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## **SEVEN ESSAYS ON PROPHECY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although we know prophecy exists, it is a very challenging concept to understand because it is hard to define exactly what it is or how it works. Yet, abstract and obscure as it may be, we are not completely in the dark. The Bible is not only the source of our limited knowledge about prophecy, but first and foremost, it is the *fruit* of prophecy. Therefore, one thing we know for certain is that prophecy is the channel through which the Divine and Eternal communicates with earthly mortals.

We usually associate prophecy with the foretelling of future events. This aspect indeed represents a considerable part of the Biblical prophetic literature, but revelation of the future is not a goal in and of itself. Unlike the ancient practices of future telling, which the Bible explicitly forbids, the prophets' vision of the future has an ethical or moral goal as its primary focus.

Their prophecies go hand in hand with God's guidance (a fitting translation for the word "Torah"), and with the demand put before mankind "*Lataken olam bemalcut Shaddai*," to mend the world in the Almighty's Kingdom. The late Professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz once made the following sharp observation about the nature of prophecy: "The prophets did not foresee what *will* be, but what *ought* to be." This statement does not mean that prophecy was merely some kind of wishful thinking, but rather to emphasize (using Middle Eastern style rhetorical exaggeration) the primary purpose of prophecy.<sup>1</sup>

The prophets set before us a vision of a world in which mankind has a full awareness of God's calling, in which true justice reigns, and in which there is no more human suffering. This vision of utopia is not only given to be a source of consolation and hope; it is also a blue print for conducting a life of faith here and now. The liberty granted to the people of Israel on their exodus from slavery requires taking responsibility for one another. Man's freedom of choice is the backbone of prophecy and of Jesus' call for repentance.

Therefore, prophecy is not a profession, but a state of mind. The prophetic mind sees clearly what the will of God is and knows how to put it into words which touch people and motivate them to do the right thing.

The Spanish celebrity, Don Quixote, is an outstanding example of the prophet's true character: a dreamer whose eyes are constantly lifted up to heaven and who sticks to his ideals no matter what, even though his ideals are profaned by those who mock his "lunacy." In truth, even Sancho, his "right hand man," often pays the lip service of loyalty to his master's voice, but due to his worldly aspirations and human weaknesses, he fails time and time again to stand up to those ideals. If, as some literary critics suggest, Don Quixote is in some way a reflection of the Messiah, then Sancho Panza may well be an amusing image of Simon Peter, who represents each one of us, enthusiastic and compromising.

We ridicule the enlightened knight as he charges at the windmills he things are demons. In fact, the joke is on us because there really are demons turning the wheels behind the scene, but only he can see them. This was the lot of all of God's true prophets who were "ahead of their time." They were despised and rejected, beaten and martyred, only to have their tombstones sanctified by the descendents of their persecutors, who realized, too late, the true value of their message. Like the prophets who preceded Him, the Savior, "The Mighty One of Jacob" (Is. 49:26), is indeed the ultimate archetype of this knightly "Don Quixotic" adventure. In light of this particular viewpoint, it is our hope that the seven perspectives (i.e., UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY, PROPHETIC VISION, TO BE OR NOT TO BE, A NEW [OLD] FOUNDATION, JONAH AND PROPHECY, MODERN DAY PROPHETS, THE PROPHET AS A WATCHMAN) on the phenomena of Biblical prophecy contained in these essays will not only enrich our theoretical knowledge of this important spiritual matter, but also draw us closer to the essence of the prophetic vision itself, which is as fresh and relevant today as it ever was.

#### Essay One

### **UNDERSTANDING PROPHECY**

How many times have we looked back on a situation or event in our lives and said, "If only I had known"? How many times have we wished for the opportunity to go back and do something again? Some of us do not have good eyesight, but we all have perfect "20/20" hindsight, even with one eye. We look back from the perspective of experience or greater understanding; smack ourselves on the forehead, and say, "I wish I had known." In order to better understand this important Biblical genre, we shall attempt an examination of a few key aspects of prophecy: the fact that most prophets spoke mainly for their own time, the prophetic identity, the prophetic cycle, the difference between conditional and unconditional prophecies, and how one can know that a prophecy has been fulfilled.

First, let us consider a verse that is the foundation for understanding the prophetic worldview. *"For the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets"* (Amos 3:7). This means that everything God does has been revealed to His servants the prophets. It is good to know that God has revealed His plan and the map of history to the prophets. If we study them, we can know where we are on the map and how to deal with current and future events, like the end of the world or the resurrection from the dead.

In direct opposition to what Amos said, the scientific worldview does not consider prophecy to be valid, and a scientist who reads a prophetic text will say that the "prophecy" was actually written after the event happened. Essentially, the basis of modern Biblical criticism is the lack of faith in a Creator God who is actively involved in the affairs of man. This is why in talking about the second part of Isaiah, scientific criticism says that it was written from the exile after the destruction of the First Temple. The scientific mind cannot handle the idea that someone could possibly know what would happen in the future or that there is "Someone" Who plans and has control over history. There is no greater proof of the validity of Biblical prophecy than the existence of the Jewish people and the restoration of Israel after two thousand years of exile.

Prophecy is for the people who first heard it as well as for us. If a person knows there will be a rainstorm tomorrow, he will buy an umbrella today. The goal of the prophets of Israel was not to foretell the future. Many believers today look upon the prophets as fortune tellers or soothsayers whose job was to tell the future. The truth is that the most important task of the prophets was to influence the people and situations of their own day. The goal of prophecy

was to persuade, repair, warn, and encourage people in the present. The message of every prophet was closely bound up with the point of time in history at which it was delivered.

In order to understand who the prophets were, we need to remember that there were two different kinds. The first kind was a popular prophet. People would come to him and ask questions, and he would take gifts or money for his services. This kind of prophet did not work without reward, as we learn from stories about Samuel. People rewarded the man of God for his services to them. At times the popular prophets used tools to provoke ecstasy or a passion. The “popular prophets” did not write their prophecies but rather spoke the prophecies to those who demanded the answer.

In ancient times, these popular prophets were called “seers.” Every king had seers in his court who would prophesy and advise them. Ahab had 450 prophets of Baal who ate at his table. He had other prophets in his court who were prophets of God, like Micaiah the son of Imlah, who prophesied Ahab’s death in 1 Kings 22. There were also “schools of the prophets,” but all these prophets were considered “seers” who served the people. If the people needed to know where their lost donkeys were, they could ask a prophet, as Saul did in 1 Samuel 9. The popular prophets served the people. They were partly politicians and partly merchants, but they served the people and often heard from God and gave true prophecies.

Elijah was the border between the “seers” or “popular prophets” and what is considered to be a “classical prophet” – the second kind of prophet. Classical prophecy is foundationally different from the prophecy of “men of God” like Samuel. The classical prophets did not really want to be prophets and at times even denied being prophets. Amos said: *“I am neither a prophet nor a son of a prophet”* (7:14). The classical prophets spoke the Word of God to people who, for the most part, did not want to hear it. People thought they were crazy or evil to speak against the Kings, the government, and sins of the people. Classical prophets wrote down their words, and now we have the books of Isaiah, Amos, Joel, Micah, etc. Often the prophets were simply rejected by the people and Kings of Israel and Judah, but at other times they were imprisoned, shunned for years, and even beaten and cast into wells. Isaiah spent three years of his life during which no one except his wife and children talked to him.

