. Instead we would have to attribute it to a later chronicler, a writer who drew heavily on the archives to develop his theme, namely, the importance of the temple services.

*I have returned to Jerusalem with
compassion; my house shall be
built in it (Zech. 1:16).*

3. The Rebuilding of the Temple

A leader from the house of David. Early in the book of Ezra we are told about the great trek from Babylon back to

Jerusalem, which Cyrus's edict had made possible. As we see from the receipt quoted in 1:9-11 (another document from an archive), the Jews were allowed to take the temple treasures with them as they returned to their homeland. These treasures would surely be needed, for the temple was to be rebuilt. Cyrus also called on everyone to assist this enterprise with gifts.

A prince of Judah named *Sheshbazzar* (elsewhere called *Zerubbabel*) was made the leader of the band of returning exiles (vs. 8). This factual detail gives us a better perspective on the events described in Ezra: the temple and "David" were once again linked, just as they had been throughout the book of Chronicles.

Zerubbabel, a leader from the house of David, steps into the foreground. Together with Jeshua, the high priest (also called Joshua), he was in charge of erecting the altar again on its original site. When this was accomplished, the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated, just as it had been when the original temple was dedicated. It was almost as though the days of Solomon had returned: Phoenicia again assisted in the building of the temple by sending cedars to Jerusalem by way of the port of Joppa.

In Ezra, just as in Chronicles, great emphasis is placed on temple music. The priests and the sons of Asaph formed an orchestra and a choir capable of singing responsively. "For his steadfast love endures for ever *toward Israel*," they sang. The people shouted their agreement, but the older ones could not help thinking of all the misery that had come over Israel in the past (ch. 3).

Samaritan opposition. The rebuilding did not advance without obstacles and difficulties. After the deportation of the kingdom of the ten tribes, the Assyrians had allowed foreigners to settle in the area of Samaria. Those foreigners mingled with the remaining Israelites and later with some Jews left behind in Canaan when Judah was deported. The

community arising from this mixture of peoples had a mixed religion. Certain Israelite traditions were maintained, but for the rest it looked very much like the form of worship that had already been underway at Bethel for a long time.

These “Samaritans” now proposed to join with the exiles who had returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple, but they were given an unequivocal answer: the Jews did not want their help. They would rather be without a temple than make the mistake of establishing a deformed worship center.

Rejecting this proposal for “ecumenical” cooperation had serious consequences. The building project stagnated. From Tabeel’s petition we find out why (ch. 4).

But we also read that King Darius, who had made it his policy to encourage the peoples under his rule to build temples to their gods, deliberately upheld the edict of Cyrus and allowed the rebuilding of the temple to continue. In the same way, the Romans later based their favorable policies toward the Jews on the attitude originally adopted by Julius Caesar, who was also the founder of an empire.

No compromise. Thanks to the encouraging prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, the Jews persevered. Zerubbabel, the governor (representing the tribe of Judah), and Jeshua, the high priest (representing the tribe of Levi), took the initiative in bringing the temple rebuilding, which had come to a halt, to a successful conclusion.

Offerings were brought when God’s “house” was dedicated. What strikes us about the offerings is that *twelve* he-goats were sacrificed as a sin offering for “all Israel” (6:17). Although only a small percentage of the Jews now lived in and around Jerusalem, they considered themselves to be the true, lawful continuation of God’s covenant people, the people He had led out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan.

This small band of Jews refused to compromise with the Samaritans—regardless of the consequences of their refusal. They knew that they represented “all Israel” and insisted on maintaining the *purity* of the service of the “God of Israel.”

This attitude certainly cannot be called sectarian. Didn’t Elijah make his dramatic offering on an altar of *twelve* stones? And didn’t Christ, who surely did not unite the entire Jewish people behind Him, choose *twelve* apostles? The “remnant” of which Isaiah spoke had—and still has—the right to call itself “all Israel.”

*Those who are far off shall come
and help to build the temple of
the LORD (Zech. 6:15).*

4. More Exiles Return to Jerusalem

Ezra’s second mission. Chapter 7 tells us of a later repatriation of Jewish exiles, which took place under the leadership of Ezra, a priest and scholar. At his own request, Ezra was commissioned by Artaxerxes to straighten things out in Jerusalem. Clearly there was confusion among the Jews in Palestine—also in religious respects. The Jews who had returned from exile were not the unified body forming a “buffer state” that the Persians had originally envisioned.

The king and his court, as well as the Jews who chose to remain in Babylon, gave Ezra a great deal of financial support and various gifts to take with him. The continuation of the temple services in Jerusalem was in the interest of the Persian state.

The Jews who remained in exile were intensely interested

in what went on in Jerusalem, although the appeals made to them were based on different arguments. The role of the Jews who chose to stay in Babylon could perhaps be compared to the attitude of American Jews toward the modern state of Israel. No doubt there were wealthy Jews in Babylon willing to give Ezra financial backing.

No military escort. Artaxerxes favored sending a lot of Jews along with Ezra. After a prayer service by the river Ahava, the large band of exiles left for Jerusalem. Because he trusted in “the hand of our God,” Ezra declined a military escort (8:22). Just as he expected, God heard their prayer and watched over them on the journey (see vs. 23 and 31).

