

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel

“Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the Lord . . . I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me . . . They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them . . . This is what you keep saying to a prophet: ‘What is the Lord’s answer to you?’ or ‘What has the Lord spoken?’”

Jeremiah 23: 28,30—32,37

The most important period of ancient world history to that time, from God's point of view regarding His creatures, was 722 BC to 435 BC, some 300 years in the Mesopotamian region. In that period God revealed through a series of prophets His divine blue-print of significant cosmic events which would unfold from that point to the end of the world. It was not new in that it was a fresh start; but it was new in that it was prophetically announced, apocalyptically described, and divinely declared to be inevitable. It was new in that it removed His chosen people, the Jews, from the central position in the divine plans which they had occupied from

Abraham to David; and announced a New Covenant with a New Israel. It was also new in that God revealed in considerable detail how He operated with pagan nations and empires in order to fulfill His divine will in history.

Four major prophets were sent by God to deal with issues facing the five world empires of that time; the fading Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Medo-Persian and Greek empires. It was also the period of the emergence of the great philosophers and scholars who would lay the foundations of the world's later civilizations.

He did all this with a total of twenty-two prophets—described by later Biblical commentators as "major", and "minor". The "minor" prophets operated in the two periods, before and after the central most important period of Israel's history following the Assyrian ten-tribe Dispersion of Ephraimite-Israel, and the return to the Promised Land of the exiled 50,000 Judean Remnant from Babylon, when the four "major" prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—were declaring God's historical purposes for Israel and the nations of the world. These four prophets were declared "major" because of the length and detail of their prophecies, and also because they had the unique distinction of being commissioned by God from His heavenly Throne.

It was these four great "princes of prophecy"—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel—who most clearly articulated the mystery of the Messiah in the mid-centuries BC. The four prophets proclaimed the future rise of a Davidic king and kingdom, filled with the Spirit of God, in whom would be intermingled all the virtues of Jehovah's kingship greater than David's, and which would include believing Gentiles as well as faithful Jews. Regarding this kingdom Isaiah prophesied a "New Remnant-Israel"; Jeremiah prophesied a "New Covenant"; Daniel prophesied a "New Kingdom"; and Ezekiel prophesied a "New Temple".

Their divinely-provided prophetic revelations, and subsequent writings, emerged at a time, and were associated with, the greatest period of Biblical intellectual enlightenment and concentrated power the world had known. During that period the Babylonian empire was the first recorded world totalitarian system; the Medo-Persian

empire was the first world law-dominated system; the Greek empire was the first world single-language system (since Babel!); and the Roman empire was in the process of becoming the first world inter-continental administrative system. They all combined to leave a legacy of civilization which has dominated the world to the present time. In addition, the religious system of institutionalized priesthood created in Babylon was passed on through the various empires to the post-Roman world and is still predominant in all nations, cultures and creeds.

It was also the period in which the world's greatest philosophies and religions emerged. In Greece between the fifth and fourth centuries Socrates, Plato and Aristotle laid the foundations of the later world's philosophies, while between the sixth and fourth centuries Confucius in China, Buddha in India and Zoroaster in Persia laid the foundations of what became Confucianism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism.

According to the Jewish philosopher Philo, the prophet was an interpreter of God, who made the prophet inwardly perceive what he was outwardly to speak. This was received by the prophet in a state of spiritual afflatus in which self-consciousness was completely in abeyance: put another way, the divine "Other" was making use of the prophet's organs of speech to make His voice heard. However, although the prophet's self-consciousness might be in abeyance, it was not non-existent. For example, in Isaiah's visions⁴⁸ he was conscious that he was a sinful man; also that his iniquity was taken away and his sin purged. Jeremiah, too, ⁴⁹was conscious of his weaknesses. Ezekiel ⁵⁰was overwhelmed by his initiatory vision, but he was helped on to his feet by the Spirit of God to receive the message. Daniel ⁵¹admitted he was stunned by the vision, but he did not receive the full content of the visions until he had recovered. All of them were unequivocally conscious that they were in the Presence of God, and that they were responsible individuals. They knew what it was throughout the revelations to experience fear and hope, sorrow and joy.

What the prophet experienced was a distinctive voice, different from any other in normal cerebral or vocal experience. The voice

⁴⁸ Isaiah 6 : 3

⁴⁹ Jeremiah 1:6

⁵⁰ Ezekiel 1 & 2

⁵¹ Daniel 10: 8-10

usually preceded an image in a dream or vision, sometimes a "theophany" of angel-spirit in human form, to validate the source and credibility of the divine voice. These visionary images varied from the simple, such as Daniel and Gabriel; or very complicated, such as Ezekiel and the Chariot-Throne of God.

The function of prophecy was not to be a common tool, or vehicle of curiosity, to discover ordinary requirements, or even to avoid having to resort to heathen sooth-sayers or sorcerers. Prophecy was given by God to educate His chosen people to a perception of their present circumstances which would enlighten their understanding of God and His purposes in present and future history. Prophecy was employed entirely in promoting the interests of the kingdom of God, and directed towards the glory of God; as God said to Isaiah: "New things I declare; before they spring into being I announced them to you"⁵²

Another aspect of divine communication was the apocalyptic revelation. This was different from the prophetic vision in that the latter had a measure of restriction to "fore-telling" or "forth-telling" of events; the former included these elements but was greater in that it was an "uncovering" of the significance of those events. This difference was particularly evident in Ezekiel's final vision, which was distinctively apocalyptic, while his earlier visions were prophetic. God defined the difference:

"Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the house of Israel everything you see".⁵³

Finally, the apocalyptic visions, in contrast with the prophetic, were usually related to critical historical events—as, for example, Abraham's "fire-pot and flaming torch" vision, and the divine provision of the Promised Land; Moses' "burning bush" and the deliverance from Egypt; David and the Destroying Angel on Mount Zion where the Temple would be built; Daniel and the four future empires—while the prophetic visions were usually for particular contemporary circumstances; with later applications which the

⁵² Isaiah 42:9

⁵³ Ezekiel 40:4

prophets seldom understood, or had explained by God.⁵⁴

What the prophets saw were rarely events in historical time, but visionary images of those events in a divine timeless present in which the Eternal God lives. It was the content of the vision which was important, not the date in which it occurred—unless God specifically mentioned the date. It is the natural human predilection to attribute dates to prophetic utterances which has created so much confusion of interpretation over the centuries. It meant nothing to God, prophetically speaking, to remain silent for hundreds of years at a time, or not to mention specific great civilizations such as China or Maya, or humanly conceived religions like Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, because He was operating to a divine and not human agenda. God's historical revelations were related to the Mesopotamian/Mediterranean region, especially His chosen people Israel, the Promised Land, Jerusalem, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. It was the coming of the Messiah, and the kingdom of God, which was His chief interest; also, the later New Israel, the Church, the restored Jewish remnant, return to the Promised Land, and the cataclysmic Armageddon of "the last days" of the unbelieving world.

On the death of Solomon the judgment of God fell on Israel foretold to David and his offspring because of his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and complicity in the death of Uriah. Under Solomon there had been many incidents of misrule—forced labour, extravagance in building projects, luxurious royal indulgence, religious apostasy, heavy taxation, marriages with foreign women. These now became the cause of revolt in the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and the kingdom of Israel was divided into two segments as a result.

These were designated as the "northern" and "southern" kingdoms: the former consisting of the ten tribes seceding from the rule of Rehoboam, who made Jeroboam their king, was most often referred to as "Israel"; and the latter, consisting of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin was known as "Judah". Another name attributed to the "northern kingdom" was "Ephraim", being the leading tribe of the secession. There had been perennial rivalry

⁵⁴I Peter 1:11

between Judah and Ephraim over the leadership of Israel, mostly because Ephraim, as one of Joseph's two sons, considered their superior status while in Egypt gave them greater priority than Jacob's and Moses' later prophetic utterances. The rebellion against Rehoboam gave them the opportunity to reject the authority of "the house of David" of the tribe of Judah.

This period of the judgment of God on disobedient Israel in the prophecies divided into two sections: (i) in the northern kingdom of Israel, from the time of Ephraim's revolt to the time when the ten tribes were carried away captive by the Assyrians (BC 931-722); (ii) in the southern kingdom of Judah, from the time of Rehoboam to the time of the carrying away captive by the Babylonians (BC 931-586). In each period and each kingdom there were approximately twenty rulers ruling for different lengths of time: nineteen of Judah's kings were all descendants of David, and they reigned for a total of 345 years. Israel, or Ephraim, also had nineteen kings of nine dynasties, reigning for 210 years, eight of whom were either assassinated or committed suicide.

Throughout this period from David God sent a total of twenty-two prophets with messages calling for repentance and imminent judgment. These were distinctive individuals with special prophecies for (i) the circumstances of their times, (ii) the near future, and (iii) the distant future. At the same time as they were making their distinctive God-directed contributions, there were others who were simply part of the lives of the people in "schools of the prophets".

The struggle between the competing Mediterranean empires, the first object of which was to consolidate possession of Mesopotamia and Israel, began in the ninth century BC with the conflict between Egypt and Assyria. The relationships between them reached a critical point during the dynasty of Omri in Israel's northern kingdom, when Omri broke Assyria's commercial monopoly with the powerful trading Phoenicia by establishing friendly relations with the king of Sidon, Ethbaal. This resulted in the marriage of Ahab, of the northern kingdom, and the infamous Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of Assyria.

This formal breach of God's Covenant, not only in the marriage to a foreign national but also one who was a notorious Baal-worshipper, initiated a new and critical development in God's relationship with Israel. Until that time, despite their many breaches of the divine Covenant, God had been patient and forgiving if they indicated repentance to any degree.

But with the marriage of Ahab, God intervened with the emergence of the first of the great "sign" prophets. Samuel had been a "word", or declamatory, prophet, who brought the revelation of God to a generally disinterested Israel. But, in the time of Ahab, God sent Elijah, whose first action was confrontation with the king of Israel's "northern kingdom", and the "sign" of God's presence in history with a three-year famine "according to my word."

Prophecy would never be the same after Elijah. He was the first of nineteen prophets of this period to both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel who would change the prevailing conception of the history of the world—Elijah, Micaiah, Elisha, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Obadiah, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi. From Elijah to Malachi God was concerned with the changed destiny of Israel in the light of their impending punishment for dishonouring their Covenant with God, and with the consequences of this judgment on the nations of the world up to, and including, the last days of the world.

At the time of King Ahab of the northern kingdom, King Jehoshaphat of the southern kingdom on one momentous occasion asked him with incredulity, "Is there not a prophet of the Lord whom we can enquire of?" That incident took place in one of the most remarkable circumstances de-scribed in the Scriptures with a description of decision-making in God's presence in heaven. King Ahab of the secessionist Judah/Ephraim northern kingdom had decided that he could recover the frontier city of Ramoth-gilead from Assyria with the help of King Jehoshaphat of Judah. Jehoshaphat was reluctant to do so without some indication from God through a legitimate prophet. Ahab had about four hundred professing "prophets" prepared to say what he wanted, but

Jehoshaphat was unhappy about this and asked for a statement from a genuine prophet of God. Ahab reluctantly agreed to consult Micaiah ben Imlah, who was well-known for being a prophet of integrity beyond the king's control.

After an initial mocking scenario to ridicule Ahab, Micaiah gave a true prophecy from God. He demonstrated to the two kings what had been revealed to him by God as to how God administered the affairs on earth from heaven. Micaiah described it:

"I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing round him on his right and on his left. And the Lord said, 'Who will lure Ahab into attacking Ramoth Gilead and going to his death there?'

"One suggested this, and another that. Finally, a spirit came forward, stood before the Lord and said, 'I will lure him.'

"By what means?' the Lord asked.

"I will go out and be a lying in the mouths of all his prophets,' he said.

"You will succeed in luring him,' said the Lord. 'Go and do it'.

"So now the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouths of all these prophets of yours. The Lord has decreed disaster for you."⁵⁵

Having revealed the scene of the judgment tribunal in heaven presided over by God, the Scriptures proceed to record the concurrent events on earth. Ahab, although publicly derisive of Micaiah's prophecy, took precautions to avoid his destined fate by disguising himself in the subsequent battle of Ramoth Gilead: But, it is recorded,

"Someone drew his bow at random and hit the king of Israel between the sections of his armour. The king told his chariot driver, 'Wheel round and get me out of the fighting. I've been wounded.' All day long the battle raged, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Arameans. The blood of his wound ran on to the floor of the chariot, and that evening he died. as the sun was setting, a cry spread through the army: 'Every man to his town; everyone to his land!'

⁵⁵ I Kings 22:19-23

"So the king died and was brought to Samaria, and they buried him there."⁵⁶

This was the first mention of a divine judicial tribunal in heaven intervening and influencing events on earth, which would recur later in greater detail in Daniel's prophecies regarding the destinies of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar—and of Israel, present and future. But the cycles of disregard and disobedience of God in Israel increased in scope and pace. In the eighth century BC this was evident in the fact that four kings in the northern kingdom occupied the throne, and two of them were murdered in the years BC 753-752. Almost thirty years later (BC 724) Shalmaneser V, king of Assyria, invaded the northern kingdom and launched a period of siege and nightmare conditions for the Israelites. The successor to Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, completed the genocide of the Ten Tribes by exiling them and settling people from other lands in their territory in Israel's "first holocaust".

The judgment of God recorded in the Scriptures reads:

"All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the Lord their God, who had brought them out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshipped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before them, as well as the practices which the kings of Israel had introduced. The Israelites secretly did things against the Lord their God that were not right . . .

"They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the Lord had ordered them, 'Do not do as they do,' and they did the things the Lord had forbidden them to do' . . ." ⁵⁷

The Ten Tribes of the northern kingdom disappeared in history, as God had declared they would if they did not obey his destiny for them. But there was still the southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin—still with a measure of obedience through its promised line of David. With the collapse of Israel's northern kingdom the

⁵⁶ I Kings 22:34-37

⁵⁷ II Kings 17:7-20

southern kingdom was left alone and isolated as the representative of God's chosen people.

After the death of Jehoshaphat, who was contemporary with Ahab of the northern kingdom, he was succeeded by the Baal-worshipping Athaliah. She was followed in the eighth century BC by eleven kings with a declining record of obedience to God's commands. The reigns of Athaliah, Ahaz and Manasseh had encouraged unrestrained idolatry. Religious reforms began with Joash, expanded under Uzziah and peaked under Hezekiah.

Hezekiah would be the last of the God-fearing Judah kings. During his reign the three prophets—Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah—were active, especially Isaiah. But even in Hezekiah's reign moral corruption was especially rife among the ruling classes, the bureaucracy, the priests and the prophets. They ignored the warnings of Isaiah that their self-centred policies of putting themselves under the influence of Egypt to avoid Assyrian domination, instead of having faith in their God, would end in catastrophe.

In the final twenty years of the southern kingdom's history there were four kings and three invasions of Jerusalem. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was a weak ruler who was easily swayed by his own advisers and by contemporary events. He swore fealty to the rising power of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar, despite the warnings of the prophet Jeremiah who told the king and people explicitly that Nebuchadnezzar was "God's servant" in the matter of punishing a disobedient Israel.

Zedekiah's prevarication and dissimulation led to an internal revolt in the southern kingdom, and an external attack from the Babylonians in BC 588. Two years later, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and put the whole city to the torch—Temple, palace, and houses—and deported the aristocracy and artisans of Jerusalem to Babylon, leaving only the peasants in the countryside. This was Israel's "second holocaust", and also the end of God's Covenant with Israel, the terminating of their hitherto unique destiny as God's instrument to the nations of the world.

The four prophets during this climactic period—Isaiah (740-681

BC), Jeremiah (626- 585 BC), Daniel (605-530 BC) and Ezekiel (593-571 BC)—were designated “major” not only because they were the most complete and detailed in their prophecies, or were the most historically comprehensive, but also because they were the only ones who were uniquely commissioned by God from His Throne.

ISAIAH

Isaiah wrote during the disturbed period of the expansion of the Assyrian empire under the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser and Sargon II (745-705 BC), and the rebellious decline of Israel. The king of Israel’s northern kingdom tried to pressure the king of Judah of the southern kingdom into joining a coalition against Assyria, a decision contested by Isaiah who warned that the decision would result in captivity by the emerging Babylonians.

Isaiah was the first of the “four princely prophets” to reveal the details of God’s abrogated Covenant with Israel. Isaiah was the first to delineate an “Israel within Israel”, or faithful “Remnant Israel”, who would choose to be obedient to God beyond the coming prophesied Holocaust and Dispersion and despite death. Isaiah’s ordination as prophet from God was given in circumstances of awesome grandeur and impressive solemnity:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’

“At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe is me!” I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty’.

“Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken

away and your sin atoned for.'