According to Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher,

Prophecy is the highest state to which a human being can attain. It requires perfect wisdom and moral behavior as well as perfect imagination. When the senses are at rest, the imagination gives rise to true dreams, including prophetic visions . . . The difference in the degrees of prophecy is due to the difference in degrees of reason, imagination, and ethical conduct of the various prophets.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Maimonides thought that men could develop into prophets by developing their moral, ethical, and imaginative features and living a quiet, contemplative life. Man makes himself ready to receive from God, and then God reveals Himself to man.

Here are some characteristics of the classical prophets. First, the spirit of God had to rest upon them; in fact, they were called to prophesy by God. Secondly, God’s revelation and the truth had to be more important to the prophet than his popularity among human beings, as it says in Isaiah 8:11-13:

*For the Lord spoke thus to me with His strong hand upon me and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, "Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of Hosts, Him you shall regard as holy. Let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread."*

The classical prophet had to have an active social awareness, care for the poor, and care for widows and orphans. They prioritized morality over the political and religious establishment. Professor Y. Kaufman named this phenomena "The Primacy of Morality." This idea means that God cares much more about relationships than about religious practices and services of the Temple. This was true for both the prophets of Israel and Yeshua Himself, Who clearly held morality to be a matter of the highest importance. The prophet Micah places justice on the highest ethical level, saying, "He has told you O man what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" Similarly, Hosea 4:1-3 declares,

*. . . The Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of this land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery. They break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish . . .*

In addition to there being two kinds of prophets, there are two kinds of prophecy. One kind warns of doom; the other promises prosperity, blessing, restoration, and faithfulness. The prophecies of hope and blessing from God are actually given unconditionally as an expression of His grace and loving-kindness. The prophecies of doom are always conditional, just as Jonah's prophecy over Nineveh was conditional, meaning that when Nineveh repented, the city did not fail. All prophecies of doom and destruction are first and foremost given to make the people realize their sins and repent. If there is repentance, then there is no need for punishment. If someone says, "Do not go to such and such a place because a snake does not need to bite you," and you do not go to that place, then the snake does not need to bite you. This is an important concept because a huge portion of the Christian world is depending on all the terrible things in the Book of Revelation and the other prophecies to happen. They are planning for Jerusalem to go up in flames and for two thirds of the city's population to be killed and for the Antichrist to sit in the rebuilt Temple. However, if there is repentance and acceptance of God's grace, these things do not have to happen. This is why there must be concentration on doing God's will, being obedient and faithful – reaching out to Israel and the world with the Good News.

Both conditional and unconditional prophecies have a life cycle. From the moment the prophet speaks, the prophecy is born, and the life cycle of the prophecy is when it is fulfilled. If the words of the prophet are really from God, all that he promised will happen, and when everything is fulfilled, the prophetic cycle is concluded. A prophet whose words do not come true is a false prophet. There is no place for mistakes when a person says, "I heard from God, and this is what God said . . ." He is either a true or false prophet.

The prophetic cycle extends from the moment that the prophet says, "This is what will happen if you continue doing such and such or if you do not do such and such" to the moment the prophecy comes to pass. The Bible has both short and long prophetic cycles. Some of these cycles are thousands of years old, and we are still living in the midst of them. The prophetic

cycle about the return of Israel to Zion is from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, from Isaiah and Jeremiah's time; even beforehand – in fact, it is still being fulfilled at the writing of this essay. These prophets never gave it a specific time frame, but they did give signs that we can observe and follow today. Yeshua said, "When you see the fig tree blossom, you know that the end is near." This is a kind of prophecy that gives no time frame until the end of the cycle, but it does provide a sign. Some prophecies can come to pass within several hours, but others may take many years. Most of us love the short prophetic cycles because we can immediately see the results.

One of the shortest prophetic cycles is found in 2 Kings 7. It was fulfilled in one 24 hour period, and everyone who heard the prophet proclaim the Word of God also saw its fulfillment. The background of this story takes place during the six month Syrian siege of Samaria. The city of Samaria was totally alone on a hill. All around the city extended only fields – a beautiful and strategic spot on the road between Jerusalem and the Galilee. Think about how terrible a six month siege would have been without freezers, refrigerators, or agriculture. Even with our refrigerators and trucks, being under siege for six months without the ability to farm, would find us in serious trouble. Back in those days, the situation was even worse. People were dying from hunger. The situation got so bad that two mothers who had just given birth decided to cook and eat their babies. When the king heard about this terrible crime, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and mourned. Then, the situation began to improve.

*But Elisha said, "Hear the word of the Lord; thus says the Lord. 'Tomorrow about this time a seah of four shall be sold for a shekel and two seahs of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria.'" Then the captain on whose hand the king leaned said to the man of God, "If the Lord Himself should make windows in heaven, could this thing be?" But he said, "You shall see it with your eyes, but you shall not eat of it." (2 Kings 7:1-2)*

This situation was terrible. According to chapter 6, the head of a donkey cost 80 shekels in the market, and there is nothing to eat on a donkey's head. Then suddenly Elisha said, "Do not worry; tomorrow there will be plenty of food, and it will be cheap." In complete disbelief, one of the generals laughed at him and said, "Do you think God is going to open the windows of heaven?" Elisha answered him, "You will see this happen, but you will not eat or enjoy it."

In verse 3 the scene switches to four lepers sitting at the gate of Samaria. They decided that with the hunger and the siege, they would die no matter what happened, so they had nothing to lose by walking to the camp of the Syrians. However, when they got to the camp all the soldiers were gone because God had miraculously caused the Syrians to become confused and think that the Egyptian army was coming to attack them. They ran away for their lives. When the lepers got to the camp and did not find anyone, they entered one of the tents; they ate, drank, took money and clothes. They filled up their pockets and then realized, "*We are not doing what is right because today is **a day of good news**. Tomorrow everyone will find out, and we will be in trouble.*" So they decided to go back to Samaria and tell the rest of the starving city the good news.

By the morning, the entire city knew. They opened the gates, and everyone ran outside to take food and spoils from the Syrian camp. That same general who mocked Elisha's prophecy got trampled in the gate and died. Within 24 hours, he saw the prophecy come to pass, but he did not get to enjoy its benefits, just as Elisha had said.

Clearly, one of the advantages to a short prophetic cycle is that everyone can see it, but if it continues for thousands of years like the prophecy about the return of the exiles to Israel, it is hard to see and deal with it. In real life in the exile, and even in real life in the exile of today's state of Israel, there is suffering, and it is hard to see how these prophecies will ever come to pass. There is a song by a popular Israeli singer that says, "The Messiah does not come and does not even call." Because of this difficulty it is good to sometimes examine the short prophetic cycles and learn about the crucial principles involved in prophetic fulfillment.

One difficulty with a long prophetic cycle is that it is harder to know when the prophecy has been fulfilled. In fact, about half of the prophecies in the Word of God have already been fulfilled. When we read those prophecies, we can point to a clear historical event that happened and say this event was what the prophet was talking about. However, there are many other prophecies which have no clear fulfillment indicated in the Scripture.