Just as when the first exodus from Babylon took place (2:40), there was not much enthusiasm among the Levites. Ezra had to make a special effort to recruit some Levites to come along (8:15ff). Were they perhaps afraid of living under the dominance of the priests?

Old promises fulfilled. The exiles departed while Babylon was preparing for the new year’s feast. It took four months to reach Jerusalem. Those who went along—including women, children and slaves—numbered about 10,000.

The distance they covered on their journey—which can be compared to Abraham’s migration to the land of promise—was about 1500 kilometers. Thus they must have traveled about 15 kilometers per day. We should note that the sacrifices the exiles offered upon their arrival in Jerusalem included *twelve* he-goats as a sin offering for “all Israel” (8:35).

The remnant already in Jerusalem was strengthened by this new infusion of exiles. In this way the old promises were being fulfilled. The Lord still chose Zion (Zech. 1:17; 2:12; 3:2). The services in the house of God could be con-

tinued and even enjoyed the approval of the authorities (8:36). Surely the Ruler, the Messenger of the Covenant, would come into His temple! (Mal. 3:1).

Judah . . . has married the daughter of a foreign god (Mal. 2:11).

5. A Threat to the Covenant Community

Mixed marriages. The leaders in Jerusalem immediately informed Ezra how badly things were going. Many of the Jews, from the richest and most powerful to the humblest, had entered into mixed marriages with heathens. Thus the “holy seed” had been mixed with “the peoples of the lands.” The leaders of the people led the way in this sinful practice.

Of course there were some understandable reasons for this intermarriage. For one thing, a band of immigrants generally includes a preponderance of unmarried males. Moreover, by intermarrying with the population already living in Palestine, the Jews made themselves less liable to attack. They could even look to the people with whom they had allied themselves for protection.

Whatever one might say about this intermarriage, at least it was to the credit of the leaders in Jerusalem that they hid nothing from Ezra but called this sinful practice by its right name. It was *unfaithfulness*, a breach of the covenant—in short, *rebellion* on the part of Israel, Yahweh’s vassal, against its lawful Ruler.

A confession of sin. The news made a tremendous impact on Ezra. When Nehemiah faced a comparable

situation, he pulled out the hair of the people involved (Neh. 13:25), but Ezra pulled out his own hair. He sat alone, appalled at what he had heard, until the evening sacrifice, the time of prayer (9:3).

Ezra was approached by some people who trembled at the “God of Israel” because of this breach of contract. During the evening sacrifice, he stood before the people in his torn clothes (symbolizing mourning) and led them in a confession of sin. The Lord had given the Jews a “nail or tent-pin within his holy place” (9:8).

In this prayer of confession, Ezra declared his solidarity with the people, with “all Israel,” for he said: “*We* have forsaken thy commandments, which thou didst command by thy servants the prophets. Wouldst thou not be angry with us till thou wouldst consume us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape?” (9:10-11, 14). The “remnant” was in great danger!

As a result of Ezra’s penitence and the words he spoke, the Jews came together and declared by way of Shecaniah that they had sinned. They now wished to enter into a covenant with God in which one of the conditions would be that foreign wives as well as children born of mixed marriages would be sent away. Note that the people asked for this renewal of the covenant *on their own*, proposing to take definite steps to bring about a purification.

Ezra had the leaders of “all Israel” swear an oath. Within three days a general meeting was held at Jerusalem. It was decided—almost unanimously—that a commission would be established to look into the question of the mixed marriages. The commission did its work and submitted a report in which it was made clear that the sin had penetrated even the family of the high priest (ch. 10).

The isolation of the church. Ezra has not always been praised for following this course of action. He is accused of lacking the breadth of the New Testament vision of

humanity, of being an unrelenting legalist and Pharisee, and of not taking human feelings into account. The fact that the same evil came up again later (see Neh. 13:23ff) is taken as evidence that his purification of the “race” was ephemeral and had no lasting effect.

The first point to be made in response to these charges is that the issue here is not *racial* purity—unless we choose to speak of the “holy seed” (i.e. the church) as the “holy *race*.” The real issue is the maintenance of Israel’s religion, which required the isolation or separation of the church from other peoples.

Let’s not forget that there are some “mixed” marriages in the Bible: think of Ruth, the Moabite woman who married Boaz (see also Neh. 13:1ff). But the women married to the repatriated exiles clearly were not cut of the same cloth as Ruth: they refused to give up their idols. This cast the continued existence of “all Israel” into jeopardy and aroused God’s burning anger.

This historical situation should not be approached on the basis of a New Testament love commandment and the commission to preach the gospel to all the world. In this instance priority had to be given to love for the Lord and His Kingdom and future.

What Ezra did in this perilous situation—with the consent of the people—was to cut out a cancerous sore and thereby prepare the way for reformation. Of course the Samaritans became even more determined in their opposition, now that they had to do without their fifth column (see 4:7-23). This slowed down the rebuilding of the walls. Moreover, the covenant was later broken again, especially in the higher circles of the priests.