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'

"And I said, 'Here am I. Send me.'" ⁵⁸

Isaiah was equally at home in the palace or among the people. While king Hezekiah was prepared to compromise for the sake of a peaceful reign ("there will be peace and security in my days," he said), Isaiah looked beyond Hezekiah's proposed but temporary social and religious reforms to absolute obedience to God.

Then Isaiah was dumbfounded with God's next prophetic announcement and command. King Hezekiah had been desperately seeking to stave off the threatening overtures from Babylon by cultivating assistance from Egypt. The King of Assyria, Sargon II, had attacked the coastal city of Ashdod to the south and was threatening to over-run the whole of remaining Israelite territory, and Egypt was mobilising to attack Assyria in response. At that critical time God spoke to Isaiah and said, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet".

God explained the outrageous necessity to the stunned Isaiah, that it was a sign and portent for both Egypt and Cush to the south "so that the king of Assyria will lead away naked and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old with buttocks bared – to Egypt's shame. Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame." ⁵⁹

God then went on to announce a chain of four prophecies associated with "the last days" of the world, when both Egypt and Assyria would be restored to divine favour together with purged Remnant Israel. An act of divine judgement would cause Egypt to fear; five Egyptian cities would swear allegiance to the Lord God; these Egyptians would raise an altar to God in Egypt; and finally Egypt, Assyria and Israel would be linked together as one people⁶⁰. So, for the next three years Isaiah disciplined himself to obey God and went naked and barefoot among Judah's mocking inhabitants.

Meanwhile, God declared, the rampaging Assyrians threatening the destruction of Judah among others could not be resisted, not

⁵⁸ Isaiah 6:1-8

⁵⁹ Isaiah 20:1-6

⁶⁰ Isaiah 19:16-25

because of their vaunted military might, but because they were a weapon in God's hand to punish disobedient Judah. What would emerge from the fires of coming judgment would be a purified Remnant Israel. Old Israel was being punished for disobedience, transgression of the Law of God, rejection of the revelation of God to and through them to the nations of the world. But the true Israel within the false and failed Israel would be preserved, purified and perfected as an obedient and holy instrument of God to the world.

Isaiah declared several times under the explicit direction of God that a "new era" was about to be initiated:

"I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare:
before they spring into being
I announce them to you . . .

"Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" . . .

"From now on I will tell you of new things,
of hidden things unknown to you.
They are created now, and not long ago;
you have not heard of them before today . . ."
(my emphasis)

With the apostasy of Israel/Judah, and the subsequent judgment of God upon them, the old era of prophecy ended and a new era of unfolding of divine "mysteries" began ("of hidden things unknown to you . . . created now . . . you have not heard of them before today"). Samuel had ushered in the speaking revelations of the purposes of God, and Elijah had ushered in the sign revelations of the purposes of God. Now Isaiah ushered in the written revelations of the purposes of God.

The significance of this change of prophetic emphasis was related to the change in the character of the predicament of the prophet. From Nathan to Micah, God had been concerned with the possibilities of Israel's repentance and recovery; but from Isaiah to Malachi, God was concerned with their regeneration and restoration as a believing Remnant people. Therefore, the prophetic function was not just directed towards a contemporary Judah, but a future Remnant Israel and "a people who were not my people." This future element was divided into two segments: near future, and distant future.

The central feature of the near future was the coming of the foretold Messiah, the Anointed Servant of God, in humility and sacrifice. The central feature of the distant future was the second coming of the Messiah in majesty and conquest. The purpose of the first coming of the Messiah would be three-fold: (i) to establish God's true kingdom on earth; (ii) to complete God's redemption of his creatures; and (iii) to complete the revelation of the true nature and person of God.

The purpose of the second coming of the Messiah would also be three-fold: (i) to remove his faithful followers from the terrors of God's judgment in the "last days" of the world; (ii) to defeat the Satanic forces of evil in the world; and (iii) to rule personally over the kingdom of God in a new heavens and new earth, in association with his new chosen people, the new Israel of true believers. The centrality of the person of the Messiah could be said to have originated from a prophetic message of a patriarch rather than from a prophet. In the Book of Genesis the dying Jacob/Israel prophesied:

"Gather round so that I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come . . .

The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his . . ."

David was another who gave a prophetic prediction of the Messiah:

"The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'
The Lord will extend your mighty sceptre from Zion;
you will rule in the midst of your enemies . . .'"

There were two watersheds in Isaiah's prophetic service: (i) his vision of the Throne of God at his ordination; and (ii) his vision of the Messiah as a Servant-Redeemer. Isaiah prophesied regarding the coming of a "Mighty One";

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

"He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the
earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist . . ."
(my emphasis)

So, a disobedient House of Jacob/Israel, and a disobedient House of Judah/David, were both instruments of God's purposes, and an obedient Remnant Israel would be preserved, out of whom would come the perfect servant of God, the Messiah: ". . . in the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan . . ."

But before the Perfect Servant of God appeared—"my servant . . . my chosen . . . my Spirit on him . . ."—there was another servant

mentioned by God: "one from the north . . . who calls on my name". This was Cyrus, king of Media-Persia, of whom it was said, "the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia" to open up the way for a Remnant Israel to be preserved. Cyrus was the one from the east "stirred up" by God, and called to "righteousness in his service."

Cyrus came originally from Persia "in the east", and then went on to conquer Media "in the north" before his other conquests. Isaiah was astonished at this prophecy, for there was no contemporary indication of the significant rise of the Persians against the current empires of Assyria, Egypt and Babylon, who had their own struggles against rivals - the Scythians and the Urartu, to the north, and the Ethiopians in the south. But he trusted in the revelations of the visions, and declared to his listeners and readers:

"Who told us this from the beginning so that we could know, or beforehand so that we could say, 'He was right'? No-one told us of this, no-one foretold it, no-one heard any words from you. I was the first to tell Zion, 'Look, here they are.'" I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings. I look but there is no-one—no-one among them to give counsel, no-one to give answer when I ask them. See, they are all false. Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion."

The great Xerxes, Agamemnon, Achilles and Hector would all become insubstantial myths, Troy and Athens disappear amid ruins and historical mists, but a New Israel and Jerusalem would remain forever.

God unfolded to Isaiah some of the glories ahead for the Remnant of Israel, and explained further how he would do it:

"This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut. I will go before you and will level the mountains. I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places for you, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by name . . ."

Isaiah understood the prophecy to mean that God was appointing the future king of Persia, Cyrus, to a special task for God, in which all his conquests would be a prelude. Cyrus, instructed by God, would dry up the waters of the Euphrates by a unique engineering feat to enter Babylon secretly; he would then throw open its vaunted gates of brass and iron bars for his army, in order that he might learn "the power and majesty" of God, and later open the way for the Remnant Israel to return to Jerusalem:

"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, 'My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man who to fulfil my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about, what I have planned, that will I do . . . I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel'".

That was the application of the near-future restoration of Israel provided by Cyrus of Persia a "man for God's purpose . . . from the east, Persia (and the north, Media) . . . from a far-off land." There was still another, distant future, restoration of the Remnant to Israel — "in the Day of the Lord".

God showed to Isaiah how that, from this purged Remnant Israel would come forth the Messiah:

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him —
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,

the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord — and he will
delight in the fear of the Lord."

This could not be the contemporary King Hezekiah, Isaiah decided, because, although he had begun to remove the idolatries and apostasies of Judah, he had already appeared and this prophecy was for the future. The Messiah to come, said God, "will give decisions for the poor of the earth; he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth." He would alter the predatory nature of the wild

animals, as well as human creatures. Also, "In that day . . . the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples...the nations will rally to him . . . in that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria . . . he will gather the exiles of Israel from the four quarters of the earth . . ."

"In that day" Judah and Israel would be one people in the Remnant Israel, with no tribal jealousies or hostilities. The kindred tribes of Canaan who were their traditional neighbouring tribal enemies—the Arabs—would be subject to them, and from the Nile to the Euphrates there would be peace and inter-communication. "In the last days" a restored Remnant Israel would fulfil that destiny as they became the instrument of witness for God in the world:

"In that day you will say; 'I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.'"

Meanwhile Isaiah was facing a personal crisis. King Hezekiah was under great pressure to make an alliance with Egypt to oppose the advancing Assyrians, but Isaiah was warning him that the policy was against the purposes of God for Israel. The Philistine city of Ashdod had rebelled against Assyria with support from Egypt and Ethiopia, and they had sought support from King Hezekiah. It was at this point that God commanded a shocked Isaiah:

"Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet . . . as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old."

For three years Isaiah walked naked (probably with only a loincloth!) in solitary protest against any alliance with Egypt and Ethiopia in a humiliating public rebuke from the streets to the royal palace. In this same period, with the Assyrians occupied with suppressing the many revolts against them, the Babylonian king, Merodach-baladan took the opportunity to extend Babylonian

interests while undermining Assyria's. Egypt was also distracted elsewhere with incitements and alliances. But by 701 BC Merodach-baladan was defeated and replaced by a member of the royal family, a native Chaldean, Bel-ibni. Then King Sennacherib of Assyria decided to attack and subdue Judah. He marched southwards with mounting successes—Sidon, Joppa and Lachish—and defeated a large force of Egyptians at Ekron. He captured 46 walled cities belonging to Hezekiah, took over 200,000 Judeans captive, and boasted that he had "Hezekiah of Jerusalem like a caged bird".

During this period Hezekiah, caught between the warring ambitions of Assyria and Egypt, received another warning about the inevitable conquest of Jerusalem. He took the letter into the Temple and again prayed to Jehovah:

"O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; listen to all the words that Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.

"It is true, O Lord, that the Syrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God."

Jehovah acknowledged the action and faith of Hezekiah and sent the prophet Isaiah to him with the divine assurance of deliverance from the arrogant Assyrians, couched in words of mocking dismissal and contempt more incisive than the field commander's ultimatum. Isaiah concluded his message from God:

"This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah: This year you will eat what grows by itself, and the second year what springs from that. But in the third year sow and reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

"Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above. For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and

out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this".

Having survived the siege, Hezekiah became fatally afflicted with ulcerated abscesses. In addition, Isaiah was told by God to go to Hezekiah and tell the king that his time to die had come—if he fatalistically accepted as final the normal course of the disease. Hezekiah had seen the miracles wrought by God, and he inferred from the prophet's remarks an implied rebuke that he had not exercised enough faith in God. So he prayed to God for healing. God sent Isaiah to the king with the reply:

"I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.

"This is the Lord's sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised. I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz."

The sun-dial of Ahaz had been copied from those he had seen in Babylon when he visited the pagan temple to Marduk. The sun-dial was divided into sections depicting twelve hours, and the time determined by the shadow of the sun. The retrogression of the shadow might have been caused by a refraction such as a cloud interposing between the gnomon and the sun-dial. It did not require a convulsion in the stellar system such as cynics scornfully suggested. The divine intervention was not evident in the fact of the shadow's response, but that it responded at the time and place as Hezekiah and God agreed. But the event was so unique that the Babylonians even sent special envoys to hear about it at first-hand

The extent of Hezekiah's faith in the sign was not known, but it seemed to require a further intervention by Isaiah and God, when Isaiah told the king to apply a compress of figs and apply it to the ulcerated areas of his body. The combination of both faith and treatment prompted Hezekiah's recovery.

However, Hezekiah's remarkable experience and recovery from death for another fifteen years was not of great benefit, either to him

or the nation; in fact, it was a curse. When news of Hezekiah's recovery reached the king of Babylon, he sent a delegation to Hezekiah with a gift and letter proposing an alliance. He was seeking to restore Babylon's pre-eminence following on the death of the king of Assyria, and Hezekiah was flattered by the recognition. He showed the Babylonian delegation all the treasures he had accumulated, and even the military equipment, in his eagerness to impress the Babylonians.

When Isaiah heard of the incident he went to see Hezekiah to enquire what the Babylonians wanted. Hezekiah took great pride in describing the visit and his response:

"They saw everything in my palace. There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them."

Then Isaiah told Hezekiah grimly of the vision God had given him in response to his foolish action with the Babylonians:

"Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

Isaiah informed the astonished Hezekiah that Assyria was not Judah's greatest enemy, but Babylon. Jehovah was more interested in Babylon than in Assyria or any other nation, and it would be Babylon that would eventually destroy Judah, and not Assyria. But the time was coming after that period of destruction and sorrow for Judah—"the Day of Jehovah"—when Babylon, too, would be punished for her own record of iniquities;

"The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light. I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless . . ."

God's "holy ones", "my warriors", were those who carried out His

purposes, some wittingly and some unwittingly. This also applied to Egypt or Syria, Assyria or Babylon, whom He individually designated "my servant" when each at some point was subject to His will and plans. He, Jehovah, was already at work among the nations — "a noise on the mountains . . . an uproar among the kingdoms . . . nations massing together"—not because they were in anarchic confusion but because He was moving them in accordance with His divine will.

The Babylonians did not yet know it, but it had already been determined by God that, after their time of dominance, they would be replaced by the Medes.

"Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah. She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there . . ."

What was awesome to Isaiah was that God was using these microcosmic current events in the Mesopotamian-Mediterranean region of the world as a parable for the macrocosmic future history of the world. If he could understand the future of the world in the light of these current events, then it must be God's purpose to enlighten the understanding of those living in the future from what was happening around him now.

It appeared to Isaiah, therefore, that the three most significant lessons to be learned from the visions of God were: (i) the removal of a disobedient Israel from her previous divine destiny of "enlightening the world", and her punishment by Dispersion and persecution until the predestined "Day of Jehovah"; (ii) the safeguarding and reinstatement of a faithful Remnant of Israel until that "Day of Jehovah", and the appearance of a divinely appointed Davidic Deliverer; (iii) the centrality of Babylon throughout history as the quintessence of evil and opposition to the plans of God, and its eventual destruction.

This was confirmed as the revelation unfolded in the words of God to Isaiah:

"On the day the Lord gives you relief from suffering and turmoil

and cruel bondage, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: 'How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended! The Lord has broken the rod of the wicked, the sceptre of the rulers. which in anger struck down peoples with unceasing blows. and in fury subdued nations with relentless aggression . . .

It was becoming apparent to Isaiah that Babylon was to Satan what Jerusalem was to God; it was an operational centre from which to direct all the respective essentials for the Satanic rule on earth. Babylon the Empire would come and go, as it had since the early stages of its existence; but Babylon the City, with its religious, political and commercial systems, would continue to influence the nations of the world in the same way as would Jerusalem the City for the fulfilment of God's purposes. Babylon the Empire could control the heartland of Asia, much as the Assyrian Empire aspired to do; but Babylon the City had and would spread its web right across the world.

So Isaiah understood when God showed him the fall of Babylon in a vision that what appeared to be the triumph of Satan "in that day", in procuring the captivity of God's people in Satan's own city, God was preparing to demonstrate that even there God had His chosen servants in prophets and kings to fulfil His cosmic purposes.

Except for Cyrus, the names of the future rulers in Babylon were not made known to Isaiah, but the circumstances and results were revealed. Babylon's imminent destruction in the near future would be nothing compared with its ultimate destruction in the last days of the world. Babylon the City might boast that her Satanic systems were so established that she would never be widowed nor be without offspring in all the world where they prevailed, but none of her vaunted Chaldean divinations would be able to foretell the catastrophic enormity of her final end.

Now to Isaiah there was revealed this Perfect Servant, the Messiah, "the Anointed of God", "the Branch out of Judah". Israel, the wife of God, was the matrix from which the Servant of God had been promised from the beginning, Israel had become unfaithful and adulterous, and had ceased to be a true wife, a faithful people, a

royal priesthood; but still, out of her would come "the seed of the woman" promised to Eve, and "the seed of David", promised to him and his family, who would reign forever:

"And now the Lord says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength - he says; 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth'".

Isaiah was stunned with this new revelation regarding the Messiah. He had accepted the inevitability of Israel's punishment for disobedience to include their removal from the privileges of being God's people in God's Promised Land, their Dispersion across the world and persecution there; but he had assumed that the faithful Remnant of Israel would inherit the privileges and promises as God's restored instrument on earth. What God was showing to him now was that restored Israel was no longer to be the exclusive instrument of God's purpose - it was "too small a thing"—but that the Messiah would replace Israel as "a light for the Gentiles" and through them "bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

The revelation continued:

"This is what the Lord says - the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation. to the servant of rulers; 'Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you . . .