Consider two ways of determining if a prophecy has already been fulfilled: First, sometimes the inspired Scriptures indicate that a particular event fulfilled a particular prophecy. For example, in 1 Kings 13:2, a man of God from Judah prophesied against Jereboam and his pagan altar at Bethel saying, "*O altar, altar, thus says the Lord: 'Behold, a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.'*"

2 Kings 23:25 records the fulfillment of this prophecy.

*Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jereboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, that altar with the high place, he pulled down and burned, reducing it to dust. He also burned the Asherah. And as Josiah turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount. And he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord that the man of God had proclaimed, who had predicted these things.*

Matthew 21's record of Yeshua's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey also explicitly says that these things happened to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, which says, "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is He, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*"

Secondly, we can know that a prophecy has been fulfilled after the historical event has taken place and all the indications show that this is what the prophet predicted. We can only approach this problem from our point of view, as it is presented by history. It would have been easier if the Word of God had simply catalogued the prophecies into a list of those that have been fulfilled and those that will be fulfilled in the future. It also would have been easier if the prophets had listed dates instead of using symbols, but this is not the case. Instead the Lord left it up to us to study history in order to understand these prophecies. We must understand that the predictions of the prophets were only a small part of what Israel experienced in her day to day dealings with God. In short, God's dealings with Israel demanded faith, not calculation. Dr. James E. Priest wrote,

The great Rabbi Maimonides, who was also physician for the Islamic Khalif in Cordoba, Spain, actually condemned those who spend their time calculating the end times and coming of the Messiah. This is the reason why delay of the

fulfillment of certain promises in the long prophetic cycles (like the delay of the coming of the Messiah), did not develop into a deep crisis. Israel knew well enough that God was the Master, and the prophets were servants of His words.

Of course, waiting for a long prophetic cycle to come to its conclusion was not always easy, even for those living in the days of the prophets. Sometimes, even the prophets themselves grew tired of waiting, as Jeremiah 15:16-18 says,

*Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your Name, oh Lord, God of Hosts. I did not sit in the company of the revelers, not did I rejoice. I sat alone because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?*

The people of Israel also got tired of waiting, as Ezekiel 12:22 recounts a popular proverb circulated among the people of his day, *"The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing."* The prophets wanted to see immediate results and a clear fulfillment of their words, but such did not always happen. The object of their prophecies was not for personal vindication, but establishment of the knowledge of God, ". . . *That they may know I am the Lord . . .*" The demonstration of saving acts in history is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, leading to the acknowledgement and worship of God.

In conclusion of this first essay, the prophet spoke by the power of God first and primarily for the people who heard them in their own time. They were willing to suffer disgrace at the hands of their fellow citizens for the sake of telling them the truth and thus seeing them saved. The prophecies that have been preserved in the Bible have value even after they were fulfilled because through them we can learn how God works in our own history. In some cases, one can detach prophecy from its historical setting and give it a personal interpretation which might be valuable to strengthen our faith or give us hope, but this method should not be used too much; nor should it be used as a sectarian tool. We have great expectations for the future, and we look forward to those days when our faith in Yeshua will be universally known. Let us heed the prophetic call for repentance, waiting with hope and faith for the soon return of Yeshua in the clouds.

## Essay Two

### **PROPHETIC VISION**

What is the purpose of Biblical prophecy? The answer of many Christians would probably be, "to tell us what is going to happen at the end of the world." Although there are prophecies that talk about God overturning the present earthly order, or ending the process of history to judge creation, this is not the exclusive purpose of Biblical prophets. Equally erroneous is the common assumption of many Messianic Jews that the prophets mainly gave a checklist of Messianic characteristics or circumstances so His identity can be confirmed, convincing others to believe in Yeshua. Undoubtedly, the prophets wrote extensively about the Messiah, but since this was not a primary goal during their careers, it should not be our only use of prophetic material. Rather, the incredible diversity found in the *Nevi'im* ("Prophets"), demands that we approach each text with an awareness of its genre and purpose.

It must be noted that many prophetic books do not fit the traditional Christian understanding of "prophecy. The category of *Nevi'im* includes both the "historical" books of Joshua, Judges,

Samuel, and Kings, as well as the classical prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve "Minor" Prophets. (Jews place the book of Daniel into the *Ketuvim* "Writings"). The presence of "historical" books in the Prophets, shows that Biblical prophets were concerned about the present and future, as well as the past. Not all prophets were historians, but history and prophecy are intimately connected. One can learn a great deal about future potential by studying the past, and the prophets certainly would have agreed with the adage, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Both the narrative books of history and the more poetic classical prophets appealed to Israel to change their ways because of the greatness of God and His deeds and because of the unfulfilled ideals of peace and justice in society.

The Biblical prophets were a mix of historians, modern social critics, and dreamers who envisioned a better future. This mix of past, present and future without firm borders is part of what makes interpreting their writings challenging. They also used an astonishing variety of prophetic methods to achieve their goals. Some pre-exilic prophetic genres include historical accounts, dramatic court room scenes, oracles of woe, stern words of condemnation, calls for repentance and reconciliation, poetic laments, visions of eschatological hope for the "End of Days," and Messianic prophecy.

In order to study the method and message of each of these genres individually, let us examine Isaiah 1:1-2:5, which as an introduction to the entire book, contains short but dramatic examples of many of these prophetic methods. Perhaps the most well known Biblical prophet, Isaiah, was an 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE court prophet in Judah under kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah; the words of his book form one of the most powerful and beautiful literary creations of the ancient world. He mixed past, present, and future using many prophetic techniques and an artistic hand.

Isaiah 1:1-3 begins with these words:

*The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O Heavens, and give ear O Earth, for the Lord has spoken. "Children I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."*

Verse 1 mentions all four kings to indicate that this opening passage is a summary of Isaiah and its themes will be repeated throughout the book. This section is a courtroom scene in which God acts as prosecutor against the accused (Israel) and offers evidence to "Heaven" and "Earth;" which He calls as witnesses. The prophet's words, "*Hear O Heavens and give ear O Earth,*" mimic Moses' words in the song of Deuteronomy 32:1: "*Give ear O heavens, and I will speak; Listen O earth to the words of my mouth.*" Both passages are lawsuits in which God calls the ever-present heavens and earth (from which we can hide nothing, just as we can hide nothing from Him) to corroborate his accusations.

These verses also contain a Messianic hint discernable in the words "hear" and "understand." Although one of Israel's primary duties as God's people is to hear His words and understand who He is, all too often this calling to bring an understanding of God to the world was not successfully accomplished. In the Messianic Servant Song of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, these words appear, ". . . So he will sprinkle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths because of him, for

*that which has not been told to them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand."*

Combining these verses shows that no matter how much Israel has heard or the nations have not heard about God, it is only the sight and experience of the Messiah that will cause anyone to truly understand Him.

Negatively comparing an animal's obedience to its master or the regularity of the stars, seasons, rains, and other natural elements is a common feature of prophetic material. By saying, "Even a donkey is smarter than you," this verse is meant to embarrass the people with their own behavior and inspire hard thinking about repentance. Put another way, these verses show God applying a little "Jewish mother's guilt trip" onto His children: "I slaved away to raise you to be good children and you repay me by acting worse than animals? . . ."

Verses 4-6 are a poetic lament or oracle of woe for the judgment Israel was suffering in Isaiah's day.

*Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. Why will you be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds, they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.*

The Hebrew word that begins verse 4 is like the Yiddish "Oy!" only more dramatic and laden with sorrow. In contrast to verse 2, which calls Israel God's children, verse 4 says His people were so corrupt that they would more appropriately be called "offspring of evildoers" than "offspring of God." It is important to note that this does not mean that God rejected Israel as His children, just as no father can cancel the fact that he sired children. However, there are times when a father becomes so upset at the behavior of his children that he becomes ashamed to claim them. Similarly, God here says, "*Your deeds are more fitting for someone with a completely different father.*"

After a series of rhetorical questions, God then reasons with His people by reminding them of their great suffering for their sins, describing their physical and spiritual condition as open, untreated wounds. This lifelike description of physical wounds calls to mind Isaiah 53 and its description of the Messiah's suffering. (It shares some similar Hebrew vocabulary, too). "*But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And by his bruises we are healed . . . Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief . . .*"

These two passages contrast the great suffering of Israel for its own sins with Messiah's terrible suffering in our stead so we would not have to bear punishment for our own sins eternally. Those who do not accept the Messiah's suffering on their behalf will have to suffer God's just punishment for their sins, and that fate is just as ugly and painful as the picture in Isaiah 1:4-6.

Verses 7-8 describe the history of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah during the reign of Hezekiah, which Isaiah also recounts in prose in chapters 36-37. These verses emphasize the isolation of Jerusalem when Assyria conquered the countryside and besieged the city.

*Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence foreigners devour your land, it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber held, like a besieged city.*

Here the prophet takes the role of a poetic historian to describe the horror of the war during his day. The similes of a deserted watchman's booth in a vineyard or field after the end of the harvest season convey Jerusalem's absolute loneliness and abandonment as a city under siege.

Depending on whether they narrate positive or negative events, there are two purposes for a "historical review" in the Scriptures. Both kinds demonstrate the greatness of God in His acts in history and invite people to glorify Him because of His deeds. The positive historical accounts give hope for the future and inspire worship as we remember God's deeds in the past. The negative historical accounts, such as this one, show the terrible consequences of sin and encourage us to repent before we have to suffer something like that again.

Verse 9 records Israel's response to her suffering during this invasion: *"If the Lord of Hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah."* This verse communicates a number of ideas simultaneously, beginning with the important concept of the remnant which remains faithful even in times of national apostasy. Secondly, the mention of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that the invasion was so devastating that it seemed all life had been extinguished. God promised Abraham not to destroy those cities if He could find even ten righteous people. Yet, because all the residents proved themselves to be totally wicked except for Lot, the cities were annihilated. Perhaps this verse in Isaiah shows that the reason God did not allow Sennacherib to conquer Jerusalem was the righteous remnant of people like King Hezekiah who prayed and trusted God to deliver them (Is. 37).

In contrast to the description of a righteous remnant for whose sake God preserved Jerusalem, Isaiah 1:10-14 delivers a scathing rebuke to the unrighteous leaders and unrepentant masses of Judah. Although the people viewed themselves as being more righteous than Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 9), God turns their terminology on its head and rebukes them. *"Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!"*

Verses 11-15 continue the theme of condemnation and enumerate specific sins which made God angry at Israel.

*"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings, incense is an abomination to me. New Moon and Shabbat and Holy Convocations – I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them."*

Too many people have interpreted prophetic passages like these that condemn the temple cult to mean that God did not want the sacrifices to be made or the festival days to be observed at all. Since one cannot accuse God of schizophrenia (not remembering what He said), or

deciding His laws are not good, the fact that He specifically prescribed these sacrifices and festivals in the Torah eliminates such an interpretive option. Instead, this is the language of preference expressed in exaggerated terms, just as God said, *"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."* God loves every human being, including Esau, but His love for Jacob and His choice of the people of Israel was so strong that, in comparison, His love for Esau seemed like hatred. His statement that his "soul hates" the Israelites' worship is terminology of preference. He preferred that they repent and seek justice and righteousness in their daily living rather than continue to offer enormous quantities of sacrifices without changing their hearts – an unacceptable attitude in God's eyes.

Yeshua said something similar in Luke 11:42, *"Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb but neglect justice and the love of God, These you ought to have done without neglecting the others."*

Far from condemning tithing herbs, Yeshua upholds it as a good thing to do (just as the sacrifices God commanded were good), but says that justice and God's love were far more weighty matters. This is also an important lesson for today. God is not pleased with the multiplicity of our worship assemblies, worship nights, home group Bible studies, prayer meetings, youth activities, etc. if they do not spring from repentant hearts and lives – lives that walk in His ways and "love our neighbors as ourselves." Samuel told Saul that "to obey is better than to sacrifice" (1 Sam. 15:22).

Verse 15 describes the consequences of hypocritical worship: God will stop up his ears to our prayers. *"When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood."* When God ceases to hear our prayers, it may be the worst situation we could ever experience. The reason He gives here for turning his face is that the people had blood on their hands. The word "blood" can literally mean killing, but many Jewish commentators also equated other "minor" sins like gossip to bloodshed. Yeshua even said that anger was the spiritual equivalent of murder (Matt. 5:21-22). Isaiah minces no words in saying that neglecting justice, especially in the cases of the widow, orphan, and alien is a crime like murder, which blocks our access to God.

In a series of terse imperatives, verses 16-17 enumerate the "weightier matters of the Law" and call for repentance. *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good. Seek justice; correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless; plead the widow's cause."*

The theme of these verses: (1) The importance of justice in God's eyes; (2) Earthly judges should have great concern for those who are disfranchised in society

In verses 18-20, God appeals to Israel to seek reconciliation with Him and in simple terms restates the covenant from Deuteronomy:

*"Keep my laws, and I will bless you; break them, and I will punish you." "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow: though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword," for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

Here, the imagery of scarlet and white is contrasted with the bloodstained hands in verse 15. The beautifully phrased call for repentance and promise of forgiveness (v. 18) is a beacon of hope for people overwhelmed by sin. However, this verse is all too often ripped out of its context to offer "cheap forgiveness" without any demands. Restating of the covenant terms immediately following this appeal shows that true repentance and following God's commands are very important conditions for receiving this offer. In other words, His forgiveness is always available but will be of no use to those who do not respond with obedience.

The prophets often wrote in circles or cycles, with each circle repeating the same basic accusations or promises of the previous one, but more intensely and with more detail. This is the case with the oracle of condemnation in verses 21-23.

*How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice!  
Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross,  
your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of  
thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to  
the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.*

This passage is a lament for the city of Jerusalem that was drowning in its own injustice. The prophet uses the metaphors of a prostitute, precious metal corrupted by impurities, and good wine diluted with water to depict how injustice was destroying the city's glorious reputation. The images of silver and wine tie in with the metaphor of harlotry because they symbolize the wages and debauchery of a prostitute, "The figure carries double significance: corruption of the silver and corruption for silver."<sup>3</sup> These verses repeat and intensify the theme of justice that we saw earlier.

Now that God's "lawsuit" has proved the guilt of the accused and mentioned the deserved punishment, the Judge declares His response in verses 24-26.