Does this enmity and apostasy constitute proof that Ezra was a mad legalist or a fanatic about racial purity? The *antithesis*, the struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, was at work here. The real issue was not the holiness of Israel itself but the holiness of the

covenant deeds of the Lord. Ezra made it clear in his prayer that to him the important thing, the thing on which everything depended, was God's plan for His people. How could the Israelites be God's vessel if they entered into marriage covenants with subjects of a strange god?

Nehemiah

We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts (Is. 26:1 NIV).

1. A Deliverer Sent to Jerusalem

Jerusalem's walls. The Redeemer was to come to Zion. But what was there left of Zion? A city in the ancient Near East had to have walls and fortifications to protect its inhabitants. Lamentations could still be sung over Jerusalem, for its walls lay in ruins.

Because of the activities of certain enemies of the Jews at the Persian court, the walls had still not been rebuilt, despite all the years that had passed since the first Jews returned from exile. The words of Isaiah were still as far from fulfillment as ever:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,
behold, I will set your stones in antimony,
and lay your foundations with sapphires (Is. 54:11).

A prominent exile. The book of Nehemiah now tells us how the Lord raised up a deliverer who was able to turn the holy city into a strong fortress. Nehemiah, the man chosen by God for this task, was a highly placed servant at the Persian court. He was not the only Jew in exile to succeed in gaining a prominent position at the court: think of Daniel and his three friends, or Zerubbabel, or Mordecai.

The Lord chose this high official, who was the king's cupbearer, to see to it that Jerusalem again became a city with walls. From his brother Hanani, Nehemiah heard about the desolate situation of Jerusalem. In prayer he poured out his heart to the Lord.

We should note that Nehemiah first considered the *threats* made by the Lord. But he was quick to mention the Lord's *promises* as well (as we find them in Deut. 30:1-5). Had the Lord's promises been fully realized? Apparently not, for complete restoration would involve building up the dwelling place of the name of the Lord, the place where the temple stood. How could the temple city be in ruins?

A second exodus. Nehemiah's words were shot through with terms from the law of Moses, especially words drawn from Deuteronomy. Such a phrase as "redeemed by thy great power and by thy strong hand" (1:10) reminds us of the language used by the Israelites in a much earlier era. (Remember that *redeemed* actually means *bought back*.)

Nehemiah knew that the return from exile really represented a second exodus—this time not from Egypt but from Babylon. The people had to cling to the Word of God, which is "very near" to them (Deut. 30:14). They had to repent and turn to the God of the covenant—hence Nehemiah's confession of sin. Yet, in all humility the people were to ask for a complete restoration of the temple city of the God of their fathers.

Nehemiah struggled to take hold of the Messianic inheritance, the breakthrough of salvation, the fulfillment

of the promise. We must bear this in mind as we read about his courageous undertaking. The story of Nehemiah is not an adventure that begins in the winter residence of a Persian king; it is an account of an *act of faith* by a child of Abraham.

Inspection by night. Nehemiah managed to persuade King Artaxerxes I to give him full authority—confirmed in the necessary papers—to rebuild the city where the graves of his fathers were located. In other words, he was to see to it that there was once again a strong wall around Jerusalem.

He left for Jerusalem with a military escort (2:9), something that Ezra had declined. We need not scratch our heads over this contrast: Nehemiah went to Jerusalem as a *state official*. Moreover, his escort would give him added leverage with any officials hostile to the Jews.

As soon as he arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah inspected the city by night and called a meeting of the Jewish authorities. He reported his findings to them and told them about the changes in the king's attitude. The "good hand" of God was visible in this. The decision to proceed with the rebuilding of the walls could be made at once.

Combat readiness. Of course this decision stirred up the bitter hatred of the leaders of the peoples living around Jerusalem.* They interpreted the rebuilding project as

*The first of these leaders to be mentioned in this context is Sanballat, of the town of Horonaim. His name also appears on a piece of papyrus inscribed in Aramaic and found in southern Egypt, on an island in the Nile. This piece of papyrus was part of the records of a Jewish military colony there. It appears that during the time of Darius II (424-404), a certain *Sinuballit* was governor of Samaria. This Sinuballit is probably the man called *Sanballat* in the book of Nehemiah. In 1962, certain documents

rebellion and started plotting and scheming against it. But Nehemiah was not about to give up because of the opposition he encountered. Boldly he declared: “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build; but you have *no portion or right or memorial* in Jerusalem” (2:20).

The first part of this statement is sometimes quoted when a church undertakes a new enterprise. There’s nothing wrong with quoting these words—as long as we don’t forget to take the last part seriously: the “holy seed” must always be in combat readiness, rejecting all alien sects and religions and separating itself from them.

In Nehemiah 3 we are given a summary of what was achieved. It’s a shame that we don’t have Bibles with maps printed throughout the text instead of just in the back. A map and some illustrations would help us understand this chapter better.