In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come and to those in darkness, 'Be free!' " (my emphasis)

In all his meditations in the Presence of Jehovah, as he sought understanding of the visions, Isaiah was conscious of two important

emphases: (i) God was addressing and effecting political events as they related to Israel and the nations in the pursuit of His purposes; (ii) God was addressing and effecting spiritual solutions permeating these events as they related to Israel and the nations in the pursuit of His purposes. However, the failure of both Israel and the nations to adequately respond to His servants over the centuries would bring on to the world scene the Messiah, as the Perfect Servant-Redeemer who would successfully accomplish all of God's spiritual and political purposes. This would include the purging of Remnant Israel, and the salvation of a faithful body of believers from among the nations of the world, who would succeed where the nation of Israel had failed.

The purifying process would of necessity require sacrifice, because in the past it was the shedding of blood of animals which made atonement for the sinner. It was an unblemished sacrifice which was acceptable to God on behalf of others. The offering became one with the offerer through the laving on of the hands of the priest. These effected the redemption of the offerer from the bondage of sin, and release into a new freedom of relationship with God. And the Messiah was to be the Redeemer. So God as Redeemer, as well as Deliverer (as He had been in bringing His people out of the bondage of Egypt) would be revealed in His Perfect Servant, who would have to die on behalf of others to fulfil the divinely revealed symbolism of past revelations. Isaiah was not unduly surprised, therefore, at his next revelation from God:

"See, my servant will act wisely, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness—so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand."

The message of hope for Israel and the nations was not so much freedom from the tyranny of Babylonian wickedness as deliverance from the bondage of sin through God's Suffering Perfect Servant.

The vision was about necessary stages of humiliation, and suffering to increasing levels of exaltation. But who was this unique Person in such abject circumstances who was yet so pleasing and acceptable to God? One who was with God in eternity. Isaac recalled Solomon's words about such a person:

"I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was the craftsman at his side, I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind".

But was the triumphantly incarnated Messiah to pass through indescribable humiliation and suffering beyond human comprehension, as he accomplished his work of redemption, on his way to the consummation of the cosmic purposes of God and His eternal triumphs? The world to be redeemed—both Israel and the nations—would certainly be startled and dismayed at the enormity of this suffering, bewildered by the apparent indifference of Jehovah; puzzled as to why such a blameless life should be subjected to such humiliation and rejection. Only with his death and subsequent resurrection could it be revealed that the sacrifice was for the sins of others and not his own. This seemed to be implied with the following words from God:

"Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life, and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

"Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

Isaiah's final visions were of the triumph of God's ways of judgment and righteous government in the last days of the world. With the sacrifice of the Suffering Servant the days of animal sacrifices and religious rituals had ended. God would delight in all those with humble and contrite hearts, who accepted God's offer of salvation through the work of the Servant-Redeemer. The ransomed people of Jehovah would return to Jerusalem with triumph and gladness, and everlasting blessings would flow from the City of God to the whole world.

Finally, with the wicked of the world and hell judged and punished. God would usher in "a new heavens and new earth":

"Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more...As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me, so will your name and descendants endure . . ."

The people of this Messiah would be the true Israel, the inheritors of the kingdom of God. Isaiah described them:

"In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God. Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous . . ."

"In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of the people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea.

"He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth . . ."

JEREMIAH

Jeremiah was prophesying about the same age as the “minor” prophet Zephaniah, living in Jerusalem at the same time. But while Zephaniah was a member of the royal family, Jeremiah was a priest in a small village, Anathoth, three miles north-east of Jerusalem. Living in Anathoth was an indication that he was of the line of the renegade priest, Abiathar, who was deposed from the high priesthood by Solomon. Jeremiah's uncle, Shallum, was the husband of Huldah the prophetess, who had been responsible for interpreting the lost and recently discovered Book of the Law.

Jeremiah was the most charismatic of the prophets of the period, his volatile personality shining through his messages, and his responses to individuals and circumstances. Yet, when God called him to be a prophet, he disclaimed any gifts for the task.

“The word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’

“Ah, Sovereign Lord, I said, ‘I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.’

“But the Lord said to me: ‘Do not say “I am only a child.”. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you, and will rescue you, declares the Lord.’

“Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.’” (my emphasis)

Jeremiah was already a priest in a family of priests; and, in his twenties, he was approaching the age of ordained priestly service at thirty. His initial response to God, therefore—“I do not know how to speak; I am only a child”—was something more than modesty, false or otherwise. The explanation for his reluctance was in God's momentous challenge to him: “I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations and kingdoms, to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.” It was a breath-taking

commission by any standard at any time, but in the surrounding circumstances of that period, with Assyria, Egypt and Babylon all battling for dominance, ten of Israel's twelve tribes already dispersed and Isaiah's prophecies of captivity for the other two, it was mind-staggering for Jeremiah.

But God's other three divine statements—"I know you . . . I formed you . . . I set you apart"—Jeremiah knew were all solemnized signs of God's ordination and had been experienced by others, such as, for example, Israel's earlier Judges, Samson and Samuel. What Jeremiah found overwhelming was that he was a chosen vessel by God "for the nations". When he spoke of not knowing "how to speak", it was not in his ignorance of foreign languages—he knew that Jonah and Nahum had been able to deliver their prophetic messages to Assyria - but that he had no message for the nations. As a member of Israel's priesthood Jeremiah believed that his sole task was to represent God's interests to His chosen people, and their interests to God. As far as the pagan nations were concerned, he was ignorant as a child.

God would not listen to Jeremiah's excuses: "You must go to everyone . . . and say whatever I command you." To Jeremiah, these words meant not only addressing the neighbouring tribes of Canaan, but also the major powers beyond—Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Media, Persia, all struggling for domination, and all included in God's plans according to the earlier prophets. Jeremiah knew the words of David the Psalmist:

"Let all the earth fear the Lord,
let all the people of the world revere him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and It stood firm.
The Lord foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.
But the plans of the Lord stand firm for ever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations."

Jeremiah did not need a prior message; he would have the words of Jehovah Himself. Jeremiah knew from history and experience that

the voice of' the priest was never heard in the Sanctuary; only God's voice was heard there. But the voice of the prophet was the voice of God to the world. The words of God to and through him were to be both constructive and destructive, to predict the nations' rise and fall according to their response to the words of God. Words and actions were the same thing to Jehovah. Jeremiah recalled other words from the same Psalm remembered earlier:

"Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance. From heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind—from his dwelling-place he watches all who live on the earth—he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do . . . The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. "

God continued His instructions to Jeremiah:

"From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms Get yourself ready Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you."

Jeremiah was aware of the threat from the north. Although the earlier dangers of possible Assyrian invasion had receded, now the major threat from the north-east was the rising power of Babylon. Only Egypt to the south was a comparable threat. So, all Josiah's vaunted reforms would not stop the outpouring of God's anger against Judah at the hands of the Babylonians.

There were five kings of Judah during the disturbed period of Jeremiah's prophesying, but he mentioned only three, omitting Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin. These two were nondescript individuals who only reigned for about six months between them. Of the others—Josiah, Jehoakim and Zedekiah—Josiah reigned eighteen

years after Jeremiah began his prophetic ministry. Jeremiah knew of the great influence on King Hezekiah wielded by Isaiah the prophet, more than fifty years before, and he knew of the messages and prophecies of the other prophets of the period.

While Jeremiah was preaching his messages of imminent doom and destruction in Jerusalem, intermingled with appeals for repentance, King Josiah was still pursuing his religious reforms. One year before Jeremiah was called by God to prophesy, Josiah had begun his most extreme destruction of the Baal and Asherah idols and shrines, pounding them to dust and scattering it over the graves of those who worshipped them. He personally participated in these activities throughout Judah, and in the eighteenth year of his reign—five years after Jeremiah began to prophesy—he returned to Jerusalem.

On his return to Jerusalem he found that king Josiah had sent two senior officials to the Temple with orders to begin repairing the damage done by king Manasseh years before. It was while this was being done that Moses' 600-year-old Book of the Law, which had been lost, was discovered by the workmen. The spiritual significance of the contents at first baffled Josiah until they were interpreted by a prophetess, Huldah, a relative of Jeremiah. Then the king was appalled to learn of the great disparity between what God commanded of His people and the superficial nature of his own reforms. The most important part was the significance which Jehovah attached to the observing of the Covenants; and the prophecy concerning the potential destruction of the Temple, and the exiling of those who disobeyed. Huldah told the king:

"This is what the Lord says; 'I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all the idols their hands have made my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched. (But) because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you. Therefore I will gather you to

your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place."

When Jeremiah was informed of the contents of the Book of the Law it threw light on God's revelations to him and inspired his own preaching. After expounding both the Book of the Law and his own messages of judgment in Jerusalem he went on a tour of the cities and towns of Judah over the next five years. When he had completed this, God appeared to him again and instructed him to say to the people:

"Reform your ways and your actions and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless."

This was a shattering message to the throngs of people crowding into the newly repaired Temple. The refurbished building, the cleansed and sanctified Sanctuary, the celebratory feasts and services—including the Passover as Moses had instructed—in the view of the people were a symbol of their belief in Jehovah. Yet, according to Jeremiah, Jehovah considered them "deceptive" and "worthless" because they were more concerned with the rituals than the content.

The weakening of Assyrian interests in these final years of its power led Josiah to push Judah's interests into Samaria as far north as the Plain of Jezreel. With the kings of Egypt, Medes and Babylonians all occupied elsewhere, Josiah had rushed into battle against Egypt at Megiddo, where he was killed. Later, Nebuchadnezzar defeated the king of Egypt at the deciding Battle of Carchemish (605 BC) and the meteoric rise of Babylon began. Throughout these twenty years Jeremiah prophesied in Jerusalem and travelled through the cities and towns of Judah to teach the contents of the newly discovered Book of the Law.

Jeremiah's oracular utterances were directed into three categories: (i) proclamations from God; (ii) denunciations of nations; and (iii) lamentations for people. Jeremiah declared that, in spite of prognostications of false prophets and the platitudes of posturing politicians. God's judgment was inevitable and imminent. Unlike the heathen nations, who were at least loyal to their gods, the remaining two tribes of Judah/Benjamin had forsaken their compassionate God for worthless idols; and had exchanged her glorious freedom under God for shameful bondage to Assyria and Egypt. God had planted them as a fruitful Vine, but they had become degenerate offshoots of a strange vine. They had left the God of living water for broken cisterns vainly promising water.

They thought they would not be punished because they respected their religious centre of worship, while ignoring the One who should be the object of their worship. They thought that it was enough to perform religious services in the Temple, while they worshipped the Queen of Heaven and other idols in their homes and streets. What Jeremiah was telling them was that, as far as God was concerned, they might as well eat their sacrifices and offerings; what Jehovah wanted was obedience to His words, not ritual observance—"obey me and I will be your God and you will be my people." What Jehovah wanted was revolution, total change, and not just revival, or renewal, or reform. Instead, they were not listening to their God; they were going backwards, and not forwards.

The reaction of the people to Jeremiah's words was unbridled fury. They were spending their time at the Temple services as never before, they were spending their money on offerings and sacrifices as never before, yet this was not enough to please Jehovah. So what if they also gave some time and money to Baal and Asherah? It was just the custom of the people - everybody did it. God's reply through Jeremiah was unequivocal:

"Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching. Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. What I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the Temple you trust

in, the place I gave to you and your fathers. I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your brothers, the people of Ephraim.

"So do not pray for this people, nor offer plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you. Do you not see what they are doing to the towns and cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem? This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God, or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips. Cut off your hair and throw it away; take up a lament on the barren heights, for the Lord has rejected and abandoned this generation that is under his wrath."

The dramatically shorn Jeremiah returned to his public denunciations of the people of Judah—and of the priests and prophets and kings—at the time of their greatest commitment to Jehovah in recent history. It was not enough for Jehovah that they should be devoted to religious pursuits like other nations; they had been chosen as His people, for His purposes, and His goals, and these were being ignored. Jeremiah was torn between the inflexible demands of a Holy God, and his sympathy with the apparently reasonable objections of his fellow-Judeans, and he pled passionately with God:

"O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me. Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away; 'Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?' Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?"

Yet, in his grief Jeremiah was conscious that he was being called on to experience Jehovah's own grief at His people's stubborn choice of rebellion and punishment, rather than obedience and blessing. Jeremiah had been brought into circumstances where God's experience of His people was his own:

"O, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears. I would weep day and night for the slain of my people. Beware of your friends; do not trust your brothers. For every brother

is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer. Friend deceives friend, and no-one speaks the truth. They have taught their tongues to lie; they weary themselves with sinning. You live in the midst of deception; in their deceit they refuse to acknowledge me."

Jeremiah found that the more time he spent with God and the greater his understanding and perception of God's ways, the more he became isolated from his people, his friends and even his family. It was with his mind that he was identifying with his people; while with his heart he was identifying with Jehovah. Even that was not strictly true. He could sympathise with those among his people who wanted to live a quiet life of simple devotion to God, and who were overwhelmed with the awesome vision of perfection being required of them by Jehovah. Only a few years ago he had been one of them. Now that he had been given his vision of God Himself, and entered into communication with Him regarding His purposes for the world, he wanted all those former friends to experience the same relationship with Jehovah that he knew. God's requirements were clearly stated:

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this; that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on the earth, for in these I delight. "

Instead, the majority continued to worship their useless idols of gold and silver, wood and stone, that they made with their own hands: the same metal or wood or stone they hammered into shapes of gods they used for ornaments or building or fuel. The idols on their shrines were as much use as scarecrows in their fields. Where the idols had been removed in obedience to king Josiah's reforms many had retained the idol-worshipping practices in homes and hearts. They observed circumcision of the body, but not circumcision of the heart. Time was no longer available to them, for God's day of destruction was rushing towards them.

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign (605-4 BC), God told

Jeremiah to commit the visions and revelations He had given him to writing, and to complete a book so that the people might read and repent. To help him with the task Jeremiah obtained the services of an associate, called Baruch, and he recorded what Jeremiah dictated. At the time, Jeremiah was barred from the precincts of the Temple, where he had been accustomed to deliver his prophetic revelations from God, like some of the earlier prophets.

So, throughout that year he dictated to Baruch the visions given to him by God over the previous twenty-three years as a prophet. When the book was completed, Baruch, on Jeremiah's instructions, took it to the Temple and read from it to the people gathered there. When the king heard, he demanded the scroll; and, when he received it, he had an official read it to him while he sat in his winter-palace before a charcoal-brazier. When the reader had completed a few pages, the king called for them to be cut from the scroll, and then he threw them on to the fire and watched them burn, until the whole scroll was destroyed. Some of the king's officials were appalled at the desecration, but he shrugged them off and ordered them to arrest and imprison Jeremiah and Baruch.

But they had been forewarned, and they hurriedly left the city for Jeremiah's home village of Anathoth, and other towns of Judah. In Anathoth, Jeremiah found he was as unwelcome as he had been in Jerusalem, and God revealed to him a conspiracy to have him put to death. During their travels together Jeremiah once more dictated to Baruch the revelations from God, and added to them those that occurred after their flight from Jerusalem. It had become apparent to him that God's message "to the nations" through him would not be through physical travel to the places but through his writings.

The last revelation from God before Jeremiah left Anathoth was to remind the people of their Covenant with God:

"Listen to the terms of this Covenant and tell them to the people of Judah, and those who live in Jerusalem. Tell them that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant - the terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.' I said, 'Obey me and do everything I

command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. Then I will fulfil the oath I swore to your forefathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey' – the land you possess today. "

But Jeremiah had reached a low point in his service for God, and he now complained to God that he had become a laughing-stock of the people, an object of reproach and derision. He had decided that he had had enough of being a prophet, and that he would no more make mention of the divine Name, nor preach any more of the prophetic messages. But the words were like a burning fire within him, and he was compelled to speak them:

"The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonour will never be forgotten. O Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause."

In the year 598 BC the king of Judah, Jehoiakim, withheld the tribute demanded by Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar ordered his army to attack the country. Jehoiakim died before the Babylonians arrived and, after his son, Jehoichin, reigned for only three months, he was replaced by his brother, Zedekiah, at the insistence of Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah was a weakling who always chose the line of least resistance. At the time the two major political factions in Jerusalem were composed of pro-Babylonians and pro-Egyptians, and Zedekiah was pushed and pulled between the two rival groups, with false prophets creating additional confusion as they sought favour by denouncing Jeremiah's prophetic judgments.

Through Jeremiah God specified why the false prophets were adjudged "godless": as messengers of truth they were untruthful; as messengers of purity they were impure; as messengers of justice they were unjust; as messengers of morality they were immoral. They were moral relativists who had sold their bodies and minds for money and status and power, and had become perverted in the pursuit of personal gain. Even worse, they misrepresented

the people's conception of God.