*Therefore the Lord declares, the Lord of Hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I  
will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. I will turn my hand  
against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.  
And I will restore your judges as at first, and your counselors as at the beginning.  
Afterwards, you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city."*

God's solution to human injustice is to intervene; to bring sweeping judgment against the wicked, purifying His people and His land. These verses reverse the corrupted metal imagery of verse 22 and show that corrupt judges was the problem polluting the "precious metal" of Israel. Verse 26 also restores the title of "Faithful City" to Jerusalem, which verse 21 says had once been her name. These verses represent Isaiah's hope for a Jerusalem that fulfills God's expectations of justice and righteousness. Verse 26 is the source of the 11<sup>th</sup> blessing in the Daily Amidah which says,

Restore our judges as in earliest times and our counselors as at first; remove from us sorrow and groaning, and speedily reign over us – O Lord alone – with kindness and compassion and justify us through righteousness and judgment. Blessed are You O Lord, the King who loves righteousness and judgment.

According to this passage, the vision of the ideal future is to return to the past and the direct Kingship of God Himself, Who will set up righteous and faithful judges over Israel. The purpose of God's judgment of His people is for purification, not total destruction.

Verses 27-28 prophesy Israel's restoration through God's justice. *“Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners will be broken together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.”*

God's mercy for the wicked, allowing them time to repent, will at some point come to an end, and they will be utterly destroyed in their sin. Unlike God's purifying judgment of His people, His judgment of the wicked is to remove their pollution from the earth.

The rest of the chapter continues this theme of final judgment by using a strange sounding metaphor about burning trees.

*For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired, and you shall be embarrassed for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden without water. And the strong<sup>4</sup> shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together with none to quench them.*

This is a difficult set of verses, but one key to understanding their meaning is to remember the significance of trees and gardens in the Middle East. In that desert climate, any garden or tree without a regular water source has no chance of survival. Because flourishing flora represents life, peace, and fertility many pagans worshipped trees, and gardens had great religious significance, (e.g. “Asherah poles” “sacred groves;” and Jacob's strange action in Gen. 35:1-8). The Bible often uses the metaphor of flourishing trees for the righteous and the image of withered plants for the wicked (e.g. Jer. 17:5-8; Ps. 1:3-4). Both Genesis 1-2 and Song of Songs use garden imagery in their descriptions of God's relationship with His people. Many commentators have viewed the Garden of Eden as representative of the Temple or as a Divine blueprint for the concentric circles of holiness which the Temple later had.

The prophets also used plant metaphors to describe the Messiah, His execution of justice, and the gradual spreading of redemption throughout the world. Using a plant metaphor for the Messiah, Jeremiah 23:5-6 contains a wonderful promise for the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision:

*“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteousness.”*

Other passages refer to the Messiah as “my servant the Branch,” “the man whose name is branch;” “a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his roots” who “grew up before him like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground” (Zech. 3:8; 6:2; Is. 11:1; 53:2).

In short, plants and gardens are highly representative of conditions, locations, and spiritual leaders. However, it is clear that Isaiah's hearers chose the wrong temples, leaders, and actions. The end result was destruction because of their opposition to God. The alluring appearance of compromising with paganism and following false leaders and messiahs leads

only to shame and despair. Although Israel desired the attractive "gardens" and "oaks" of ungodly deliverers, these false hopes will burn up like stubble in God's final judgment of the world by fire. The only true deliverer is the Messianic Servant who "had no beauty that we should desire him" (Is. 53:2).

Finally, for our last example of a prophetic technique, Isaiah 2:1-5 gives a stirring eschatological vision of hope for what Israel will become during the righteous rule of the Messiah, who will exercise perfect justice and draw all men to Himself.

*The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it. And many peoples will come and say, "Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth Torah and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

The highest hope and purpose of the labor of the prophets was this vision of Israel's restoration, the rule of the Messiah, and the whole world coming to know the true God. Like them, we also must dream, pray, and strive for no less than the full repentance and restoration of Israel and all the nations to the just and righteous rule of the One God and His Messiah Yeshua.

### Essay Three **TO BE OR NOT TO BE**

All the turmoil and uncertainty currently churning around the Land of Israel and the future of Jerusalem, has caused much discussion, speculation, and division among the believing community regarding the possible prophetic significance of these events. Many believers sense that current negotiations over the Land of Israel is not merely another real estate transaction, but is a significant step in the scenarios of Biblical prophecy concerning the final unfolding of events and the coming of Messiah. There are some sincere souls who have mapped out exactly what they believe the inevitable near-future sequence of events will be, and some have set their clocks by them. Rather than examining possible future scenarios, we would like to briefly consider the nature of Biblical prophecy and the heart of God in prophetic utterance.

One aspect of prophecy is the Divine warning of the consequences of ungodly behavior – that which will surely occur if such behavior continues unchanged. The heart of God desires that the object of the prophetic utterance change behavior so that the disastrous consequences will not have to follow. In Ezekiel 33:11, God says, "Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I take **no pleasure** in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live." Complementing that revelation, the Messiah also comforts us: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's **good pleasure** to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). God takes pleasure in sharing the goodness of His kingdom with His obedient children and takes no pleasure in punishing the disobedient.

Prophecy often describes in full detail the consequences of not repenting, as if it has already happened. However, in light of the heart of God our Father, assuming that the catastrophic picture the prophet paints is inevitable, could be a major mistake. Though it is pronounced with certainty from the Lord Himself, the Bible shows occasions on which sincere intercession or repentance effectively changes God's mind or delays His judgment. A classic example is God's commission of Jonah to prophesy the destruction of the great city of Nineveh.

Nevertheless, the repentance of Nineveh's king and people entirely turned the hand of events – to the prophet's dismay. God's prophet, Isaiah, told King Hezekiah that he would soon die, and surely God is the One to know that for certain. However, in this case the king's tears and pleading with God actually changed the course of events so that Hezekiah was given another fifteen years to live. In Exodus 32, the Lord declared to Moses that He would destroy Israel for their transgressions, but the sincere intercession of Moses for the people of Israel stayed His wrath and changed the mind of God and the history of the world.

Joel 2 offers another example, describing in frightening detail the "Day of the Lord," "a day of darkness and gloom." He begins the decree of the Lord with these words of alarm: *"Blow the trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm on my holy mountain!"* In the midst of the chilling portrayal of the outpouring of destruction from the Lord appear these words: *"Yet **even now**, declares the Lord, return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning, and rend your heart and not your garments."* Here He demands the opening and changing of the heart and not religious ceremonies, and says, *"Who knows whether He will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him."* Then He calls for the blowing of a second trumpet to consecrate a fast of repentance, with the result that He will *"remove the northern army far from you"* and destroy it, rather than it destroying Israel.

Therefore, it would appear that part of the unfolding of prophecy is in our hands, as Deuteronomy 30:19 enjoins us, *"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants."* That same dynamic precedes as well as follows the Torah, with the choice given in the Garden of Eden and in the choice of whether to accept or reject the King Messiah. As for the good promises of God, Deuteronomy 1:2 says that although it should only be an eleven-day journey from Horev to Kadesh-Barnea, it took forty years for the children of Israel to finally arrive in the Promised Land. Their poor choices delayed the fulfillment of the promise, but the good promise was surely fulfilled, even if it was by the longer, harder route.

We see then that God **lives** and is not just a machine fixed on tracks. His heart hears our prayers and intercessions, and He desires that all men turn and be saved – though there may be a point of no return. Recently a friend wrote:

Last week I stood in Samaria looking across the hills toward the two Biblical mountains of Eval and Gerizim, upon which the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy were pronounced by the Tribes of Israel under Joshua. I thought of those words in Joel and prayed that we would, especially as we seem to be nearing circumstances as described in Joel 3, choose those blessings, that the good promises of God would come to pass sooner rather than later, and turn away from the curse while there is yet time, back to our merciful Father in heaven.