In 3:5 we read that the aristocrats of Tekoa (Amos’s birthplace) refused to cooperate—and even sabotaged the work. In those days, too, the middle class bore the brunt of supporting the church and did most of the work.

called the “Samaria papyri” were found in a cave north of Jericho. Among them is a document about the sale of a slave named *Nehemiah* to a Samaritan nobleman for 30 pieces of silver. Among the various scrolls—one of which is even sealed with seven seals—there is a fragment in which the sons of governor Sanballat are mentioned twice. Because these papyri go back to the fourth century B.C., we may take it that some later governors of Samaria also bore the name *Sanballat*. We can also conclude that there was trading in Jewish slaves in Samaria—even though the “Biblical” price of 30 pieces of silver for a slave was still used!

2. A Battle against Force and Cunning

Internal and external difficulties. The restoration of Jerusalem's walls did not proceed unhindered. First of all, there were external difficulties, as Sanballat and his cronies plotted and schemed. Moreover, the builders got discouraged (4:10). Nehemiah then took stern measures: all the workers were armed, and no one was allowed to take a holiday from the work. The workers took turns building and standing guard, half being assigned to each task. Using both the sword and the trowel, they built and watched. "The sword and the trowel" has since become a well-known motif in Christian literature.

There were also internal difficulties, namely, social problems and abuses. Grain was scarce. Certain Jews took over the mortgaged fields of their poorer brethren or forced them to pay exorbitant interest on loans. Some even dealt openly in Jewish slaves.

Money and taxes. In the law, taking interest on a loan to a fellow Israelite was forbidden. The law also raised the possibility of buying back the land of an impoverished brother, or his freedom (if he had become a slave). In the year of Jubilee, the impoverished Jews who had become slaves would be given their freedom again, and their land would be restored to them.

During the time of the exile, it was customary to buy back Jews who had become slaves, and Nehemiah may have introduced this custom in Jerusalem as well. Furthermore, he personally lent money to the needy and provided them with food, later forgiving the debt. Finally, unlike the other governors in the Persian empire, he did not impose heavy taxes—a policy especially beneficial to the wealthy.

Since Nehemiah's exemplary conduct provided him with

great moral authority, he was able to take some resolute steps in the face of the crisis: he called a meeting to discuss the problem, demanding that all debts be cancelled immediately. In the presence of the priests, an oath was sworn (ch. 5).

False prophecy. Sanballat and his allies were still trying to intimidate the Jews. They accused Nehemiah of harboring the ambition of becoming king, declaring that he had paid some prophets to declare him king. Nehemiah was then invited to confer with his accusers. He declined the invitation and avoided the trap, remarking that his accusers were the ones who had hired prophets, in the hope of undermining his position and blocking him in his mission.

What happened in the case of Shemaiah, the son of Delaiah, clearly illustrates the tactics of the opposition. Shemaiah used talk of a mysterious prophetic revelation to summon the governor, Nehemiah. That in itself was not so serious. But then he proposed a strange plan to Nehemiah: they would enter the temple together and close the door to escape an attack (presumably from Sanballat). Only the priests were allowed in the Holy Place of the temple, of course, but in such an emergency the law could surely be broken!

Fortunately, Nehemiah saw through this false prophecy. In the first place, his task as general was to stay at his post. "Should such a man as I flee?" he asked. Furthermore, he was forbidden from entering the Holy Place of the temple. "And what man such as I could go into the temple and live?" (6:11). Nehemiah was not a priest. He may even have been a eunuch. Therefore he was not to defile the temple by entering it unlawfully.

Nehemiah was able to survive this temptation because he looked to the pure light of the *unchangeable* Word of the Lord for guidance. The story of Shemaiah shows that

Nehemiah knew enough to check the word of the prophet against the standard of other prophecies. The fact that a man wore the mantle of a prophet was *no guarantee* that he spoke the pure prophetic Word. Even within our own stronghold, we must be on guard against the enemy (6:10-14).

Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps faith may enter in (Is. 26:2).

3. Admission of Guilt and Renewal of the Covenant

Completion of the wall. Despite all the opposition and obstacles, the wall was completed in the record time of 52 days. In the seventh chapter we are shown the steps Nehemiah took to look after the growing population. The religious festivals were observed faithfully.

On the first day of the seventh month, the Feast of Trumpets was celebrated, marking the beginning of the Jewish civil year. Normally this would have been an occasion for great joy, but this time it was not, for on that day Ezra and his helpers stood in the square before the Water Gate and began reading the law aloud to the people.

The reading of the law caused consternation, for an obvious reason: the people finally became aware how far they had departed from it. Just think of all the “social” evils, of which some examples are given in Nehemiah 5.

A day to rejoice. Conditions in Nehemiah’s time looked very much like conditions during the darkest days of the kings of Israel and Judah (see, for example, Amos 8:4-6; Mic. 2:1-2; Is. 5:8; Jer. 34:8ff). We can well understand

why consciences were disturbed when the heavy words of the law were again driven home to the people, who then saw clearly how much they deserved judgment. Would there be another deportation?

But the leaders, especially Nehemiah, urged the people not to lament. This was to be a feast day, a day to rejoice in what Yahweh had done for His people.

The Feast of Tabernacles was restored and celebrated in accordance with the instructions laid down by Moses. The law was read during this feast, which was one of the requirements in the Mosaic legislation (Deut. 31:11).

A day of repentance. On the twenty-fourth day of the same month (i.e. the seventh month), a national day of prayer and repentance was held. This gave the people an opportunity to express their guilt and sorrow in response to the reading of the law.