So Jeremiah declared to the people "God's revolutionary manifesto":

"It is better to have no king than a bad king; it is better to have no rulers than have rulers whose personal ambitions are at variance with the well-being of the people; it is better to have no officials than to have officials who were more concerned with salaries and security than with the needs of the people they were supposed to serve; it is better to be without civil authorities than civil authorities whose policies replace spiritual values with material goals; it is better to have no prophets than have prophets who preach platitudes and seek personal power; it is better to have no priests than to have priests who care more for their religious system than for the souls of the people; it is better to have no priests than to have priests whose beliefs could be altered by false idols and ideologies; it is better to have no priests than have priests who had never personally met nor talked with their God; it is better to have no Word of God than a Word of God misconstrued, misinterpreted and misapplied."

Jeremiah was both appalled and enthralled with the revelation from God. It was a divine manifesto for spiritual and political revolution. It was both a vision of superlative splendour of the kingdom of God, and of staggering submission to the rule of God. It was the vision seen and embraced by Abraham and Moses, by Samuel and David, by Elijah and Isaiah. It was a vision for the committed few, and not for the compromising many.

The freshly inspired Jeremiah went to his usual place in the courtyard of the Temple to proclaim the revolutionary message from God. It provoked an uproar among the authorities and people, and Jeremiah was arrested for heresy. When the officials of Judah heard about the disturbance, they went up from the royal palace to the Temple and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate. There the priests and the false prophets said to the officials and all the people, "This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears"

But Jeremiah's unapologetic response was sufficient to cause them to reconsider:

"The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he pronounced against you. As for me, I am in your hands to do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to speak all these words in your hearing."

It was an incredible experience for Jeremiah. On the one hand the nation's king, civil and spiritual leaders, and the people; and, on the other hand, he, a solitary man, confronting them all with the confident affirmation that he alone knew what was God's will. If the whole world was against him in this affirmation, then he was against the world. What the Assyrian threat had been to Isaiah and Israel's ten tribes, the greater Babylonian threat was poised to engulf the remaining two tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Meanwhile, Jerusalem had been spared the drastic consequences of defiance and destruction in the Babylonian siege of the city because Nebuchadnezzar had been called away to Babylon with the news of his father's serious illness. For some time after his father had died, Nebuchadnezzar was involved in his own coronation ceremonies. Then Nebuchadnezzar consolidated his power over the surrounding territories, before once again dealing with Jerusalem. During this period the Babylonian army eased the restrictions of their siege around Jerusalem, without moving away from the city surroundings.

These were desperate times for Jeremiah. He was officially under detention in the royal guard-house. He was condemned and rejected by family, friends and neighbours, by fellow-priests and prophets, by kings, princes and people. He only had his secretary, Baruch, as a companion. In that dark night of the soul God again appeared to him with a fresh vision of the future forgiveness, healing and glory

for Israel, deliverance for the city and a glorious future for city and people. The days were coming God told him, when He would make a "New Covenant" with both Israel and Judah, a Covenant in which He "would put the laws in their minds and hearts". In this way He would no longer be a distant God but a living Father to His people.

In the New Covenant relationship each individual would have independent access to Him. There would be no need for a Tabernacle or Temple with furnishings priests, sacrifices and services, because "all will know me, from the least to the greatest." The essential parts of the Law would be interpreted by the indwelling Spirit in the individual believer. The aspiration would no longer be to be acceptable to God, but to be one with God. God had created men and women to reflect the nature of God, and the Law was a pedagogue directing how this could be apprehended in certain conditions. But the Law itself was not perfect, so it could not make men and women perfect; only God Himself could do that. Knowledge of the will of God through the Laws could be learned by study; but knowledge of God Himself could only be experienced in a personal relationship. They will know me, said God, because My Law will be in their hearts and minds, and My Presence will be in their personalities and performances. As inevitably as the sun and the moon, the stars, the seasons and the weather, I will be a part of their daily experience.

So what was to be done under the New Covenant? Two things, said God: (i)"I will forgive their wickedness" and (ii)"I will remember their sins no more". The wickednesses were the external acts of the sinner; the sins were the internal thoughts and imaginations of the heart that were evil continually, and which prompted the wicked acts. Both had to be dealt with in the perfecting of the individual to be fit for the presence of God. This perfection, or moral cleansing, was not something that could be obtained by individual effort; it was something to be received as a gift. In contrast with the endless ritual ceremonies and sacrifices required under the Law, the New Covenant would provide a full and final cleansing from sin and its associated wickedness, rendering the individual capable of reflecting the image and nature

of God. It is the pure in heart only who see God.

The Babylonian siege began to be intensified once more as Nebuchadnezzar consolidated his rule over outlying territories, and the pressures and antagonisms against Jeremiah increased accordingly because he called for submission to Babylon as God commanded. Eventually the city officials went to the Babylonian puppet-king Zedekiah and said:

"This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of these people but their ruin."

"He is in your hands," Zedekiah told them unctuously. "The king can do nothing to oppose you."

The officials took Jeremiah from the bearable conditions of the royal guard-house and put him into a disused cistern belonging to one of the princes. The cistern held no water, but its floor held a deep deposit of mud and refuse. Jeremiah gradually sank down into it. But a royal slave-eunuch saw this and he reported to the king that if Jeremiah were left in the cistern he would certainly die; so the king secretly ordered his removal, and the slave-eunuch pulled Jeremiah out and put him back into the royal guard-house.

Shortly afterwards, the desperate Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah once again, and swore on oath that if Jeremiah gave him his honest opinion about the city's disastrous situation he would not be put to death for being candid about what he really thought was likely to happen. Jeremiah repeated that the only alternatives were to go out and surrender to the Babylonians, or suffer an even worse fate when the city was captured by Nebuchadnezzar on his return. Zedekiah swore Jeremiah to silence about the secret interview, and Jeremiah agreed, giving a much-diluted report to the princes when they heard of his removal to the palace and demanded an explanation from him. After only a short detention Jeremiah was allowed to go free.

When Nebuchadnezzar returned to the command of his besieging army around Jerusalem he quickly and ruthlessly forced a breach in the city walls and entered Jerusalem. King Zedekiah and

his leading officials left the palace through the gardens, and the south gate of the city, and headed towards the Jordan Valley. But the Babylonians quickly followed and the fleeing royal family were captured in the plains of Jericho, and Zedekiah brought before Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian king had the royal princes slaughtered, as well as the leading officials and nobles who had resisted him, in the presence of Zedekiah, and then he had Zedekiah's eyes put out, his feet put in shackles, and led away to captivity in Babylon, together with the elite of Judah's aristocracy and about ten thousand officials and artisans. This had left an uneasy atmosphere of fear, tension and hostility in Jerusalem as the city's remaining inhabitants faced an uncertain future with the increasingly powerful Babylonian overlords. The more cautious among them remembered that Jeremiah's doom-laden messages were a reflection of those preached by the prophet Isaiah and others.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed the captain of his bodyguard, Nebuzaradan, to oversee the demolition of Jerusalem, ordering the Temple, the royal buildings, and all the great houses to be razed by fire, and the city walls to be reduced to rubble. The Temple furnishings and vessels were removed to Babylon to be put in the temples there, and another large number of representative members of the aristocracy and middle classes were sent into captivity in Babylon to join those already there. Only a few of the poorest people were left in the land of Judah. The holocaust that had struck the ten tribes of Israel's northern kingdom a hundred years before had now engulfed the two remaining tribes of the southern kingdom of Judah, and the nation of Israel was decimated and dispersed as God had foretold. The judge and perpetrator was their God. The cause was the disobedient and unrepentant Jewish people.

Jeremiah had remained in his prison in Jerusalem until he was brought before Nebuchadnezzar. Both his own testimony regarding his imprisonment, and the evidence of others, showed that he had been a consistent and public advocate of submission to Babylon. So Nebuchadnezzar had him released from his fetters and, after giving him a choice of going to Babylon, and Jeremiah saying that he

preferred to remain in Jerusalem, he had him escorted to Ramah, the centre of the schools of the prophets, five miles from Jerusalem. Jeremiah was put under the supervision and protection of Gedaliah, the new Babylon-appointed governor of what remained of Judean territory. Gedaliah's function was to see that the remaining inhabitants settled down peaceably under the new regime, and to bring order out of the civil chaos of the countryside.

Jeremiah spent his days walking about the city, picking his way over the rubble, sitting on the ruined walls of buildings, weeping over the destroyed glory of the once beautiful city and its history. He committed his thoughts in dictation to Baruch in a scroll of Hebrew acrostic Lamentations:

"How deserted lies the city, once so full of people. How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations. She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. How the Lord has covered the Daughter of Zion with the cloud of his anger. He has hurled down the splendour of Israel from heaven to earth; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger . . .

"Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no-one gives it to them. Those killed by the sword are better off than those who die of famine; racked with hunger, they waste away for lack of food from the field. With their own hands compassionate women have cooked their own children, who became their food when my people were destroyed".

Jeremiah spent the remaining years of his life in Egypt. His visions were ended, but he continued to reflect and to dictate his recollections and revelations to Baruch. The history of Israel and Judah as a nation had ended with the fall of Jerusalem, and the Dispersion of the people; but there was hope for a Remnant Israel from among the nations where they were scattered. The most significant of these nations, in Jeremiah's opinion, was Babylon. That was evident from other prophets besides himself. For the present, while Israel was under God's judgment and in pursuit of His own purposes, Babylon was the object of divine favour—presumably because it had been a faithful instrument of God's current plans.

Over the next few years Nebuchadnezzar established the Babylonian empire in the region, absorbing the neighbouring nations as Jeremiah had prophesied. The Egyptian Pharaoh was defeated, deposed and replaced by an Egyptian General, Amasis. When he in turn revolted against Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Egypt and appropriated its northern regions. In one of God's earlier visions to Jeremiah He had stated regarding the looming judgment of His people:

"Because you have not listened to my words I will summon all the peoples of the north, and my servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and I bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations . . . But when the seventy years are fulfilled, I will punish the king of Babylon and his nation . . . They themselves will be enslaved by many nations and great kings; I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands. "

When the Babylonians least expected it—"while they are aroused, I will set out a feast for them and make them drunk, so that they shout with laughter then sleep forever"—they would be replaced by a nation more amenable to God's will for a time, probably Cyrus of the Persians, as Isaiah had prophesied .

Jeremiah put his final reflections and revelations into a scroll, and sent Baruch's brother, Seraiah, to Babylon with it, for the comfort of the exiles there. Jeremiah had heard that there were prophets there, and they would appreciate his words as much as he had appreciated Isaiah's and others.

DANIEL

The first deportation of exiles from Judah to Babylon occurred in 605 BC, and this included Daniel and his three close friends. The second deportation included Ezekiel in 597 BC. The third and last took place in 586 BC when the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and re-populated the country with foreign immigrants.

Isaiah and Jeremiah, having prophetically revealed the plans of God's future "New Remnant" and "New Covenant for His people, Israel, God now communicated to Daniel the plan of the future "New

Kingdom" to emerge from the ashes of the destruction of Israel. Isaiah had prophesied during the last days of the northern kingdom of Israel before their dispersion by the Assyrians; and before the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians. Jeremiah began his prophetic life in Jerusalem and Judah, and ended it in exile in Egypt. Daniel began and ended his prophetic life in exile in Babylon, during the Babylonian empire's rise and fall.

There is no record that Daniel and Jeremiah ever met, but it is likely that Daniel read the letter that Jeremiah sent to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. He would also have read the prophecies of Isaiah concerning Israel, Assyria and Babylon, their significance and consequences. Daniel knew, therefore, that the judgment inflicted upon Israel was also a judgment on the nations of the world surrounding Israel. He knew from both Isaiah and Jeremiah that God was using the heathen rulers of the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Greek empires to fulfil His purposes in the present and the near future, but the distant future was hidden from him. Isaiah had said, regarding God's purpose in Cyrus, king of Persia:

"I am the Lord, who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt', and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid.'" (my emphasis)

Jeremiah had God speaking of the imperial ruler of Babylon as "my servant Nebuchadnezzar" and had prophesied that God had set a limit to the Israelites' exile in Babylon in the words:

"This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you'". (my emphasis)

In the first Babylonian attack and siege on Judah, when Nebuchadnezzar placed his puppet king Zedekiah on the throne in Jerusalem and took away several thousands of the leading Judean

aristocracy and artisans as hostages to Babylon, Daniel was one of the exiles. From these first captives - which had also included Ezekiel —certain youths were selected from the royal family and aristocracy of Judah for special education and possible advancement in the Babylonian court.

The schools in Babylon were usually attached to the temples, and were run by priests. The predominant element in their teaching was the emphasis given to astronomy and astrology, and the authorities in this field were designated "Chaldeans" from their specialist interest in occult beliefs and practices. Their scientific studies in astronomy were greatly respected for centuries, and their esoteric studies in astrology were greatly feared for much longer.

Daniel and his three Judean companions - Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, re-named by the Babylonians as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—were enrolled in these studies and, while all of them impressed their teachers, Daniel quickly surpassed the others with his intellectual grasp of the great masters of astronomy and astrology. Daniel's pre-eminence was evident in the changing of his name to Belshazzar, meaning "prince of Bel", the favourite early Babylonian god. But Daniel preferred, and continued to use, his own Hebrew name, meaning "God is judge".

It was part of the task of the chief marshal of the royal court to watch out for promising graduates as potential officials, and he quickly identified Daniel and his three companions as such, and they were given the special status of royal beneficiaries of food and wine. Daniel decided that he could not continue to eat the royal issue of food and wine, and he courteously requested the royal court marshal for permission to refrain from eating it. He explained how the Babylonian practice of offering a token part of the food and wine to the gods before eating would be a violation of his God's commandments regarding idolatry. The court official was sympathetic, for he had grown to respect Daniel and his three companions, but he confessed he had a problem with Daniel's request:

"I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men

of your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

Daniel sympathized with the official's quandary but, without telling him, he proposed to their immediate superior that they be given nothing but a vegetarian meal and water for ten days; and, when, at the end of ten days, it was evident that they were in better shape and appearance than his other charges, they were permitted to continue with their uncompromising vegetarian diet. It was not that Daniel and his companions were vegetarians on principle, for it was said of Daniel later that he enjoyed "choice food, meat and wine"; but they preferred eating simple vegetable meals freed from the Babylon association with idolatry. The high-risk commitment of the four youths to a walk of obedience to God, in an enemy court of a pagan country, was approved by God. In all the nation of Israel He had only a very few servants of such integrity. Now these gifted youths had declared themselves ready for service. So it was stated:

"God gave to these four young men knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds."

This divine emphasis on Daniel's additional gifts apparently was necessary if Daniel and his companions were to understand the difference between the rational, spiritual and spiritist realms in the complex Chaldean occultism in Babylon. In the rational realm, natural abilities could be cultivated intellectually, but in the spiritual realm God ruled and conducted His will in and through individuals by means of the Spirit of God acting on the responsive spirits of obedient believers; while, in the spiritist realm, Satan ruled and conducted his purposes by means of demonically inspired manipulations to infiltrate and influence the mind and spirits of the spiritually disobedient. These were important distinctions because the predominant influence in Babylon was held by the Chaldean astrologers with their occult divinations and practices. But it was King Nebuchadnezzar himself who, after receiving reports of Daniel and his three companions, sent for them to examine their progress in education and training, and who found them superlatively equipped in all matters relating to astronomy and astrology, which was his own prime interest.

Daniel was in Babylon at a unique time in divine and world history. For the first time since the creation of humankind God was revealing in considerable detail His purpose for the nations of the world beyond his chosen people, the Jews—and he was doing it in Babylon, the centre of Satanic opposition to the divine purpose in creation. It was in Babylon that men and women had first defied God, in building a tower to the planetary deities; it was from Babylon that institutional priesthoods and false religions had arisen and spread across the world; it was in Babylon that monarchical autocracy (“divine right of kings”) was first devised by Nimrod. Abraham's covenant with God was conditional upon his leaving Babylon (“Ur of the Chaldees”) for Canaan. David's ideal theocratic state incorporated Babylon (“the river Euphrates”). God's choice of Babylon through Daniel for the announcement of his purposes for the nations of the world to the end of time, therefore, was a declaration of his omnipotence to the Satanic and angelic powers in the heavens as well as the nations of the earth. But Daniel knew that God had declared both him and king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon as his “servants” .

Almost every branch of Babylonian and Assyrian literature was permeated with religious influences of all kinds, not only myths and legends of gods and goddesses, but also esoteric practices and superstitions designed to elicit arcane knowledge and experiences. The earliest and most persistent form of Sumerian and Babylonian custom was a rhythmic invocatory phrase, which was the predominant mode in occultic incantations and exorcisms. The prayers and hymns were recited by the priests to invoke possessions and to elicit abnormal phenomena; and these were taught to acolytes and supplicants seeking supernatural interventions. The worship of the great gods and goddesses was reserved for special occasions, such as festivals; but the ordinary daily lives of the Babylonians were filled with offerings and supplications to a multitude of spirits whom they contacted by means of incantations, spells and magical practices. The true religion of Babylon was magic, in its most extreme occultic forms. The object of all the divination was to find out about the future, and to discern the purposes of the god or goddess approached.