The power of the Messianic prophecies has been evident since the time of the first believers. They were an integral part of the outreach of the early followers of Yeshua, demonstrating their fulfillment in Him. This is a practice carried on to this day. These prophecies are still the mainstay of our presentation of the Messiahship, of Yeshua to our Jewish friends and families. However, a common error in our methods and approach to sharing Yeshua with Jewish people is that we frequently use these prophecies as some sort of mathematical proof,  $A + B = \text{Yeshua}$ . This is often used as sort of a lever to demand a confession of faith which is not quite appropriate. We can certainly lay out the truth before them, but the actual belief is a more complex, personal matter.

Further, when used with our Jewish friends this approach has some fundamental flaws. Behind the logic of this method lies a subtle message of opposition – an us/them stance. Providing an argument and then expecting automatic belief in Yeshua brings to mind the medieval disputations which used both the Prophets and Talmud as proof for belief in Yeshua. This method wrongly suggests that when one believes in Yeshua he becomes a Christian and ceases to be a member of the Jewish people. Instead of seeking to lead, inform, and help the one to whom we are witnessing to develop in his relationship with God, we have too often used prophetic proof-texting to demand a complete change in that relationship, one that is not necessarily required by God.

Consider the example of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. When Philip explained to him the meaning of the passage in Isaiah, the eunuch was searching for an answer. This is a fundamental requirement. This Ethiopian was not just searching for an answer because he was personally ready and hungry to hear, but also because many other people during the Second Temple period were doing the same. It was a period of apocalyptic expectation. The Jewish people used many methods of interpretation to apply the prophecies to the present or immediate future. Consequently, there was much messianic speculation. This speculation was not limited to the identity of the Messiah, but also extended to all the details surrounding that time period. The question of the day was: how do I explain prophecy x, especially in view of contemporary history? Much of Christianity has inherited this apocalyptic emphasis since the New Testament was formed in this environment and continues to influence us today.

As important as these Scriptures are, we must remember that they are not the primary focus of Jewish learning today. The most crucial questions in a traditional Jewish setting are those pertaining to legal matters. How is a commandment to be performed and why? Even beyond these basic questions, very specific ones are asked of the complicated texts of Jewish law, the Talmud, and various works springing from it. One might be tempted to bemoan the fact that the emphasis has changed and possibly blame it on some evil tendency of "the Rabbis," as many believers do. However, we must remember that it was the eunuch who asked the question in the first place. Maybe the questions being asked today are just as pure and ready for the answer of Yeshua.

The late Dr. James E. Priest suggested that

Though these prophetic Scriptures should still play an important role for us, the foundation on which they rest, and therefore the method and intent with which we employ them, should be altered. This foundation is poor because it assumes a rejection of Judaism. This rejection results in condemnation of the “Rabbis” or the “law;” as well as the general purpose and function of the Jewish people. Therefore, no matter how Jewish the context is in which we place the verses or rabbinic texts, it is still founded on a base that sees them as irrelevant.

Dr. Priest further taught that

It is possible within traditional Judaism to point to a Scripture and its interpretation (midrashic or straightforward), as a sort of “proof.” However, this proof is not usually fundamental and is merely a demonstration of a previously known principle that comes from the basic theology and outlook of Judaism. When we point to a verse about the Messiah, we may be doing one of a few things. We may be providing a verse that is unlinked to the Jewish framework and therefore lacking relevance to the Jewish mindset. On the other hand, we may provide a slew of verses in an attempt to show that their basic mindset as a whole is flawed or that if their theology has not taken all of these things into account, then it must be abandoned for ours.

We hold that declaring the basic Jewish mindset to be flawed should always be avoided; providing instead, input into their lack of knowing the Messiah. For this to be done without reverting to the previous methods, we must always seek to *complete* their Judaism by what we bring to them; not *destroy* it.

The common Jewish person may not be impressed by our examples, but not because they are not good examples. It is because we are attempting to destroy or invalidate his belief system in order to provide our own. To some extent, this is always true when convincing someone of a new outlook. We should refrain from essentially wiping out their entire foundation, which is a traumatic experience for anyone. This method may be acceptable for one who has a seriously and fundamentally flawed outlook on God, but hopefully we do not view the religious tradition of the Jewish people in this light. Let us respect the foundation and seek to build on it, finding ways to make Yeshua relevant to our Jewish friends as a religious Jew.

This requires us to re-examine the theological framework behind what we are presenting. To be relevant, this framework has to allow observance and find ways of interacting with it. We need to see God working within rabbinic Judaism while still being honest with its faults – viewing as insiders; not condemning from without. The differences, largely pertaining to belief in Yeshua and issues stemming from that belief, should be dealt with using methods that traditional Judaism has always used to allow innovation. Though these methods are crucial, it is the acceptance of the whole framework that makes them of any worth, without which they are merely tricks.

Building this new foundation requires much, especially of the community of Jewish believers. Simple, illustrative connections with Jewish tradition which are made to provide a Jewish feel to the Gospel require little of us. A foundation built on the core tenets and practices of Judaism requires faithfulness to the Torah and Jewish practice. Moving in this direction may cause a lack of desire on our part to keep these practices.

We must also address our fear of rejection, whether it is by the Jewish community or by "Judaism" itself. Although it may seem odd to describe those who are willing to share with others as fearful of being rejected by them, none the less this fear is real. It is one thing to approach someone, fully assured of the might of right, seeking to bring them into "your" fold. It is another thing to enter their theological system, giving up a certain amount of control. We are more vulnerable in this position. We feel safe in saying that if the truth were known, many Christians have a perpetual fear of entering into the rabbinic system and the possibility of being judged by it as an insider. Could this be one of the main reasons why we so readily condemn traditional Judaism (or speak of it snidely)? Yet we do not enter this world empty handed, but rather with a deep revelation that enables us to find our way. It is from this revelation that we know how to act on the material of Jewish tradition. It will guide us in using the sources to make a place for belief in Yeshua. In our Western culture, we lack respect and love for this tradition, something that would be easier to obtain if we dealt with this fear.

Is it too much to ask that the prophetic spirit granted to us as believers be used to make a place for Yeshua, as well as belief in Him, within Judaism? Surely, the guiding Spirit that inspired the prophets can in some measure also inspire us to creatively, yet responsibly, create such a position. Knowing when to use a tradition or when and how to innovate requires Godly wisdom. The heart of prophecy is connecting people with God; encouraging the good and correcting the wrong. How often do we mistake our theological and cultural background as the good while condemning everything else? But today's prophets need to transcend their cultural beginnings and seek the Lord's Word in this new situation and setting.

Essay Five  
THE BOOK OF **JONAH** AND **PROPHECY**

Jonah is an amazing book from which we can learn many important concepts such as the meaning of prophecy, mercy, forgiveness, and ethics. It ends with the most important lesson of all: that every living creature is the pinnacle of God's creative activity.

God gave Jonah the mission of bringing a prophecy of doom to Nineveh. Why did Jonah flee from his appointed task? We discover his reason at the end of the book. As a prophet, Jonah knew the characteristics of God and that He is *"the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and full of loving kindness, who repents concerning calamity"* (4:2). Jonah was afraid for his prophetic career and perhaps even knew ahead of time that his prophecy of doom would not come to pass. If, from the beginning, he was expecting God to have mercy on Nineveh and not destroy it, then he might have been afraid that he would be labeled a false prophet.