A beautiful prayer of Ezra was included in the worship service that day (9:5-37). In this prayer, all of covenant history passed in review: the covenant with the patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the legislation given at Sinai, the worship of the golden calf in Moses' absence, the journey through the wilderness, the conquest of the land of Canaan, the period of the judges and then the kings, the apostasy, and so forth. The repeated apostasy of the office-bearers and of the people themselves was emphasized. Finally, the prayer moved to the present situation and the pressures from the side of the Persian kings: "They have power also over our bodies and over our cattle at their pleasure, and we are in great distress" (vs. 37).

Ezra was pointing to all the sins that stood between the Lord and His people. Those sins were called to mind so that a covenant could be made "because of all this" (vs. 38). Representatives of all sectors of the population were to sign it. In future the people would live by the law of the

Lord, even when it came to such painful questions as “mixed marriage,” the observance of the sabbath and the year of Jubilee, and obligations toward the temple and the priests.

Dedication of the city wall. The book of Nehemiah lists the names of those who came to repopulate Jerusalem and also gives us a supplementary list of priests and Levites. The next matter to be taken up is the ceremony in which the city walls were dedicated. Jerusalem again had a Jewish population, and the covenant with the Lord had been renewed after the people confessed their sins. Therefore the new wall could now receive the attention it deserved.

All the people purified themselves. Walls and gates were purified as well, no doubt through sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood. Since the dedication would involve a procession, the path to be followed by the procession was purified with blood, just as when David brought the ark to Jerusalem.

Along the southern wall went one company, including a contingent of twelve priests, accompanied by a choir. A procession of twelve priests also went with the other company along the northern wall to the temple, complete with musical accompaniment. The festivities were concluded with sacrifices, and the prophecy of Zechariah was fulfilled: “The LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem” (Zech. 1:17).

4. A Cry for the Great Reformer

More mixed marriages. The Festival of Dedication was a fine note for Nehemiah to end his work on. He could not remain governor of Jerusalem forever. After spending

twelve years in the city of the graves of his fathers, he returned to the king he served.

Some years later he came back to Jerusalem, where he discovered that degeneration had set in again. The priest Eliashib had allowed Tobiah, an Ammonite friend of Sanballat, to occupy a room in the temple.

Nehemiah saw to it that the temple was cleansed. When he discovered that the people had not been faithful in giving to the temple—despite their promises when the covenant was renewed—he set them straight on that score too. Moreover, he had to do something about the desecration of the sabbath.

Mixed marriages again appeared to be the order of the day. As a result, there were children who could not speak the language of the Jews but did speak the language of the Philistines. Nehemiah saw clearly that the trouble in the church stemmed from the mixed marriages. This sort of thing had led to the downfall of the great king Solomon.

It even turned out that a grandson of the high priest had married into the family of Sanballat. Could such a man become a leader of Israel? Nehemiah drove him out. We learn from other sources that this grandson settled on Mount Gerizim, where he devoted himself to the temple service of the Samaritans.

Deformation and reformation. “Remember me, O my God, for good.” With these words the book of Nehemiah ends. It is a book that describes reformation, but also deformation. We sense that the deformation could not be entirely halted by any human force.

Nehemiah was not the Messiah either; he was not able to call a halt to the activities of satan. Yet, when he saw that his work had been undone, he did not shrink from proclaiming for the second time that reformation had to be undertaken and continued.

In the light of the coming of Christ, the struggle to

preserve Israel's isolation was highly meaningful—even if the Pharisees, through their excessive rigidity, did make a mockery of the law and the measures necessary to ensure that isolation. The *Redeemer* was to come to Zion!

Like Nehemiah, Christ would discover great deformation among His people. He, too, would be tempted. His opponents tried to make Him stumble and cause His mission to fail; but He recognized false prophecy for what it was.

Although Jerusalem cast Him out from its walls and gates as someone cursed, He laid the foundation for the New Jerusalem through His blood. Thereby He brought Nehemiah's partial and imperfect attempts at reformation to completion. "For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11). The impotence apparent in the priest Ezra and the non-priest Nehemiah is overcome in the power of the great Priest-King of the new people made up of twelve tribes.

Esther

1. Does the Book of Esther Belong in the Bible?

God's name. Why is the book of Esther, in which God's name isn't even mentioned, included in the Bible? This question is raised regularly by young people, who often want to know as well where Cain got his wife.

Now, it's true that God's name does not appear in the book of Esther. But would the appearance of His name guarantee that Esther—or any other book, for that matter—belongs in the Bible? Moreover, there are no prayers recorded in the book of Esther either.

One possible explanation for the absence of God's name was that this book was read aloud at the Feast of Purim, which was a boisterous occasion in the Jewish year. Perhaps it was thought wiser not to mention God's name in the midst of all the carousing.