What Daniel found particularly interesting in Babylon was the intricate association of religion with politics even in many important matters like participating in battles, and national and international politics. When Nebuchadnezzar returned triumphantly from his conquests, the king acknowledged the help received from the gods Nabu and Marduk as he conducted them in public procession through the streets of the city.

Daniel was still in his three-year training period when the king had an important dream. It was so important to the king that he decided on radical measures to ensure that he would obtain a true and not false interpretation. He called on his Chaldean "Council of Wise Men", the specialists in astronomy and astrology, magic and the occult, and said to them:

"This is what I have firmly decided: if you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honour. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me".

The Council of Wise Men, with a variety of approaches, appealed to the king to tell them the dream first; but he told them categorically;

"I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realise that this is what I have firmly decided. If you do not tell me the dream, there is just one penalty for you, you have conspired to tell me wicked and misleading things, hoping the situation will change. So, then, tell me the dream, and I know that you can interpret it for me".

The desperate members of the Council of Wise Men were forced to admit to the king,

"There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks. No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No-one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men."

Nebuchadnezzar, angered by their procrastination, and now convinced that if they could not tell the dream they were equally unable to interpret the significance of it, and he ordered the execution of all the claimed wise men in Babylon.

This decree included Daniel and his three companions, although they were not members of the royal Council of Wise Men. When Daniel heard of the decree from the commander of the king's guard he requested a delay, and an urgent appointment with the king so that he could interpret the dream for him. While the commander went off to see the king, Daniel sought out his three companions and persuaded them to join him in prayer to God for a revelation of the mystery.

Daniel knew how, when Moses himself confronted the Pharaoh's royal magicians and sorcerers, there were miraculous activities given to him by God that were impossible for the Egyptian sorcerers to emulate. In matters involving legerdemain or illusion, the Egyptians were as clever as Moses; but when it came to the issues of bringing forth something from nothing requiring the supernatural (lice from dust, boils from ashes) or matters of control over creation (ordering frogs back into the river, flies in Egypt but none in Goshen) the Egyptian magicians were helpless.

That night God appeared to Daniel in a vision, revealing both Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its meaning. Daniel hurried to the king's commander and asked him not to execute the Council of Wise Men until he, Daniel, had been to see the king and had given to him the dream's contents and interpretation. But Daniel had been given much more than this. God had revealed to Daniel the framework within which the king's dream could be understood in the political context of the time, and in the cosmic purposes of God. What Daniel received from God in the vision was primarily a revelation of "the wisdom and power of God." This had been demonstrated to Daniel in the stated ability of God to manipulate nations and empires according to His purpose: God changed times, or periods in which individuals ruled or nations held dominance; and God changed seasons or appropriate circumstances in their temporary periods of power.

From the vision Daniel understood that his vocation would be as apocalyptic seer. The words from God to deliver to the king were:

“As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what was going to happen. As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, , but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.” .

Prophets like Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke their revelations from God in words supplied by the Spirit's ;prompting ; but the apocalyptic seer was in the Spirit, revealing what was unfolded by God when He lifted the veil that normally hid the spirit's timeless world. The prophet was a communicator of God's will; the apocalyptic seer was the revealer of God's mind. The form in which this was communicated was either in a dream, into which God or angel intervened through the human mind (as with the patriarch Jacob, in Bethel, with his dream of angels ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth with God at the top); or in a vision, in which the individual concerned was caught up to heaven - seeing and speaking "things not with my own mind", as Moses said - and the presence of God for the revelation. What God had revealed to Daniel was the divine plan for the nations of the Mesopotamian and Mediterranean region in the immediate future, and the significance of this in the distant future for the last days of the world. He, Daniel, had stood beside the throne of God, and had looked into the end of time with God Himself as his Guide.

When Daniel entered the king's presence Nebuchadnezzar gazed at him with a mixture of interest and scepticism. An adult lifetime of involvement with the occult had provided him with experience of its powers, but also knowledge of its deceits; and magicians had taught him to be wary of accepting all their skills and prognostications—especially when they were facing death as an alternative!

"Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?" the king asked Daniel bluntly.

Daniel replied with quiet confidence:

"No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown king Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Our dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these.

"As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come,

and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. As for me,

this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than

other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and

that you may understand what went through your mind.

"You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing-floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth."

As soon as Daniel began talking, the king sat forward on his throne with sudden interest. How could this man—this captive youth!—know what he had dreamed when no-one else could even guess? While Daniel talked, the king's mind seethed with questions and possibilities. If Daniel knew the details of the dream did he really know the true interpretation, as he claimed? If he knew, was it by insight or by supernatural help? If it was supernatural help, did he have an error-proof formula of approach to the gods? Did he really talk with the God of gods? If he had an error-proof formula, could it be harnessed with his own political and military power to build a world empire?

Without any further prompting from the king Daniel continued:

"This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

"After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours as silver is to gold. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron - for iron breaks and smashes everything and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. As the toes were partly iron and partly clay so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. And just as you saw the iron mixed with the baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever. This is the meaning of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy."

When Daniel finished speaking the king sat in silence, his gaze on Daniel but his mind on Daniel's stunning revelation. Daniel had had several hours in which to ponder the spiritual significance of the divine revelation of his vision; but the king was absorbed in the political implications. Both men were conscious that they were standing at a definite cusp in divine and human history. Nebuchadnezzar as well as Daniel knew of the Judean Jeremiah's prophecies regarding Babylon, Assyria and Egypt in the present, and

in what the Judean prophets termed the future "Day of Jehovah" at the end of the world. Both men were intelligent enough to note the downward decline of both materials and symbols in the statue: gold, silver, copper, iron, clay; and head, chest, belly, feet, toes; also, intellect, vital organs, digestion, locomotion, incompatibility.

Nebuchadnezzar walked from his throne to where Daniel was standing, and prostrated himself before the surprised youth, calling to his officials for an offering of incense to be brought and presented to Daniel. He asked Daniel how he understood the interpretation, and Daniel explained that he, Nebuchadnezzar was undoubtedly the head of gold, the single emperor (one head, "king of kings") of an empire. The second kingdom (two arms, "silver chest") was a lesser empire to follow. The third kingdom ("brass belly and thighs") was inferior to the two previous ones. The fourth kingdom ("iron legs, toes of iron and clay") would be a confederacy of both inferior and inimical elements during whose rule God would introduce a fifth spiritual kingdom ("rock cut out of the mountain without hands") which would be superior to and longer-lasting than all of these four foundation imperial civilizations.

This was a unique time in world history. Nobody since Adam had been given by God such a sweeping mandate to rule as that given to Nebuchadnezzar: dominion over human and animal creation. God's purpose for the world from Adam to David had been to demonstrate the unique benefits of a truly theocratic-democracy state; of a nation directed by God, and the willing consent of its people. But from David to Daniel's time they had chosen instead to be ruled by Satan, behind the facade of various ruling systems and idolatrous gods and goddesses – an incompatible mixture of "iron and clay", the "iron" the rule of political system, mixed with the malleable "clay" of religion.

Israel had reaped the catastrophic consequences of that choice; and now God in divine judgement was permitting the unleashing on the world representatives of "the prince of the world, Satan", who would guide its destinies based on demon-inspired rather than divine principles. These principles were symbolized in the statue-dream: the head, intellectual; the chest, physical; the belly,

material; the legs and feet, practical. Babylon, historically, was the leader in all of these categories—from Cain through Cush and Nimrod, to Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar—with the predominance of politics, commerce and religion, and the claimed “divine rights” of rulers and priests.

Babylonian civilization under Nebuchadnezzar was the epitome of human aspirations without God, and, according to the image-interpretation, its civilization would reflect its autocratic character, with dictatorial policies (“whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive”). The second empire would be aristocratic, with feudal policies (a two-tiered society ruled by nobles and lawyers). The third empire after them would be militaristic, with fascist policies (ruled by soldiers and intellectuals). The fourth nameless civilization would be republic (“iron”) claiming republican democratic policies with people-majority rule (“clay”). All of them would fail eventually, would be smashed to pieces by the supernatural powers (“rock cut out from the mountain without hands”) of the spiritual kingdom of God which would appear, exist and expand to universal triumph despite the antagonisms of human empires and civilizations.

Daniel pointed out to Nebuchadnezzar how, in the dream and subsequent interpretation, there was no mention of the kings of Babylon who preceded Nebuchadnezzar; and of those later imperial rulers who were likely to succeed him who would rule their empires from Babylon. God had also emphasised, “After you, another kingdom will arise inferior to yours.” In other words, Nebuchadnezzar was the only personal world ruler recognized by God; the others were kingdoms, empires, not persons, and they were successively “inferior”. All other nations and forms of government would decay and disappear due to their intrinsic weaknesses until the Biblically historic Anti-God ruler appeared in person to rule from a future Babylon in an apostate religious/political empire—to be defeated by the nameless spiritual kingdom.

Nebuchadnezzar was so impressed by Daniel's interpretation of his dream that he appointed Daniel to be his chief adviser of the Council of Wise Men in the royal palace. Daniel also requested that

his three companions be given positions of influence, and they were appointed as satraps over Babylonian regions.

Then Nebuchadnezzar conceived an ambitious plan by which he would impress the gods, consolidate his personal prestige, extend his control over his own people, and perpetuate his reign. He gave orders for a monumental image of gold, ninety feet high, to be made and installed in the specially rebuilt Great Temple of the moon-god Sin, founded in Sumeria on the Plain of Dura. He ordered new glazed brick pavements to be laid, put an altar in each of the two central rooms adjacent to the image, and then made a vast open space encircling it for public worship. When it was completed Nebuchadnezzar summoned all the provincial governors and officials of all kinds, together with representatives of the people and diplomats of the nations, to attend the dedication service of worshipping the image - or be thrown to death in a blazing furnace.

Daniel was living in the city, and not being personally commanded by the king to attend the ceremony on the Plain of Dura, he did not travel there. But his three companions—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—as provincial administrators were involved. They did attend as commanded, but conspicuously did not bow down to or worship the golden image. This was reported to Nebuchadnezzar, who sent for them to explain their defiance. They replied courteously but firmly:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up".

In a rage at their intransigence Nebuchadnezzar commanded the furnace to be increased seven-fold in heat, and for the three men with bound hands and feet to be thrown in, as a terrifying warning to others. To Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment, as he watched the leaping flames engulf the three men, they were not consumed; but, rather, their ropes dropped off and they walked about furnace freely

—and they were accompanied by a fourth person! Nebuchadnezzar, with a startled exclamation, jumped to his feet and, pointing to the flames, called out: "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the god."

He called on the three men to come out of the furnace and, as the king and his officials crowded around them, they saw that their clothes were not scorched nor their hair singed. Who was the fourth person with them? Nebuchadnezzar wanted to know. Was it Bel, the Babylonian god of fire? No, it was the Angel of the Lord, they told him, the messenger of God. Then Nebuchadnezzar said:

"Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants. They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

With his extensive empire under control, Nebuchadnezzar devoted himself to building and beautifying the city of Babylon. He brought artists and artisans from all the lands he conquered, as well as slaves for the building projects. He built a vast system of streets and canals radiating from the centre of the city to the two rivers, Euphrates and Tigris; and he had a wide moat built around the city, with gates in the walls of the city reaching the base of the moat, rendering the city impregnable. He had twenty temples built to a variety of gods, and everywhere the bricks used bore the imprint of his name. When he was finished Babylon would be greater than all the famous cities of the past – Nineveh, Thebes, Memphis and Ur.

Later, Herodotus described the city:

"The centre of the city, which is full of three and four-storied buildings, is traversed by dead straight streets not only those that run parallel to the river but also the cross streets which lead down to the water-side. Every one of them bore the name of one of the gods in the Babylonian pantheon. There was a Marduk street and a

Zababa street on the left bank of the river. In the right-hand corner of the city they crossed the streets of the moon-god Sin and of Enlil, 'Lord of the World'. On the right bank Adad street ran from east to west, and intersected with the street of the sun-god Shamash . . .

"Altogether there are in Babylon 53 temples of the chief gods, 55 chapels of Marduk, 300 chapels for the earthly deities, 600 for the heavenly deities, 180 altars for the goddess Ishtar, 180 for the gods Nergal and Adad and 12 other altars for different gods . . .

"But the most vicious practice of the Babylonians is every woman in the country must take her seat in the a shrine of Aphrodite, and once in her life consort with a stranger . . . And only when she has been with him, and done her service to the goddess, is she allowed to go home . . . "

Many exiled Jewish captives were used on those enterprises, but generally speaking they were treated well by Nebuchadnezzar. At first they were concentrated in the city of Babylon and its immediate environs, but gradually they spread into the provinces, many of them as farmers along the fertile plains adjoining the Euphrates. Also, their skills as merchants enabled them rapidly to become successful in a variety of commercial enterprises. While they continued to use their own Hebrew language among themselves, they became accustomed to using the Aramaic spoken widely in Babylonia. The Jews in Babylon adapted themselves to their circumstances, those who wished to return to Judah encouraged by the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel of a divinely promised return of a Remnant Israel. From his high position in the royal court and close association with the king Daniel was able to obtain copies of the scrolls of the prophets, and he studied them avidly.

Nebuchadnezzar was satisfied with his reign—"contented and prosperous"—when he had another dream, the contents of which terrified him. He suspected that he would not like what Daniel would make of the interpretation, so he said nothing to him but sent for his other advisers. But they were baffled, and eventually the king told Daniel the dream:

"I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery

is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. These are the visions I saw while lying in my bed; I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the beasts of the field found shelter, and the birds of the air lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

"In the visions I saw while lying in my bed, I looked, and there before me was a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven. He called in a loud voice, 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

"The decision is announced by messengers; the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.

"This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

For a time Daniel was perplexed about the significance of the interpretation which God gave to him, in the complexity of its consequences, and he hesitated long enough for a disturbed Nebuchadnezzar to note it and urge him to reveal whatever it meant. His fears increased when Daniel said slowly:

"My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries. You, O king, are that tree. You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches

the sky, and your dominion extends to the distant parts of the earth.

"You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one coming down from heaven and this is the interpretation, this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle, and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times (or years) will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

The fulfilment of Daniel's prophetic interpretation did not happen immediately. A year later, while the king was walking on the roof of his palace looking out over Babylon and assimilating its beauties, and his part in creating it, a voice came from heaven:

"This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar. Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times (or years) will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes".

Nebuchadnezzar was reminded of his dream a year before, with its messengers, or holy ones, and Daniel's interpretation that these were from a tribunal in heaven, speaking with divine authority. It was the last rational thought that Nebuchadnezzar had before he was afflicted by the condition of lycanthropy, a form of madness in which the person thinks and acts like a beast. Eventually he was removed from ruling his empire, and relegated to a life among the beasts which lasted for seven years. At the end of that period, he lifted his eyes to heaven in acknowledgement of his dependence and repentance, and his mental balance was restored to him. At the same

time his former position as sole ruler of Babylon was also restored, and he declared:

"I honoured and glorified him who lives for ever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endured from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'"

Nebuchadnezzar's magnificent reign of forty-three years ended with his death in 561 BC. He was succeeded for two years by his son, Amel-Marduk, or Evil-Merodach; and for another four years by Neriglissar, before his grandson, Nabonidus, inherited the throne in 556 BC.

On his succession to the throne Nabonidus again introduced the former idolatrous New Year Festival to Marduk—suspended by Nebuchadnezzar after his conversion to belief in Jehovah—and also brought back the worship of the moon-god, Sin, and promoted Sin-worship over Marduk-worship. This resulted in a public uproar and in his being replaced by his son, Belshazzar, while he himself was retired to the city of Tema in Arabia.

During the years of Babylonia's royal succession troubles, king Cyrus of Persia had launched an attack against Media, and established his authority over Assyria. He then advanced on king Croesus of Lydia, eventually defeating and capturing him, and returned triumphantly to Persia. Next, he turned eastwards, and extended Persian sovereignty almost to the borders of India, thereby doubling his empire. He was now ready to challenge Babylonia, whose internal quarrels and defections had seriously weakened the central ruling authority in Babylon.

Fifty years had passed since Daniel had clearly identified Nebuchadnezzar as the "head of gold" in the dream-image, with its interpretation of autocratic imperial rule, and he had watched the rise and expansion of the Medo-Persian empire with great interest in the light of that interpretation. He had taken particular note of the prophecy of Isaiah:

"I am the Lord...who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd
and will accomplish all that I please;
he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,'
and of the temple, 'Let its foundation be laid'..."

This is what the Lord says to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armour,
to open doors before him so that gates will not be
shut . . ."