This raises an important question about why God sent Jonah to give a prophecy of doom against Nineveh in the first place. Why did not God simply destroy that wicked and sinful city as He did Sodom (Gen. 19)? The difference in the way He treated Sodom and Nineveh teaches an important lesson about the goal of prophecies of doom – to cause people to repent; to open the door for their rescue. One might say that prophecies of doom are naturally conditional. Jeremiah 18:7-8 says,

*At one moment, I might speak against a nation or against a kingdom to uproot it, to pull it down, and to destroy it, but when that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, then I will relent concerning the evil which I had planned to bring on it.*

When we read the book of Jonah “after the fact;” we come to understand that God's purpose was not to destroy Nineveh, but to save it. Many people think the repentance of Nineveh is the main lesson of the book of Jonah. In our opinion, the main message is that there are much higher values than personal honor, fulfillment of prophecy, or reliability of an individual prophet. Rather, the preservation of the lives of God's creatures through His mercy is of greater value than all those other things. The book concludes with the idea that if Jonah was so upset about the destruction of the shady plant which he did not even create, then how could God not have mercy on his creatures?

From Jonah 3:5-9, we learn that the people of Nineveh held a collective fast, so that every man and beast would repent together. Many instances of fasting in the Bible were intended to influence God to change the decision of judgment He had made against those who were fasting. Fasting was not an act of punishment or regret for past sins. For example, King David fasted to hopefully prevent the decree of death for his baby son. *“And David sought God for the sake of the boy and called a fast and lay down upon the ground.”* Yet once the child died, he stopped fasting and explained, *“While the child lived, I fasted and cried, for I said, 'Who knows? Maybe God will have mercy, and the child will live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back to life again?”* (2 Sam. 12)

David fasted in order to try and change the evil decree, but once the decree had been completed, there was no reason to continue fasting.

Today, we are also living "in Nineveh" because we are surrounded by terrible wickedness, sin, murder, sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, theft, and adultery, all of which stem from pride. We have all of the evils of Nineveh and Sodom put together. Most of us are sitting beneath our little shade tree feeling secure and certain that God's anger will destroy and punish those wicked people who "deserve it" because they have wounded us or others.

The book of Jonah teaches us that we cannot sit down in the shade and look down on our people from a distance and feel secure. We have to arise and help them – save them and bring them to full repentance; just as this book teaches that the highest value is mercy and saving lives.

The lesson of Jonah is that God's desire to forgive is greater than His desire to punish. We need to share in the afflictions of our friends, our neighbors, and our nation and at the end of the day to turn the balance toward forgiveness instead of the punishment that we and our nation rightly deserve. We always have to remember that God desires to forgive, that Yeshua's blood has atoned for all people of all nations, and that certainly includes our Jewish friends. As followers of Yeshua, we must never forget that there was a time when we were in the exact same situation as our sinful neighbors.

No doubt that we can reach people in our immediate environment through the witness of how we treat our friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues. When they know that we are believers in Yeshua and see that we live generous, proper, courteous, and upright lives, it will raise the value of our faith in their eyes and show that we truly have a living and active faith. This faith is the only thing that will touch and change others for the good.

Essay Six  
**MODERN DAY PROPHETS**

StudyJesus.com received the following email:

In November, 1988, my husband (David) and I were married. I was so thrilled, happy, and excited that when a little book appeared that might have dampened my spirits, I barely gave it a second thought. The name of the book was “88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be In 1988!” The basic premise of the book was that the Lord was going to return in September of 1988 on Rosh Hashana. Since my wedding was supposed to take place two and a half months later, I asked the Lord in a particularly non-spiritual moment if He would consider delaying His appearance just a bit. Whether the Lord honored, laughed at, or simply ignored my request I may never know, but we were married as planned. The Lord did not return at the time predicted, and the same author published another book the next year entitled “*The Final Shout – Rapture Report 1989!*”

In Deuteronomy 13:1-4, the Lord speaks about those who would presume to prophesy in His Name.

*If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, “Let us go after other gods” – which you have not known – “and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him.*

Then later in the book (Deut. 18:18), God speaks about a new Prophet who will be raised up from among our brethren and who will speak all the words that God has put in his heart. We are commanded to listen to that prophet. We believe this Prophet refers to Yeshua, Who was raised up from among the Jewish people and to whom all of us are commanded to listen. This same passage gives the criteria for how to discern if the prophet comes from God or not: If the thing that a prophet speaks does not come to pass, then it is not a prophecy from God, and he can simply be discounted as such (Deut. 18:22). Even though this passage offers a clear and easy way to evaluate a prophet, still there are many "false prophets" today, whose signs and wonders deceive, sadly even the elect (Matt. 24:24).

Even a cursory glance at the Worldwide Internet today will show all sorts of predictive prophecies offered in authoritative ways. So sure are all these people that what they predict is going to occur, that they state their cases with assurance and power. Many believers are turned aside, filled with fear and made insecure by these forecasts. In some cases, hearers make far reaching and destructive decisions based on listening to such false prophecies and false prophets.

The New Testament has a lot to say about these people. Matthew 7:21-23 may be one of the scariest verses in the Bible.

*Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of Heaven, but **he who does the will of My Father in heaven**. Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cost out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”*

Similarly, 2 Thessalonians 2:8-10 says,

*. . . The lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs and lying wonders and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved.*

Perhaps by comparing several Scripture verses to one another, we can find some principles that will safeguard us and enable us to walk through the minefield that exists today, called "Prophecy." With these principles, we can correctly discern, as well as be confident that we will not be turned aside by fables, rumors, and deception. Do any of us want to fall prey to "lawlessness" or spiritual anarchy? No, we want to walk in truth, holiness, and security. But how can we be sure? For a start, let us examine Deuteronomy 13:4. *"You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments."*

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE: WALK AFTER THE LORD OUR GOD

In a sense, this is *holacha*, "the way to walk." We are to walk *after* the Lord, or in other words, to follow Him. Because He is our teacher and example, we must in some sense do what He did and behave as He did. For 30 years of His life, He lived with His family and worked as a carpenter, yet He lived a sinless life. How many of us can say this about ourselves? Therefore, the first criteria is to simply walk humbly, circumspectly, and wisely; redeeming the time because the days are indeed evil (Eph. 5:15-16).

THE SECOND PRINCIPLE: FEAR THE LORD

How many of us think that God simply winks at sin or that because we are so adorable we can get away with whatever we want without submitting to His authority? We live in a world in which equality is sacrosanct and "anything goes;" but that is not the world of the Bible. God is our Father, the maker of heaven and earth, and He has the ultimate and supreme authority. Would you presume to speak a word in the name of your employer, best friend, wife or husband without clear directions and their approval? How then can we dare to say, "Thus says the Lord" unless 100% certain?

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE: KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS

We run into some difficulty here in determining which specific commandments the verse refers. However, to prevent getting bogged down let us take the widest possible interpretation from 1 John 3:23. *"This is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son Yeshua HaMaschiah and love one another, as He gave us commandment."* There are a lot of different personalities and interesting characters in the Body of the Lord, but the thing that marks a believer as a true child of God is his love for the brethren and for all mankind. Salvation is a supernatural thing, and if we are not being transformed into loving and patient people, then we need to question why.