The sinful human element. One could also raise the question whether the *content* of the book of Esther is such that it belongs in the canon. The book leads us into a strange world, namely, the Persian sphere with which we

are acquainted as the setting of the stories in the famous *Thousand and One Nights*. We hear about a harem, flattering eunuchs, intrigues at the court, and the whims and fancies of a king. Furthermore, the lives led by the book's two main characters are far from exemplary; Esther and Mordecai are not exactly heroes of faith. Yet a Jewish commentary on the book of Esther published in Amsterdam in 1902 (the Jewish year 5663) declares: "The chief characters in this book are true examples of piety." In a note in a seventeenth century Dutch annotated translation of the Bible, we also find words of praise for Esther and Mordecai: "On the one hand we are shown Queen Vashti, haughty and rebellious, and on the other hand Esther, who is humble, good-natured, subservient, and virtuous." Mordecai is described as an "example of a good and virtuous prince."

These words of praise go too far. As we examine the book of Esther, we will see that the sinful human element comes to the fore strongly—so strongly that we cannot help asking ourselves why this book about such indecisive, worldly people should be in the Bible at all. Is it there only to explain the joyousness of the Feast of Purim? Esther and Mordecai can hardly be examples for us or our children. Nor would we describe them as "types" or shadows of Christ. The book of Esther was not passed on to us because it contains models of conduct.

Why is it in the Bible, then? There is only one answer possible: it shows us how *the Lord* preserves His church despite our halfheartedness, our lack of commitment, and the power of the enemy. Are we to glory in our own deeds? Clearly not. If we must boast, we should boast about God's free grace.

2. The Church Conforms to the World

Suspicious about the Jews. The story of Esther takes place in Susa, where the Persian emperor Ahasuerus lived. In Ezra 4:6 we read that the Samaritans complained to him about the Jews and their desire to rebuild the temple. Plots against Jerusalem were already being hatched at the Persian court in the days of Cyrus, who had first given permission for the rebuilding. Keep this background in mind as you read the book of Esther.

The Jews lived at the edge of the Persian empire; their homeland bordered on Egypt, which was an enemy power. Opponents of the Jews could easily exploit the geographical facts to cast suspicion on the young settlement. Hadn't Israel allied itself with Egypt in the past? In any case, feelings at the Persian court were being stirred up against the Jews.

A beauty contest. In the prelude to the book of Esther, we are shown a glorious banquet hosted by the king. The king commands that Queen Vashti be brought in to show off her beauty to the men, who had already had far too much to drink. The queen refuses to display herself. The king then consults his advisors and decides that the crown must be taken from Vashti for her disobedience.

Because the decision is proclaimed as an irrevocable edict, the king has to find a substitute for Vashti, even though he longs for her again later. A beauty contest is arranged: Miss Universe is to become the new queen.

Among the women who entered the king's harem to participate in the beauty contest and be presented to the king was a *Jewish* girl. What was *she* doing in the harem of this Persian potentate? Didn't her presence conflict with the demands of the law? Wasn't she giving up her identity by entering the beauty contest?

Indeed she was. Her decision illustrated the spirit of *halfheartedness* to which the Jews who chose not to return to Jerusalem had fallen prey. They still maintained the “religion” of their fathers for their own use, but when they were away from home, they were not afraid to participate fully in whatever might be going on. Instead of going to Jerusalem, they moved from Babylon to Persia, where there was more money to be made.

Hadassah and Mordecai. The Jewish girl in question was Hadassah, whose name means *myrtle*. The branches of the myrtle, which always remain green, were used in bouquets at the Feast of Tabernacles (see Neh. 8:15; Is. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:8). Thus Hadassah’s name embodies an element of Jewish tradition.

Her parents died young, so she was raised by her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai’s name goes back not to the festival traditions of the Israelites but to heathendom; it is derived from *Marduk*, the name of the chief Babylonian god! Here we see the spirit of adaptation and accommodation at work, Mordecai was a chameleon, a “quick change artist”!

The fairy-tale atmosphere of this book should not lead us to regard Hadassah’s life as a rags-to-riches story: “Once I was a nobody, but now I am queen of Persia!” Her foster father Mordecai was not exactly a man to look up to. He was a Benjaminite of the line of Saul. Part of Saul’s family had been kept at the court by David. When Nebuchadnezzar carried off the aristocracy of Judah together with King Jehoiachin in the first deportation, the family of Mordecai (and, of course, of Hadassah) was included.

Mordecai apparently thrived in exile. The later elevation of Jehoiachin at the Babylonian court must have brought with it certain benefits for the other Jewish aristocrats. Mordecai, at any rate, was able to gain a prominent position at the Persian court: we read that he sat “at the king’s gate” (2:21; 3:2ff).

Mordecai did not reveal his *identity*. No doubt people took him for a Babylonian. His religion, of course, was a “private matter.” And he instructed Hadassah not to let anyone know about her “people or kindred” either (2:10). Her Persian name (*Esther*) means *a star*. Thus the story also has something of a Hollywood flavor.

The LORD is at war with Amalek generation after generation (Ex. 17:16 NEB).

3. The Threat to Jewish Existence

Israel’s ancient enemy. God’s miracles create light in the darkness. Even people like Esther and Mordecai, who had become worldly and no longer sought His kingship, could be used in the struggle against the church’s ancient enemy, who had some clever moves prepared. But first it was the Lord’s move, and He made Esther queen! Moreover, Mordecai discovered a conspiracy against the king as he was seated “at the king’s gate.”