Then God appeared to Daniel with another apocalyptic vision during the period when Nabonidus was out of favour with the Babylonian authorities, and Belshazzar was acting as co-regent. Daniel was lying on his bed, considering the political situation and the divine time-frame of the prophesied return of the Remnant of Israel to Judah, according to the seventy years of Jeremiah's prophecy. The problem, as he saw and struggled with it, was that it was difficult to determine whether Jeremiah's seventy years was to be dated from the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC; or whether it related to the period of Babylonian ascendancy of Nebuchadnezzar's accession in 605 BC (because he was God's specifically chosen instrument—"my servant Nebuchadnezzar"). Then there was the question of who would constitute Isaiah's "Remnant Israel"? And what would be the means and impetus of their return? Cyrus was obviously God's chosen instrument, but how would the return of the Remnant exiles be organized?

It was while he was wrestling with these questions in the first year of the reign of Belshazzar that God's revelation came to Daniel when "he had a dream", and visions passed through his mind of four great beasts::

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

"The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the

ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it.

"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

"After that I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast - terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

"While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully."

As Daniel pondered on the significance of the vision he was intrigued to note that there was a superficial similarity between the four great beasts of the sea, and the four divisions, and empires, of Nebuchadnezzar's earlier dream-image of the four empires. But the most immediate noticeable difference was that Nebuchadnezzar's earlier dream-image reflected the externalized characteristics of the four empires, while Daniel's present vision reflected the internal character of these four beast-empires. The "four winds of heaven churning", or "breaking forth", were obviously the supernatural angelic hosts of heaven in symbolism, being mobilized and released in a unique way ("four kingdoms that will rise from the earth"); at a particular time ("the Ancient of Days came"); for a special purpose ("in favour of the saints"); in a distinctive region ("the great sea"). This region was a Hebrew proper noun and expression and invariably applied to the Mediterranean Sea.

The general symbolic interpretation of this was that the angelic

and demonic forces of the spirit world were to be unleashed by God in the Mesopotamian-Mediterranean region in order to accomplish his present and future purposes in the world on behalf of his Messiah and his faithful followers. The challenge that Satan had made to God's dominion over the world in the Garden of Eden, in the building and activities of the city-state of Babel, and in the subsequent rebellion and Dispersion of Israel, was now to be made in the Mesopotamian heartland region of the world through the manipulations of Satan in the leading rivals for imperial supremacy. The revelations of God to and through His prophets of that period had emphasised the sins of Babylon, with Egypt and Assyria, and Babylon was the goal or origin of all the aspiring world conquerors.

So far, so good. The first of the four great beasts ("a lion with the wings of an eagle") was also fairly obvious relating to the Babylonian empire, as Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Ezekiel prophetically had declared, and referred not only to its autocratic character but also representative Satanic origin as the head of a created species. Also, the fearsome "Dragon of Babylon" symbol on all Babylonian buildings comprised lion, bird, fish and serpent. Its "wings being torn off" as Daniel watched, and made to stand on its feet "like a man", represented the restraint and defeat of Satan when Nebuchadnezzar was being transformed from Satan's instrument to God's servant.

The second great beast to arise from the sea, a bear, had a two-fold aspect: the feet on one side were raised to advance, whereas the feet on the other side were not; and it was told to eat "the three ribs in its mouth." The bear, noted for its brute strength, in its two-fold aspect, was the Medo-Persian empire, with the Persian partner the dominant one. The "three ribs" in its mouth would be the three sections of the Babylonian empire: Babylon in the east, Egypt in the south, and Lydia to the north-west—which were already in the process of being "eaten".

The third great beast, a leopard, with four wings and four hands, would be the empire to replace the Medo-Persian; one that—like the bronze in the dream-image—"will rule over all the earth" signifying expansion beyond the Mesopotamian-Mediterranean region and

indicating cultural as well as military conquest.

The fourth great beast was a terrifying nondescript creature—crushing, destroying and trampling underfoot everything in its power. This fourth great beast had several differences from the others: (i) it was given in a separate and single vision; (ii) it was stated to be "different", and it was not "likened" to any existing beast ; (iii) it had ten horns; (iv) it developed "a little horn" while Daniel watched; (v) the little horn had "eyes like a man", and "spoke boastfully". The fourth great beast vision caused Daniel to re-think his initial confident interpretation of them being four comparable empires of the dream-image. While there were features in each that could be made to fit the theory of four contemporary kingdoms battling for supremacy of empire—Babylon, Medes and Persians, Greeks, Macedonians and Lydians, and nations further west—there was no existing framework which would explain the fourth vision.

Daniel was still pondering the meaning of the "four beasts" vision when he was given a further revelation:

"As I looked, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.

"Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time).

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like the son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all people, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

Daniel was greatly distressed by his inability to understand what he was being shown; and, in his vision, he requested one of the angelic creatures near him to explain the true meaning. The angel's categorical opening statement made it clear that Daniel's earlier understanding of the "four great beasts" corresponding to the four empires of Nebuchadnezzar's dream-image was wrong. The angel told him:

"The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth. But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever—yes, for ever and ever."

So, Daniel understood, the four great kingdoms - or certainly the fourth—were not necessarily in existence at present, but "will rise" in the future. And the new kingdom – the "stone not cut with human hands" of the earlier Nebuchadnezzar dream-image (perhaps Isaiah's "New Remnant Israel", or Jeremiah's "New Covenant Israel", or both somehow?)—would ultimately triumph. The war between the fourth great beast and the saints, which Daniel was seeing enacted in his vision, revealed that the saints were being defeated, until God Himself stepped in and settled the issue in their favour "for ever and ever". Who and what was this fearsome fourth beast? Daniel asked the angel:

"The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times and half a time.

"But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed for ever. Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him."(my emphasis)

Daniel now understood that the vision was certainly not for the present, but for the future, for the last days of the world ("his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom"). The heavenly judgment-tribunal in the vision was not just concerned with current events, but was with the whole course of world empire—the cosmic conflict between God and Satan from Eden to eternity. It was concerned with the removal of Satan's power and complete destruction, in order that God, the Messiah and the redeemed saints should reign in God's new kingdom.

Daniel had assumed in his initial personal interpretation that the first empire would be conquered by the second, and the second by the third, and the third by the fourth. But he now saw that the fourth great beast conquered, crushed, trampled and destroyed "the whole earth." Therefore, the fourth great beast - or fourth empire of the end times—would incorporate all the externalised characteristics and internal characters of the other three great beasts, or empire-civilisations; but it would be "different" in both, because its goal would be the destruction of the whole earth and not just dominion over it. It would be "different", too, in that its leader (a human creature—"eyes like a man", "speaking boastfully", "will change set times and laws")—would pit himself against God ("he will speak against the Most High").

These laws to be challenged by God's demonic adversary, Satan, would be the civilisation laws laid down by God for all the inhabitants of the earth as given to Noah, and not just those moral laws commanded to the Jewish people through Moses. The former included (i) observing the Sabbath, and its related working week; (ii) the subjection of women to the authority of men; (iii) of monogamous marriage without divorce; (iv) of the use of meat for food; (v) of capital punishment for murder; (vi) of unrestricted procreation within marriage.

But Daniel's most intriguing question, after the identity of the Messiah, was the identity of the Anti-Messiah Adversary and kingdom of the last days. His own conclusion was that, if the Messiah had been clearly identified as coming from the royal house of David, then the anti-Messiah had been equally clearly identified

as coming from the dynasty of Nimrod - the "last Nebuchadnezzar" prophesied by Jeremiah . He had said prophetically: "Israel is a scattered flock . . . the first to devour him was the king of Assyria; the last to crush his bones was Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon". Just as the king of Assyria was not the first king to "devour" Israel (there had been the Philistines and Midianites among others); but was definitely the first to destroy ten tribes by Dispersion under God's approval and direction), so the present king of Babylon was not the first to "crush his bones" in defeat and exile.

But the prophet Jeremiah had stated categorically that "Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon" would be the "last to crush his bones". The prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah particularly had emphasised the presence and importance of Babylon in the climactic "Day of Jehovah", and Daniel's fourth great beast, or empire-confederacy, with its ten-horn kingdoms and emerging powerful "little-horn" kingdom, was to emerge in the Mesopotamian/Mediterranean region at that time.

Daniel was so deeply troubled by the complexities and possibilities of his visions that he could not eat or sleep, and it was noted by others how distraught he had become, but he refrained from discussing the cause with his questioners. Two years after his visions regarding the "four great beasts" Daniel received another vision from God.

"I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. I watched the ram as he charged towards the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against him, and none could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and he became great.

"As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between the eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. He came towards the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at him in great rage. I saw him attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering his two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against him; the goat knocked him to the ground and trampled on him, and

none could rescue the ram from his power. The goat became very great, but at the height of his power his large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up towards the four winds of heaven.

"Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and towards the Beautiful Land. It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host to the earth and trampled on them. It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host; it took away the daily sacrifice from him, and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. Because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground."

Daniel had spent his lifetime—he was now almost seventy—studying the Book of the Law and the messages and writings of the prophets, seeking to understand what it was that God was doing in the world around Israel, at this climactic period of the nation's history, and what God's plans for the future might be. It was natural, therefore, that he should apply the contents of the vision to his own time. The Babylonian empire was being attacked and subdued by the advancing Persian forces led by king Cyrus, and the city of Babylon itself was preparing for a siege. So Daniel assumed that was why he had been taken in the vision away from Babylon to Susa, the capital of Persia. The time was approaching when God had foretold the downfall of Babylon, and its replacement by the Medo-Persians.

The national emblem of Persia was a ram. In Daniel's vision, therefore, the ram with two horns, one higher than the other, and the higher rising after the shorter, indicated the earlier domination of the Medes in the alliance, with the later dominance of the Persians under Cyrus. Persia had pushed westwards, conquering other nations in Mesopotamia, as well as moving on Babylon; and northwards into Armenia and the Caucasus; and southwards into Judah, Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya.

The he-goat was the national emblem of Macedonia, whose chief

city, Edessa, was also called Aege, or "goat-city". But at that time Greece and Macedonia were only a collection of small and contentious city-states. That was the simple possible outline of the first part of the vision., but the rise of the he-goat smiting the ram indicated that Greece would defeat Medo-Persia and become a "great power". The four prominent horns could be Macedonia, Thrace, Syria and Egypt.

But, while Daniel was trying to sort out the complexities, he became aware in his vision that two angels were discussing the spiritual implications of the vision—the angelic/demonic conflict in the heavens, and the religious ceremonies in the Temple in Jerusalem.

One angel said: "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled – the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, and the surrender of the sanctuary and of the host that will be trampled underfoot?"

The other angel answered; "It will take two thousand-three hundred evenings and mornings, then the sanctuary will be re consecrated."

Before Daniel could say anything, an angel in the form of a man appeared in his vision, and was addressed by a voice in the background: "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."

As the angel called Gabriel came toward him, Daniel—who, in his fifty-plus years in Babylon as Chief of the royal Council of Wise Men had seen many impressive personages, including the mighty Nebuchadnezzar - was so overawed that he fell on his face in a deep faint. He was raised to his feet by Gabriel, who said to him:

"I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end. The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between his eyes is the first king. The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

"In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will

arise. He will become very strong, but only by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people. He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior, when they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

"The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."

The experience was so overwhelming, the vision so appalling in its significance, that Daniel was unable to function, and he lay on his bed in an exhausted stupor for several days. He was not able to sleep while his mind grappled with contents of the vision. Eventually, he concluded that they fell naturally into three sections: (1) the immediate future, the coming supremacy of the Medo-Persian empire; (ii) the near future, the rise of the Graeco-Macedonian empire; and (iii), the most important, the distant future—"the last days", "the time of the end", the later "time of wrath".

Daniel understood that the period in the future when this would take place was comparatively short: in Babylonian/Aramaic terms: "a time, times, and half-a-time", or "a time, two times, and half-a-time". This was customarily taken to be three-and-a-half-years ("a year, two years, and half-a-year"), as the term "time" was used for both definite and indefinite periods by Jews, Chaldeans and Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar had used "seven times" to describe his "seven years" of punishment. The Jewish reason for this expression was that successive years coming together involved the addition of an inter-calary month, or thirty extra days, and this was avoided when the years were calculated separately as "time" or "times".

The most significant personage in the vision was not Cyrus of Persia, or the presently unknown "he-goat" ruler of the Greek-Macedonian empire, but "the stern-faced king, the master of intrigue" of "the last days" who would become very strong "but not by his own power" and who would "take his stand against the prince of princes." Was this the "last Nebuchadnezzar of the end time"?

The ruler of the Third Graeco-Macedonian Empire in the near

future would be a remarkable person to accomplish what God foretold; but the ruler of the Ten-Kingdom Empire would be a supernatural person - "very strong, but not by his own power." A particularly significant element in the vision was the emphasis that the "little horn" would appear out of one of the four kingdoms of the later Third Greece-Macedonian Empire. According to Isaiah this would be Assyria which, in the prophet's time, included Babylonia.

The last ruler of the Ten-Kingdom Empire in Mesopotamia, with his centre in Babylon, would seek to control all religions as well as all political power. He would reach into heaven for support from among the angelic hosts - "grew until it reached the host of heaven, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth, and trampled on them", to be as great as the "Prince of the host" and stand against the "Prince of the princes." He would take control of the centre of religious administration in Jerusalem, and set up his own ruling headquarters there—"he took away the daily sacrifice . . . the place of the sanctuary was brought low . . . the daily sacrifices were given over." i)—"he took away the daily sacrifice . . . the place of the sanctuary was brought low...the daily sacrifices were given over to it."

While Daniel pondered on these possibilities he was surprised to be sent for by king Belshazzar, the co-regent of Babylon. It had been some time since he had been called officially to the palace because, he understood, Belshazzar preferred younger and more compliant advisers, and spectacular Chaldean magicians and sorcerers. On this occasion he was sent for urgently, because it appeared the royal Council of Wise Men were all unable to provide an interpretation for the king. On the way to the palace, Daniel learned that Belshazzar had given a great banquet for a thousand guests. To impress them, and to maintain his superiority over Nabonidus as co-regent, he had used the gold and silver goblets brought as trophies from the Jerusalem Temple by his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. In a gesture of bravado, Belshazzar and his drunken guests—men, women and concubines—had used the sacred goblets plundered from the Jerusalem Temple to toast and praise the nature-gods of Babylon.

At that point, the fingers of a hand suddenly appeared and wrote on the wall of the palace where the light was brightest. At the sight, the king and his guests were shocked out of their drunken ribaldry, and had sent for the Council of Wise Men to interpret the message which the disembodied hand had written on the wall. As an added inducement, the king promised that whoever was able to read and interpret the writing would be "clothed in purple, have a gold chain placed around his neck, and be made the third ruler in the kingdom"—after himself and co-regent Nabonidus.

When Daniel arrived before king Belshazzar, after fulsome compliments to Daniel about his reputation and skills, he repeated his offer to him. Daniel had little respect for the cringing monarch, and he told him contemptuously:

"You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means."

Daniel then went over to the wall where the letters were displayed:

MENE TEKEL PERES

There was no mystery about the language. It was the usual Aramaic; mene, meant "numbered"; tekem meant both a shekel coin, and a weight; and peres meant Persia. What caused the ambiguity, confusion and fear was the threatening starkness of the words written by a supernatural hand. Daniel did not hesitate

"This is what these words mean; MENE: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. TEKEL: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. PERES: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

Despite Daniel's reluctance, Belshazzar insisted on clothing Daniel in the imperial purple garment and golden chain, declaring him third co-regent of Babylon. However, the co-regency of Babylon was destined to be short and quickly forgotten.

Babylon had been considered impregnable since Nebuchadnezzar had built the surrounding moat with sunken bronze gates. However, unbeknown to the Babylonians, Cyrus had

devised a plan to divert the waters of the Euphrates, and this drained the supplying tributaries. When the canals and moat emptied, the Persian army, under the command of the Median, Darius, entered the city secretly beneath the moat gates. In one night the mighty city of Babylon fell to the Medo-Persians as the prophets had foretold. It was October 12, 539 BC.

With the arrival of the Medo-Persians in Babylon, Daniel knew that the time of deliverance for Isaiah's faithful "Remnant" was near. It was now well over fifty years since Jerusalem had fallen; seventy years since the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, when the Babylonian empire became a reality and Nebuchadnezzar became the first emperor of New Babylonia. There were reports that Cyrus of Persia intended having himself declared emperor of Medo-Persia in a ceremony in Babylon, and to announce it as his new capital. Would the ruler of the Third Greek-Macedonian empire do the same? That would be a fulfilment of all prophecies - especially the one deriving from Nebuchadnezzar's dream-image. God did not seem to be significantly interested in any event, or period, or kingdom, or world empire, until it was centred on Babylon, with its unique ruler, ambitions and policies related to Israel. Was that the central governing principle of interpretation of all prophecy?