THE FOURTH PRINCIPLE: OBEY HIS VOICE

In John 10:4, we have a beautiful picture of the Lord and His people. We are compared to "sheep who know the voice of the Shepherd;" and the sheep follow only His voice. The voice of a stranger frightens them, and they flee from it. Likewise, we are commanded to obey *His* voice and not all the other voices clamoring for attention.

#### THE FIFTH PRINCIPLE: SERVE HIM

This is a very important principle and one sadly neglected today. What does this idea of service have to do with salvation? A look at James will tell us that works (or service) is simply the practical outworking of our faith. Rather than running after “prophet” after “prophet,” we would do well to submit ourselves to a congregation and find an area of service in which we can demonstrate our faith (James 2:26).

#### THE FINAL PRINCIPLE: "HOLD FAST TO HIM"

Sometimes everything is confusing and dark. There are times in the life of every believer where we experience what is called "the dark night of the soul." Abraham, Moses, and even Yeshua Himself experienced it. At that point, the only thing to do is hold fast to God and His promises and ride it out. Often, others cannot help because the issue is not between us and others; it is between us and the Lord. This cannot be fully understood unless one has walked through this time of isolation and loneliness. But, for those who have, emerging on the other side is life altering and faith altering. After these dark experiences we *know* Him, and our faith is unshakable. It is during these times that we have to "hold fast" and not let go.

It is our opinion that in following the above principles, we will be safeguarded from deception. Maintaining humble and teachable spirits will eventually bring us into the light of day where things are clear and once again make sense. May God help us all accurately discern and walk in humility, wisdom, and truth.

#### Essay Seven

### THE PROPHET AS A WATCHMAN

One of the great “stumbling blocks” of the “Old Testament” (Hebrew Bible) is the issue of collective responsibility. Modern Westerners read stories of God commanding the destruction of the Canaanites (man, woman, and child), or verses like Exodus 34:7, which say that God “*visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation,*” and start to wonder if God is really as good as we have always thought. However, one must remember that in Eastern culture, everything a person does reflects upon and profoundly affects his family, his clan, and his community. God warned the Israelites to keep sin and impurity out of the camp altogether because the presence of sin near His holy Tabernacle would bring severe punishment to the entire community. No one can sin so “privately” that it does not affect anyone else. This may not strike us as “fair,” and in truth, even the prophets struggled with this issue and looked forward to a time when each person’s sins would only bring consequences to himself. Ezekiel 18:1-4 records a conversation between Ezekiel and God over this very issue.

*The word of the Lord came to me: “What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten the sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live,” says the Lord God, “this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold all souls are mine. The soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.”*

Although with the implementation of modern justice systems this prophecy is gradually coming closer to fulfillment, we are still living in a world in which everyone who disobeys God not only damages his own relationship with the Holy One but also further distances the entire world from a state of ultimate redemption. In order to help counterbalance this unfortunate reality, God gave His prophets and His Word to guide us in the right path and to help convict individuals and nations of the danger of our sins before collective punishment comes upon us.

One Biblical metaphor for the prophet is a watchman – an important figure in every ancient city. Without the faithful work of the watchman, the city was vulnerable to any enemy attack, and all the inhabitants, including that watchman, would be in danger of being killed. God likens the job of a prophet to a watchman in Ezekiel 33.

*If I bring the sword upon the land, and the people of the land take a man from among them and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own heart . . . But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them a warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked one, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.*

Even though God says that the individual sinner dies for his own sin, a negligent prophet/watchman is also held responsible for his fellow's destruction. Therefore, the job of the prophet was a tremendous responsibility no one could take lightly. Similarly, today in the Body of Messiah, not many should strive to be prophets and take that heavy responsibility upon their shoulders. Nevertheless, God does ask us to help bear one another's burdens by exhorting one another to stand strong in our faith and to remain pure from sin, just as the ancient prophets did. James 5:19-20 praises those words: *"My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."*

As we remember the value of repentance and the overpowering grace of Yeshua, let us seek to be watchmen for one another in our partnership with God to bring perfect righteousness and justice to the world.

## CONCLUSION

In keeping with the theme of this essay (Don Quixote as prophet and as a type of Yeshua) let us briefly explore how Yeshua saw Mary, the woman from the town of Migdal or, as we commonly refer to her, Mary Magdalene. Some traditions say that she was the woman caught in adultery (John 8), but, obscuring the identity of this woman of ill repute in Scripture, is actually a beautiful picture of grace. Her sins are covered by a degree of anonymity. We perhaps may discern that the woman who "washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head" is this same Mary, yet we can never be certain of her name.

What we do know is Yeshua's compassionate response to her, in vivid juxtaposition to the religious establishment of His day. The religious leaders were incensed. "How could He allow her to approach Him? Did He not know who she was? What kind of prophet cannot tell a sinner from a saint?" Yeshua was indeed a prophet Who could easily discern "who was who

and what was what.” However, as a true prophet He saw not only what was but also what could be.

In *The Man of La Mancha* (the theatrical adaptation of Don Quixote), our knight falls in love with a prostitute named Aldonza. However, to our hero she is not a lowly prostitute, but the beautiful Lady Dulcinea. Eventually, in one of the more stirring scenes of the play, the prostitute begins to truly see herself as a lady and accepts her new name.

This theme is repeated over and over in plays and in literature. Remember the story of *Pygmalion*, in which the lowly flower girl who lives in the street is transformed into a beautiful lady? Remember the kids from lower income homes, who become motivated and successful due to the love and perseverance of a dedicated teacher, as depicted in *To Sir, With Love*? In our own lives, many of us have been encouraged by a parent, a teacher, or friend who saw us not as we are, but as what we could be. Conversely, how many of us have been discouraged and demoralized by criticism, lack of trust, or other harsh and severe judgments about our characters or motives?

The Bible is full of admonitions to speak truthfully and lovingly. Ephesians 4:29 says, “*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.*” Philippians 4:8 exhorts us,

*. . . Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.*

When we read these words, all of our natural inclinations scream, “We do not want to be foolish, taken advantage of, or duped.” Nevertheless, we are instructed to take Yeshua as our example, and He chose Judas Iscariot even knowing he would betray Him. Why did He do this? Perhaps part of the reason was to give Judas an opportunity to repent. Yeshua took him close to His heart, allowing him intimate access to His life. The sad fact that Judas did not repent was his own choice.

As we work out our faith in the Body of Messiah and with Yeshua as our example, we offer a challenge and hope. Let us endeavor to see each other through the eyes of love and faith. Let us look at each other as “*accepted in the beloved*” (Eph. 1:6), and seek to help our fellow travelers fulfill their unique destinies and callings. In doing so, we may find that we fulfill our own.

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*Footnotes:*

<sup>1</sup> Dr. James E. Priest, *Letter to Dr. William Harrison*

<sup>2</sup> Maimonides, *Letter to Rabbi Chasdai of Spain*

<sup>3</sup> Watts, John. D.W. Isaiah 1-33. *Word Biblical Commentary*. Vol. 24. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> The only other occurrence of this Hebrew word is in Amos 2:9 where it is also connected to the destruction of trees as metaphorical for the downfall of a wicked nation.

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