Now it was satan’s turn. A certain Haman, an Agagite, became the king’s first minister. Since he is called an “Agagite,” we may take it that he was a descendant of the accursed people who attacked Israel so fiercely during the journey through the wilderness on the way to the promised land (see Ex. 17:8-16; Deut. 25:17; Num. 24:7; I Sam. 15; II Sam. 1:1-16; I Chron. 4:43). The battle, then, would be fought against Amalek, Israel’s ancient enemy.

Weapons of the flesh. This elevation of “Agag” angered Mordecai and awakened him to his responsibility. He felt impelled to break with his halfheartedness and divided way of life. He had to show his true colors. Fortunately, he was

not so far removed from the Jewish traditions that they no longer had any effect on him.

Prince Mordecai was not blinded by Haman's rising sun. Yet this descendant of Saul entered the battle with the weapons of the flesh. He let the others at the court know that he was a Jew and refused to honor Haman by bowing down to him (3:1ff).

The Septuagint (i.e. the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in ancient times) includes certain appendixes to Esther. This apocryphal material, which is interspersed through the book of Esther as printed in Roman Catholic Bibles, gives us a more pious portrait of Esther and Mordecai than we find in the Bible itself. It places a prayer on Mordecai's lips in which he says that it was not stubbornness or pride that made him refuse to honor Haman. If it would do Israel any good, he was even prepared to kiss Haman's feet. He acted out of pious motives, for he wished to worship God alone.

That's what we read in the Apocrypha. Yet, what Mordecai actually refused Haman was not worship but a simple gesture of respect. He sabotaged court protocol and in the process jeopardized the position of his people.

Israel's offensive calling. After it became known at the court what Mordecai was up to, something of the "old-time religion" seems to have been awakened in Haman as well. We saw earlier that the Jews had certain enemies at the court. Haman now seized on the offensive behavior of Mordecai as an opportunity to settle the issue of the Jews throughout the empire once and for all by killing them.

It was decided by casting lots (*purim*) on which day the slaughter of the Jews would take place. A date about a year away was chosen. From the king Haman received a charter to play the role of Eichmann. He was willing to give up a good proportion of his goods and property to obtain this charter, but the king declined his offer of payment.

The reason Haman gave for his proposal is striking. It should have caused all the Jews in exile who followed the path of adaptation, assimilation and integration to feel deeply ashamed:

There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them (3:8).

In these words we hear an echo of all the complaints about the apartness and separation of Israel. At the same time, the *task* and *calling* of the holy seed are described. What offended Haman was Israel's Messianic calling to maintain its uniqueness as the people of Yahweh. Therefore his attack was in essence anti-Christian; it was satan's *countermove*!

Mordecai's request. Mordecai, who had finally revealed his identity and was the immediate cause of the deadly peril threatening himself and his people, sprang into action. The king had given ear to Haman's plan and had allowed the edict about the annihilation of the Jews to be proclaimed. There was to be a pogrom, and it would look all the more attractive because those who participated would be rewarded with the booty.

Mordecai now made it public that he was a *Jew*. He even appeared at the king's gate dressed in mourning (4:1ff). The purpose behind his course of action is clear: he wanted Esther to reveal her identity too. He managed to get a copy of the king's edict about the slaughter of the Jews into her hands. With the help of the eunuch Hathach, she found out what was behind Haman's plan. Mordecai then asked her to intercede with the king on behalf of her people.

Esther's reluctance. At first Esther refused to get involved. She would not go into mourning with her cousin, nor would she agree to intervene in the king's business by taking up the matter with him. After some more argument, however, she finally heeded Mordecai's appeal: "For if you keep silence at *such a time as this*, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for *such a time as this*?" (4:14).

It is true that *God's name* is not mentioned in this appeal. (The apocryphal prayer of Esther, in which she declares that she takes no pleasure in her lofty position and does not enjoy eating at the royal table or drinking the special wines, must be regarded as a falsified addition to the story.) Yet, the point to remember is that the Kingdom of God forms the background to this conversation over the harem wall.

When Mordecai spoke of "such a time as this," he meant a period which the Lord Himself had made a critical hour for His people. "To be or not to be"—that was the question for Israel. God had so arranged things that Esther could now step forward to speak up for her people.

No sinless mediator. Esther asked the Jewish community to fast for three days before she made her dangerous approach to the king. This shows that she had not let go of the church but joined in the old confession: "Your people shall be my people." Yet her fatalistic remark "If I perish, I perish" is hardly what we are accustomed to hearing in church. We would rather have heard her say, "Our help is in the name of the Lord."

We see, then, that Esther is not a sinless mediator either. Her success is a matter of pure grace on the Lord's part. She wins the favor of the king when she approaches him. Yet she does not ask him immediately to help her people in their hour of peril. Instead she invites the king and Haman

to dinner. At the dinner she does not reveal what she is after either but postpones her appeal to the king until the next evening, when the king and Haman were to come to dinner again.

Haman's gallows. Meanwhile, satan made another move. Haman, at the instigation of his arrogant family, decided to have Mordecai hanged on a high gallows even before the day on which the Jews were to be slaughtered.