So Daniel set himself to fast, and to pray to God for enlightenment and guidance:

"O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his Covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you. You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us great disaster. Under the whole heaven nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem. Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favour on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. O Lord, listen.' O Lord, forgive. O Lord, hear and act.' For your sake, O God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name."

Daniel, over eighty years of age, the most powerful official in both the Medo-Persian and Babylonian empires, of unimpeachable integrity, debased himself in sackcloth and ashes in seeking God's help, guidance and intervention and the glory of His Great Name in His City and Temple. In response to Daniel's prayer God sent the leading archangel Gabriel to reveal to Daniel the further purpose of God:

"Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision. 'Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.

"Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens'. It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens', the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood. War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven' but in the middle of that 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And one who causes desolation will place abominations on a wing of the temple, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him".

Daniel was fascinated intellectually and spiritually intrigued: who was this "ruler, the Messiah, Anointed One", who would appear in about five hundred years, a rough estimate of the "sixty-nine sevens"? Who was "the ruler who will come to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple"? When would that last "seventh week" begin which would "come in like a flood" and "end with destruction"? If each week of seven days in the present Hebrew reckoning then the "Messiah, Anointed One" would come in 490

years! If that date was the time and "cutting off" of the Messiah, Anointed One then how long would be the unstated gap until the last "single week" of the seventy weeks, the "time of the end and desolations"? What would happen in the world between the time of the departure of the Messiah Anointed One and his return "to rule with the saints of the Most High" mentioned earlier?

The most important fact that Daniel learned from his encounter with Gabriel was that while, he, Daniel, was concerned and agonising over the seventy years' captivity of Israel and the Isaiah-propheesied restoration to Judah and Jerusalem at that time, God and Gabriel had ignored the matter entirely; and had provided instead a revelation concerning their restoration to the land of Israel in the last days at the end of the world. It appeared that the significance of Jeremiah's prophecy regarding their seventy years of exile in Babylon, and imminent restoration of a faithful Remnant to Judah in the present, was only important in the measure that it reflected the purposes of God for them in the last days of the world. The seventy 'sevens' represented the period in which Israel would see the fulfilment of God's hisgtoric promises to and through them as a purged and holy people.

These could be listed as three negatives and positives: (i) to restrain defiance of God; (ii) to put a stop to sin; (iii) to bring Israel within the provision of reconciliation by atonement: (iv) to initiate righteousness through the New Covenant principles; (v) to put an end to visions and prophecies, because that which was perfect, the Messiah Anointed One, had come; and (vi) the anointing of the new Holy of Holies, in the Temple described by Ezekiel.

So, what was to happen between this "cutting off and having nothing" and the appearing of the triumphant Messiah-Anointed One at the End Time? Was it the time prophesied again by Isaiah?

"The Lord Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled.. The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day and the idols will totally disappear. Men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from the dread of the Lord and the splendour of his majesty, when he rises

to shake the earth. In that day men will throw away to the rodents and bats their idols of silver and gold which they made to worship. They will flee to caverns in the rocks and to the overhanging crags from the dread of the Lord and the splendour of his majesty when he rises to shake the earth"

Daniel's final vision from God came to him when he was about ninety years of age, "in the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia" . "When Cyrus defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC, and made Babylon the capital city of the Medo-Persian Empire, one of his first acts was to permit the many captive communities who had been transported to Babylon to return to their lands and homes.

This decision was not made because he was a believer in Jehovah, but was a matter of Medo-Persian policy. This was evident from the inscriptions he had made at the time, one in the "Cyrus Cylinder", in which he ascribed his victories to Marduk, the Babylonian god, and to the Sumerian moon-god, Sin. Cyrus was well-disposed to all religions, and he knew of the remarkable Hebrew adviser to Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar who had held such high positions and authority in Babylonia, and who had publicly prophesied the coming conquest of Medo-Persia - and their replacement by the Greek-Macedonians. From Daniel, therefore, he learned of Isaiah's and Jeremiah's personal prophecies from God concerning Nebuchadnezzar and himself. So it was in his interest to claim religious as well as political credit for himself when he issued a decree in Jehovah's Name:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem In Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem."

It was under this decree, issued in 538 BC that the Jewish captives

in Babylonian exile were permitted to return to Judah and Jerusalem, as the prophets had testified—seventy years from the time of the rise of the Babylonian Empire in 605 BC. The family heads of Judah and Benjamin in Babylon, with the priests and Levites—"everyone whose heart God had touched"—took advantage of the royal permission. The responsibility for organising their return fell to a Davidic prince, Zerubbabel, and a high priest, Joshua, and about fifty-thousand people formed the "Remnant" of Israel in the return to their Promised Land. The Medo-Persian king, Cyrus, gave them the 5,400 articles plundered from the Temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

The aged Daniel was appalled: only 50,000—7,000 of them servants!—of the millions of Jews scattered in the Dispersion among the nations! At approaching ninety years of age he would have been among those returning, but his work as God's apocalyptic seer to the kings of the world was not yet completed. His visions from God were for the nations, and not primarily for Israel. But he wondered whether 50,000 Jews were sufficient to fulfil the revelations of the visions regarding God's future purposes for Isaiah's New Israel, Jeremiah's New Covenant and his own New Kingdom, and Ezekiel's New Temple in a restored Israel in the last days of the world.

In that "third year of the reign of Cyrus" the final vision given to Daniel was described:

"At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

"On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, Tigris, I looked up and there was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision . . . Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground."

He knew that this was an "Angel of the Lord", God's visiting

theophany on earth to Abraham, Moses and others in the past. Daniel was transfixed, and conscious that his companions had run from the scene. Daniel dropped prostrate on the ground, rendered unconscious by his overwhelming terror and awe. But he felt a hand touch him, and a voice saying to him gently:

"Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you . . . And now I will show you the truth . . ." "At that time the great prince who protects your people will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the Book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the star for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end."

Daniel listened carefully to the words, and even understood them. God had approved his commitment to know, understand and declare the revelations given to him. These revelations were related (i) to the authority of the Throne of God, and the heavenly tribunal, assessing and passing judgment on events on earth; (ii) the verbal communication of these decisions by God directly or through angelic messengers, and their significance to him; and (iii) the actual ordering and completion of these events to fulfil the purposes of God.

As the events of the distant future of the world had unrolled before Daniel, he marvelled how he had been prepared by God to receive them in the sequence of visions. These had been revealed in linear fashion, in that they related to events in the present, near future, and then jumped forward to the distant future, so that he had a sequential framework of understanding. But they were also cyclical, in that each had elements which overlapped with certain events in each present, near future and distant future period. Daniel

could see how later generations would also be better able to understand the unfolding of the divine revelations, especially those in the closing years of the last days of the world.

So, Daniel concluded, with the Anti-Messiah poised to launch his final challenge to God's power on earth, the Archangel Michael, the Guardian Angel—Prince of Israel, would lead forth an angelic host on behalf of God's elect people to make war against the satanic Anti-Messiah. There would be a time of great destruction as all the powers of heaven and earth engaged in the mighty cataclysm, but the outcome was determined by God that His Messiah-Prince would triumph, and the faithful of His people would reign with him. There would be special rewards for "those who are wise", who would be as distinctive and admired as the stars in the heaven.

EZEKIEL

In the Book of Ezekiel the prophet uses the phrase, "the word of the Lord

came to me", 49 times; "they shall know that I am the Lord", 66 times; and "I (the Lord) have spoken" ("and I will do it"), 49 times. That is a lot of divine communication, and a lot of prophetic confidence. There was no equivocation, or hesitation, in Ezekiel's communication with God; he knew who was talking to him, what was being said, and how it was to be done. Interestingly, however, except for his visions from God, Ezekiel—unlike his three major fellow-prophets—shows a singular lack of personal imagination in his writings of the experiences; but he does demonstrate a personal intensity in communicating the contents of the visions. He was a complex personality with a single-minded dedication to God.

Ezekiel was in his mid-twenties when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, captured Jerusalem in 597 BC and he was taken away into exile in Babylonia. He had been born into a priestly family in Jerusalem, so his home would have been located near the eastern wall of the city, and the outer courts and precincts of the Temple his school and playground. Ezekiel, as a youthful priest-in-training at the time, had heard the great prophet Jeremiah declare the denunciatory words of God in the Temple

courts, and was denounced in turn by the leaders of his own people.

In Ezekiel's exile in Babylonia, the authorities had restricted the captives to certain aspects of the Levitical ceremonies, including the banning of animal sacrifices. They had confiscated the Temple sacred vessels, but had permitted uncontroversial religious practices, including prayers and observance of the Sabbath. The enforced removal of the religious rituals led to greater emphasis by the exiled Jewish priests on personal purity of life. The Babylonian king was generous with his Jewish captives, and he appointed many of them to responsible administrative positions, and allowed them freedom to worship their own God. Also, civil organisations and commercial enterprises were permitted, because the Jews were noted merchants. Deprived of their beloved Temple, they built "synagogues", places for prayer and religious instruction. Those who believed Jeremiah's prophecies knew that they would be in Babylon for seventy years.

The most famous feature of the city was the sacred processional way leading through the centre of the city and the famed "Gate of Ishtar". Every New Year Festival the image of the chief Babylonian god, Marduk, was carried in procession to the Festival House on the River Euphrates to the north of the city, with ritual acts in mime taking place at each of the sacred buildings on the way. These acts represented the creation of the world, and the conflict between the gods and the dragons of Chaos. Ezekiel and his fellow-captives settled in Tel-Aviv on the banks of the River Kebar, known to the Babylonians as "the Grand Canal", not far from the city of Babylon. The science and engineering of canal irrigation had been first developed in Babylon, to the country's great commercial and agricultural benefit; the fabulous "Hanging Gardens of Babylon" had been built because of them.

It was by these waters that one of them wrote the words of the Psalm:

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors asked us for songs of joy;

they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion' "

"How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy "

So there was little joy, and little anticipation, in the life of Ezekiel when God came to Ezekiel in captivity during the same period when Daniel was in the royal palace:

"In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God . . . the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest . . . There the hand of the Lord was upon him"

The fourth month of the year in Babylon was the time of the New Year Festival of Marduk, and the Passover Feast of the Jews—and Ezekiel was sitting, watching the approach of a wind-storm. Dense masses of black clouds, streaked with orange, red and yellow, were rolling out of the north, with an eerie border of brilliant light and flashes of lightning. As Ezekiel watched the luminous mass fill the heavens with awesome splendour, the natural phenomenon began to curl and coalesce into identifiable supernatural shapes.

Ezekiel's interest sharpened in intensity, and he was swept into a state of heightened awareness. The centre of the core of light glowed like burnished bronze, and in it there appeared to be four living creatures, looking like men but with each of them having four faces and four wings. The faces were of a man, lion, ox and eagle. Their legs were straight, but their feet were like those of a calf. Under their wings on the four sides they had the hands of a man; as they swept straight forward, their wings touched one another, and they did not turn as they moved. The four living creatures glowed with an unearthly gleam as they moved together in a sea of fire.

As Ezekiel watched he saw a wheel appear on the ground beside each creature, yet they were like no wheels he had ever seen. Each wheel appeared to be intersecting with the others, but there were only four wheels, separate, at each corner of a square. As they moved they revolved within each other and yet go in any one of the four directions the living creatures faced. The wheels were of chrysalis, or topaz, tall and terrifying, and the rims were filled with eyes.

The awesome "living creature-chariot" was possessed by an activating spirit, and wherever this spirit indicated the living creatures moved; and, when the spirit indicated stop, they ceased to move. The spirit of the living creatures was also in the wheels. Above the "living creature-chariot" was what looked like an expanse of ice, a glassy ceiling. Under this translucent expanse of ice the wings of the living creatures were stretched out, and when they moved the sound was like the thunder of a waterfall. When they stood still, they folded their wings. Above the glacial expanse was what appeared to be a throne of sapphire; and, high above on the throne, a figure like that of a man. The figure glowed with the same unearthly fire as the living creatures, and he was surrounded by a brilliant light, brighter than the sun.

Ezekiel knew beyond all doubt that he was looking at the likeness of the "Glory of the Lord" — a detailed representation of the Shekinah "Cloud of the Presence" which had guided Moses and the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land, and which Moses had seen on Mount Sinai — and he fell to his knees. He remembered the words of God that no-one could look on God and live. But because Abraham and Moses and others had stood before representations of God in various forms it had come to be said that "God has two faces, the large and the small, and it is given to man to see the small face and live". So this vision of the heavenly "Chariot-Throne of God" was an appearance of God that would permit him to live.

Ezekiel was not just transfixed by a combination of awe and terror at the vision, he was filled with an immensity of illumination in which he was conscious of being given an unique insight into the workings of divine communication between heaven and earth, between the Creator God and His creatures. Regarding the living

creatures beneath the throne, Ezekiel accepted they were cherubim, or representations of them. In the Tabernacle and Temple they were omnipresent in the curtain embroidery, the walls, and in the most important places of the arched cover on the mercy-seat of the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle, and in the wall-to-wall, ten cubits' high cherubim overshadowing the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple. They were, with the seraphim, God's most important angel-messengers and closest to the Throne. They were primarily responsible for communicating the light of God's nature and truth throughout the angelic ranks to human creatures on earth. In their earlier form they were winged creatures with the form and features of human beings. Symbolically, they represented the manifestations of God in His glory, were the guardians of His holiness and righteousness, the communicators of His divine purposes. They were not only symbolically represented by the noblest creatures—man, eagle, lion and ox—they were always associated together in the Temple with the pleasures of flowers, palms, and pomegranates. God's omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience were enshrined in the seraphim and cherubim and their activities, and this was symbolised in the "Chariot-Throne".

The four faces of the seraphim were symbolic of their divinely-attributed lordship over creation: man, over creatures; the eagle, over birds; the ox, over domestic animals; the lion, over wild animals. They, with the cherubim, exercised God-given rule, but here they were all stationed below the Chariot—Throne of God, beneath the translucent floor separating them from the Godhead.

The wheels were symbolic representations of the omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotent activities of God, energized by His Spirit in connection with the earth. The wheels moved independently of the seraphim above Him, indicating that they were under the control of God only, and not of the cherubim; and the wheels were equally present and mobile in mid-air, or heaven, as on earth. The sign of their presence was unmistakable: the sound of the voice of God was likened to the vibration of the wings of the living creatures; and the impact on the ears of the listeners was like a roaring waterfall, or rolling thunder, or an army on the move. That

is, it was communicated supernaturally by angelic messengers ("vibrating wings"), or naturally by earthly means ("roaring waterfall"), invisible medium ("rolling thunder"), or human communication ("military command"),

Ezekiel was reminded of Isaiah's vision of the Throne of God, but it was limited to his intellectually restricted realization of the mystery of the New Remnant: God's commission from the Throne to Isaiah was, "Go and tell this people". Jeremiah's vision of the Throne of God was limited to his intellectually restricted revelation of the mystery of the New Covenant, the pending judgment on Old Israel and a new form of spiritual experience ("the law written on hearts and minds"). Daniel's vision of the Throne of God was limited to his intellectually restricted revelation of the mystery of the triumphant New Kingdom, the significance of a triumphalist but doomed Babylon and a new body of obedient believers ("the four beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth, but the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever").

Ezekiel's vision of the Throne of God was unlimited in scope and unrestricted in application: it reached from above the Throne, with a figure like that of a man "high above on it"; and above the "firmament"; and, through the heavenly creatures and their multifarious responsibilities and activities, in every one of the four corners of the earth. God reserved to Himself the ultimate communication: ". . . the voice from above the expanse of ice over their heads as they stood with lowered wings". For God to reveal Himself on this scale, and in such a manner, meant that He must have some unique service for Ezekiel to perform. He prostrated himself on the ground as Moses had done at the burning bush. The voice of God addressed him: "Son of man, stand up on your feet, and I will speak to you."

Immediately, Ezekiel felt himself raised to his feet by the power of God, and the voice continued.

"I am sending you to the Israelites, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me; they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day. The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign

Lord says', and whether they listen or fail to listen they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them or their words. Do not be afraid although briars and thorns are all about you, and you live among scorpions you must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious".

Ezekiel noted that God had addressed him as "son of man" and assumed that it meant he was simply a representative instrument of all mankind, being chosen to do a service for God. He was not chosen because he had any special gifts but because he had a special message to deliver. That message was to all Israel, both the Dispersed captives and exiles of the former northern and southern kingdoms; and those who still remained in the land of Canaan. But he noted, too, that God had said, "to a nation that has rebelled against me". How was this to be done when he was an exile in captivity in Babylon and the people of Israel and Judah had been scattered abroad by Assyria and Babylon?

He had a sudden recollection of the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah. They had said that God would scatter the nation of Israel among the nations of the world as a punishment for their rebelliousness—but that a suitably repentant Israel from among the Dispersed would be fitted to fulfil God's purpose of enlightening the heathen nations regarding His person and nature. That included himself, and his fellow-captives, in exile in Babylonia. Here there were captive rulers of defeated nations, and representatives of other nations seeking treaties and trade. Here he, too, could fulfil all that God had foretold regarding His people to be "a light to enlighten the Gentiles".

Ezekiel's mind was in turmoil of excitement, fear and awe as he contemplated the immensity of the challenge – to be the instrument of the return of Isaiah's New Remnant to their Promised Land. His fellow-Jews in the recent past had demonstrated to Jeremiah what they thought of a prophet who denounced their way of life. God had not promised him an easy task either —" . . .briars and thorns and scorpions . . . a rebellious nation...an impudent and stubborn" Israel.

His task in exile was to take up where Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and the other prophets had left off in Canaan; to declare clearly and emphatically the words of God, and to leave the consequences to Him. No prophet had ever been given a sympathetic hearing from those to whom they had been sent; but, despite this, the great ones had been very clear in their declarations of God's message. The great nations of the region, such as Egypt and Assyria, were disappearing and Daniel was prophesying the end of Babylon and others to follow, but Israel would remain as a New Remnant to the "last days of the world".

From the gleaming-bronze figure on the Chariot-Throne a hand reached out to Ezekiel, holding a scroll, which was unrolled in front of Ezekiel. He saw that it was written on both sides, and that the contents were of lamentations, mourning and woe. He assumed that this was to be his message, and that there was no room for added interpretation or interpolation in the filled pages. God's words confirmed it: "Son of man, eat this scroll, and fill your stomach with it".

Ezekiel complied, and immediately he was flooded with an intense experience of fullness and honey-sweet joy. The words might be bitter, but they were the words of God and as David the Psalmist had said of his own experience, "I ate them and they became to me a joy and the delight of my heart".

The voice of God continued;

"Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them. You are not being sent to a people of obscure speech and difficult language, but to the house of Israel—not to many peoples of obscure speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely if I had sent you to them, they would have listened to you. But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate. But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them, or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house".

Ezekiel wondered briefly why God had chosen to commission Isaiah and Jeremiah by touching their lips, yet chose to commission him by eating this scroll. Then he remembered that the other two prophets had been touched from the altar of the temple in heaven, when he given a unique vision and commission from God on his throne surrounded by angelic hosts. He had a sudden thought of the immanence and transcendence of God being reflected in the two sides of the scroll: the majesty and grace of God; the goodness and severity of God; the righteousness and love of God.

The abrupt transition from divine glory to depressing captivity left Ezekiel feeling bitter at his circumstances. The challenge and excitement of being God's messenger in a vision situation rapidly disappeared in the reality of his earthly situation. What was he actually going to say to the exiled people, and how was he going to go about it? He felt aggrieved with God and decided to keep quiet about his experience while he considered his prophet's function.

Ezekiel did not have long to wait to see the negative aspects of a prophet's function, such as Jeremiah's tribulations from kings, false prophets and fellow-countrymen; or Isaiah who had to walk naked and barefoot for three years as a sign of God's purposes for Egypt and Ethiopia. After the eating of the scroll God declared that Ezekiel would remain dumb and confined to his house and then proceeded to give him a series of bizarre symbolic actions to perform;

"Now, son of man, take a clay tablet, put it in front of you and draw the city of Jerusalem on it. Then lay siege to it. Erect siege works against it and put battering rams around it. Then take an iron pan, place it as an iron wall between you and the city and turn your face toward it. It will be under siege, and you shall besiege it. This will be a sign to the house of Israel".

As the now-dumb Ezekiel understood it, he was to take a large slab of Babylonian clay and mould it into a recognisable model of Jerusalem. Around the mock-up city's walled exterior he was to construct offensive towers, and siege works, and then bake the whole. The symbolism of all this was to be intensified by moving the siege works nearer to the city's walls every day. And Ezekiel was to

remain silent before the increasing number of interested onlookers. With the clay model of the siege of Jerusalem completed. God gave the second prophecy to Ezekiel:

"Then lie down on your left side and put the sin of the house of Israel upon yourself. You have to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side. I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the house of Israel.

"After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the house of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year. Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her. I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege".

Ezekiel was utterly bewildered. It was true that there was considerable interest regarding Ezekiel's visionary experience, with large crowds coming to his house and speculating about the significance of his clay model. But what could lying on his sides for stipulated numbers of days have to do with "the punishment of the houses of Israel and Judah"? There was heated debate over whether Ezekiel had made a mistake in writing 390 days instead of 190 days, complicated by Ezekiel's dumbness forcing him to debate by writing, and the complexity of interpreting historical events.

The period of deportation of Ephraimite-Israel under Tiglath-Pileser III in 734 BC until the capture of Jerusalem was near enough the 190 years, or number of days lying on his left side. And the 40 days lying on his right side would correspond to the period of Judah's exile in Babylon, foretold by Jeremiah as 70 years; although some believed that Jeremiah's prophecy referred to the period of Babylonian Empire supremacy, from Nebuchadnezzar's decisive victory at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC to its later fall. Another suggested possibility was that the 190 could represent the approximate figures from the destruction of Samaria to the fall of Babylon; and the 40 the number of years their Israelite forefathers spent in the wilderness under Moses. What was certain was that

there was a definite time limit indicated, relating to the present siege of Jerusalem and the fate of the remaining Judah. Each day Ezekiel lay on his left side and right side as stipulated by God, facing the requisite direction towards the model of Jerusalem, with his arm bared, and remembering Isaiah's prophecy: "The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God" So Ezekiel knew that these humanly inexplicable details in his small home had infinite implications for the dispersed exiled Jews in the present and distant future.

Throughout this period Ezekiel was commanded by God to observe a stringent diet:

"Take wheat and barley/ beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side. Weigh out twenty shekels (about eight ounces) of food to eat each day, and eat it at set times. Also measure out a bin (about half-litre) of water and drink it at set times. Eat the food as you would a barley cake, bake it in the sight of the people, using human excrement as fuel. In this way the people of Israel will eat defiled food among the nations where I will drive them".

Outside the cities of Babylon the exiles had to live in very frugal conditions, but God's instructions to Ezekiel now reduced even that amount. The symbolism was to do more than reproduce the famine situation of the siege of Jerusalem, or reflect the spiritual condition of the Babylonian exiles. It was also to highlight the inadequate and disgusting nature of Israel's conduct that had precipitated God's judgment on them. The command for using human excrement was too much for Ezekiel, however, who knew of the strict Mosaic commandments forbidding such a practice. In response to Ezekiel's revulsion and protest, God agreed to permit the use of cow-dung instead.

Then God gave to Ezekiel His solemn curse on what remained of Jerusalem, "the city of God", for its wickedness:

"I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment

on you in the sight of the nations. Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again. Therefore in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds . . . You will be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror to the nations around you when I inflict punishment on you in anger and in wrath and with stinging rebuke. I the Lord have spoken".

When He had finished with his judgments against the city of Jerusalem, God unfolded for Ezekiel a panorama of judgments on the Twelve Tribes of Israel and Judah for their disobedience. Their chief sin was idolatry, worshipping pagan gods; or, even worse, worshipping Jehovah in the same manner as the Canaanites with their pagan gods. These worship-shrines had been raised defiantly on the mountain and high places of God's Promised Land. God's judgments would purge Jerusalem and the Temple, the country and the people. The immense scale and totality of the planned destruction would teach a faithful few that the God who did it was still the God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt into the Land of Promise. They would know that "I am the Lord", God said with singular emphasis; and Ezekiel was aware that this phrase was being emphasized many times by God. He was the one true God, the God of the whole world, the God of history, the God who does not speak in vain.

After a series of oracular utterances regarding the impending fate of Israel and the nation's future New Remnant restoration God spoke to Ezekiel in dramatic terms regarding the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, and the removal of the Shekinah Cloud of Presence from Temple and country. This national catastrophe was followed by a personal crisis for Ezekiel – the death of his wife by God's instruction:

"The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet;

do not cover the lower part of your face, or eat the customary food of mourners'.

"So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded."

Ezekiel was stunned initially by the enormity of God's action. What had his wife done to incur such a fate for the sake of divine symbolism? Then he realised the awesome symbolism. The favoured choice of Israel by God was because He had chosen her out of His love, and the subsequent union with the nation under the Covenant was similar to that of husband and wife. Israel's deliberate idolatry with other kings and gods was comparable to adultery in God's sight, and the punishment for adultery was death. God wanted Ezekiel—and al Israel—to know that it was an agonising severance of relationship in which God as well as Ezekiel would only "groan quietly", because a later reunion was divinely planned.

God's coming judgments would have repercussions until the "last days" of the world. Ezekiel noted the emphases: ". . . the end has come...your doom has come . . . the time has come . . ." God's patience with His chosen people had run out. Injustice, arrogance, rebellion, were about to suffer consequences. The wrath of God would terminate all commerce and no-one would respond to the trumpet's call to war. God had turned His face from His Sanctuary and would allow it to be profaned. Because of the nation's sin He would permit the worst of the world's nations to trample them into the ground.

"When terror comes, they will seek peace, but there will be none. Calamity upon calamity will come, and rumour upon rumour. They will try to get a vision from the prophet; the teaching of the Law by the priest will be lost, as will the counsel of the elders. The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with despair, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. I will deal with them according to their conduct, and by their own standards I will judge them. Then they will know that I am the Lord."

Ezekiel's subsequent visions brought together the four prophetic

visions of Isaiah's New Remnant, Jeremiah's New Covenant, Daniel's New Kingdom, and his own New Israel and New Temple: In the vision of "the valley of dry bones" God described His people of the future:

"Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them: This is what the Sovereign Lord says, 'O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it'". (my emphasis)

In this revelation God showed Ezekiel the new order, the new law of life, and the new consciousness - of God coming "from the four quarters of the earth" – which would dominate the New Israel in "the last days" when they were "brought from graves" of death to a new kingdom of God. This New Israel would gladly embrace the vision of being a holy nation and thus fulfil the divine purpose in and through them:

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Sovereign Lord, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes.

"For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you

and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God". (my emphasis)

Ezekiel was in turmoil of mixed emotions in the unfolding circumstances. He knew that God had confirmed to David that Jerusalem was His city of choice, that the Temple was His approved dwelling-place, that the Sanctuary was where He would meet face-to-face with His people through the high priest, and that this was a reflection of what already existed in heaven. The imminent holocaust, with the destruction of the Promised Land, would bring all the divine promises of the past to an abrupt end. To what would the faithful Remnant return? Or where? Would it all be restored and rebuilt?

With the destruction of Jerusalem Ezekiel felt that this would be a watershed in his personal life, and as a prophet, he lived outside the city of Babylon and so knew little of what was happening in the city to and through Daniel. Also, with God's prophecies through him regarding Jerusalem's fate now accomplished, God lifted the symbolic dumbness which had afflicted Ezekiel and he was now free to convey the intensity of his prophecies and oracles by voice instead of obliquely by pen.

The years of reflection and discussion had increased Ezekiel's perception of the prophet's function. The content of the visions had involved both history and eternity, events present and future, permitting one or more challenging interpretations when divine explanations were absent. To the prophet, it often seemed as if the future was immediately present; and the content of the messages often implied a successful completion of an event that had not yet occurred. For example, what was one to make of Isaiah's "seventy years, the span of a king's life"? Did Jeremiah's "these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years" begin with the first captives, or at the siege or the later fall of Jerusalem? And were these the same as Daniel's "seventy sevens, or weeks, are decreed for you and your holy city" ? Were they all of the same event in the continuing present, or did they have a future application as well as

the present, or were they in the future only? Then there was the divine element of the prophetic visions, in which God invested "His Great Name and holiness" in the successful outcome of events, both to the people of Israel and to the nations of the world. On the one hand, God was giving to Israel an opportunity for repentance and reward; and, on the other hand, God was giving to the nations a demonstration of His person and nature.

Ezekiel was still considering these matters when "in the twentieth year of our exile (573 BC), in the seventh month, Tishri, and the tenth day"—the ancient annual Day of Atonement, the time of Passover and a new beginning - God appeared to him again. Once more "the hand of the Lord" was upon him, but this time he was not taken to the Temple or city of Jerusalem, but to "a very high mountain, on whose south side were some buildings that looked like a city" (either Mount Zion or Mount Olivet overlooking Jerusalem—the last place he had seen the Chariot-Throne and Cloud of Glory as they left the Temple and City). Then Ezekiel saw a man "whose appearance was like bronze", similar to the man with the writing kit he had seen in an earlier vision, who was to act as both guide and interpreter for him. This time the angelic figure had a linen cord and a measuring rod in his hand, and his words indicated a different form of vision from the earlier prophecies, and was speaking to him;

"Son of man, look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here. Tell the house of Israel everything you see."

Ezekiel made meticulous notes of everything he was shown and heard but when he was finished he was left with the single outstanding impression that, unlike earlier visions, God had explained nothing. All that he had been told was summed up in the specific words spoken to him by the Architect Angel at the beginning of the tour of the Temple: He had been given no messages, and no explanations—except to tell everything he saw.

For the rest of the apocalyptic vision—and he was certain that its meaning was for the future—it had been "This is what the Sovereign

Lord says", without any explanation. The measurements, the sacrifices, the river, the tribal allocations of land, meant nothing to him, for they neither corresponded to the Tabernacle, nor Promised Land, nor Solomon's Temple, in many of their aspects, and had no physical correspondence with anything he knew from other writings or prophecies. He had no doubt that there was some symbolic and spiritual significance, but, until God provided the vision and interpretation through some later prophet, the meaning was hidden in the mind of God.

In his own mind Ezekiel was convinced that he had been given a revelation by God of the most central operating system of God's divinely appointed administration in the heavens, as it would be transported to the new heavens and new earth of the future. This would be the heavenly "New Jerusalem", in the Messianic millennial administration mentioned by Isaiah, superimposed on the earthly Old Jerusalem as a "canopy". This was the heavenly Tabernacle and Temple and Jerusalem seen in visions by Abraham and Moses and David, from where the heavenly spirit-beings worshipped God and carried out God's will to the furthest reaches of the universe. The sacrifices of the future were not the animals of the earthly Tabernacle and Temple but their spiritual counter-parts in heaven. The Tribal divisions were a replacement and extension of the angelic hierarchies from among the faithful servants of God on earth in their heavenly inheritance.

After the Architect Angel had finished measuring what was inside the Temple area, he led Ezekiel out by the east gate for further measurements. When he had completed these, Ezekiel saw the Shekinah Cloud of Glory coming from the east, where he had seen it departing nineteen years before, and the Cloud filled the New Temple. From the midst of the Cloud there came a voice:

"Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites for ever . . . Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them remember the plan . . . its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all

its regulations. This is the law of the temple: All the surrounding area on the top of the mountain will be most holy. Such is the law of the temple." (my emphasis)

Ezekiel's revelation of the New Temple was declared by God to have a three-fold purpose: (i) ". . . describe the Temple . . . that they may be ashamed of their sins"; (ii) ". . . let them consider the plan and if they are ashamed . . . make known to them the design of the Temple"; and (iii) ". . . write these (regulations and laws) before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations". A true understanding of the revelation of the New Temple, God said, ideally should produce three stages: (i) contrition, for sinful lack of understanding God's great provision; (ii) comprehension, a greater interest in and study of God's cosmic plan in history; and (iii) commitment, to follow ALL regulations and laws.

The "law of the Temple" was: "ALL the surrounding area on top of the mountain will be MOST HOLY." This superlative term, "most holy", had only been used of the Holy of Holies' inmost Sanctuary of the Tabernacle . In the New Temple it was used to describe "all the surrounding area" on top of Mount Zion, as well as the whole Temple structure. It was no longer to be the isolated room for a solitary high priest, but an open Sanctuary for a holy people. This all-pervading holiness is to be "the Law of the (whole) Temple and surrounding area."

The Throne of God on earth will be united with the New Temple: "While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me from inside the Temple, saying: 'Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites for ever.'"

From that Temple-Throne ruled over by the Prince-Messiah would flow the symbolic regenerating and refreshing River of Life. The final vision was as far as God could take an earthly servant at that period of history, limited by earthly symbols, in his and the world's unfolding understanding of the divine purposes of God for his creatures at this time. The prophecies of the four major prophets predicting the coming Messiah would have to be revealed with his

first appearance on earth to launch his “New Covenant” and final history.

Chapter 7

will be available on this site on the 1st August 2011