The Lord responded with a countermove. Because sleep eluded the king, he had the chronicles of the empire read to him and was reminded of Mordecai's discovery of the plot against his life. When he found out that Mordecai had never been rewarded for this good deed, he decided to make up this oversight. The next day Haman was ordered to see to it that special honors were conferred on Mordecai.

Now it was Haman's turn to mourn. He returned home deeply disappointed. And when he went to dine with the king and queen again, the outcome was that he himself was hanged on the gallows he had constructed for Mordecai, his archenemy.

Mordecai's elevation. Esther knew the text of the king's edict about the Jews from memory. During the fateful dinner, she chose her words with great care: "For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated" (7:4; compare 3:13). She then went on to warn the king what a great loss he would suffer if the Jews were killed. Her relation to the king and the dangers of upsetting the economic balance were both factors in the king's mind as he weighed her words. The result was that he decided in her favor.

Haman was hanged, and Mordecai became the Keeper of the Great Seal. Another audience with the king requested by Esther led to an edict that did not revoke the original one about the slaughter of the Jews but did have

the effect of undoing it. (The original decree, of course, could not be revoked.) The Jews would be allowed to defend themselves against their enemies when the fateful day came. Mordecai, who was a capable financier and organizer, was entrusted with the task of seeing to it that everything turned out well for the Jews on that day. His elevation was an occasion for great rejoicing among the Jews. There were even a number of pagans who declared themselves Jews (8:15-17).

The Feast of Purim. When the fateful day finally arrived, it was made clear to all that the Jews had the permission of the Persian government to take revenge against their enemies. At Esther's request, they were even given an extra day to settle scores in Susa.

This story of revenge on the part of the Jews should not give rise to anti-Semitic thoughts and feelings, even if the Biblical account reveals just how bloodthirsty these Jews were. Note that the Jews did not seize the property and goods of their enemies, which says a good deal about them, since they are a people with a reputation for being materialistic. Their restraint in this respect makes it clear that the measures they took when given the opportunity were for defensive purposes only.

Mordecai, who had been elevated by the king to a high position, also introduced the Feast of Purim. The purpose of this feast was to celebrate and commemorate the deliverance of the Jews from the hand of Haman. It was never intended as a *temple* feast. It was celebrated in the *synagogue* by the reading of the book of Esther and within the *family circle* by special meals and the exchange of gifts. The day before this feast was always a day of fasting.

In practice this feast became something between a Christmas festival and a carnival. On this holiday there were more echoes of nationalism (complete with cries of "Hang Haman!") than words of humble gratitude for all

the Lord did for His people. In an eighteenth century book we are told that when the name *Haman* was mentioned as the book of Esther was being read in the synagogue, “the children and women and even the older men would strike the benches with hammers, stones and other instruments until there was a great din. For this occasion they would be provided with two stones, one of which had the name *Haman* inscribed on it. The stones would be knocked together so often that eventually the name would no longer be legible.”*

Amalek was the first of the nations, but in the end he shall come to destruction (Num. 24:20).

4. Partial Deliverance Pointing to Complete Deliverance

The preservation of the church. The degeneration and superficiality connected with the book of Esther should help us see how this book must *not* be interpreted. The meaning of the deliverance of the Jews from Haman’s hand was certainly not an occasion for man to celebrate his own triumph. Preserving the purity of the race was not the issue here: what had to be preserved was the *church*. The real issue was God’s wondrous work of redemption.

The fact that the Feast of Purim was not a temple feast, and that Mordecai, with all his influence, was not able to bring about the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem—or did not care to—tells us a great deal. In this case the deliverance was partial. It was achieved through weak members of the covenant people, two cousins who had traveled a long way down the road of conformity to the

*J. Buxtorf, *Schoole der Jooden* (Leiden, 1702), p. 431.

world—Esther, the “star” in the harem of a Persian king, and Mordecai, who felt too much at home at the heathen court. All the same, the Lord was willing to use them in grace to frustrate an attack on Israel, an attack directed against Israel’s apartness and isolation, which Israel’s enemies had used as the basis for a false accusation of revolution (3:8; see also Ezra 4:12; Neh. 2:19; Luke 23:2; Acts 16:21; 17:7).

A living temple. This partial deliverance, which represents another battle lost by the ancient serpent, does point the way to the complete deliverance achieved through Jesus Christ, who not only saves His people from the wrath of their enemies but also gives them new hearts, so that they can make the most of the peace bestowed on them. *He* is the complete Intercessor. He is deeply concerned about God’s temple and builds up His chosen ones to form a living temple.

Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah was able to correct the inadequate work of Mordecai or bring it to completion. Yet Christ is the Star out of Jacob who will crush Agag, as a wise man from the East (i.e. Balaam) once prophesied (see Num. 24:17).

The message the book of Esther leaves with us, then, is not one of carnival fun. Rather, it is a message that should lead us to confess our gratitude, for we see that God is still gathering His 7000, His 144,000. Satan loses the match, as all the successors of Haman go down to defeat.

But the accommodating attitude of a church that has “arrived,” a church that tries to turn religion into a private matter, will also have to come to an end. Christ’s deliverance, after all, is complete. “Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle” (Is. 55:13).

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