

THE LORD REIGNS

REVELATION HISTORY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

**By
J.L. Helberg**

**Translated by:
J.J.F.Krüger**

Series: CPD-publications Number 22

ISBN 1 86822 203 9

Copyright of this book is reserved by virtue of the Bern Convention. In terms of the Copyright Act 98 of 1978, no part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form or in any manner, electronic or mechanical, including photocopies, plates and video cassettes or by any information-storing or developing system without the written consent of the editors.

First Edition – 2011

Central Publications
Private Bag X6001
PU for CHE
POTCHEFSTROOM
2520

Tel.: (0148) 299-2825

FOREWORD

This book is a translation of "Die Here Regeer" (1988). The discussion of the poetic books has been revised and a considerable amount of other material has been added, especially in the discussion of the prophets.

Notes have been added at the end of each chapter giving references for further study. Due to the initial limited aim and set up of the book, the material in some chapters are more extensive than in others and some chapters therefore require more references for further study. I hope that these additions will add to the book's contribution on the subject of revelation history.

The Author

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	7
2. REVELATION HISTORY: DIVINE REVELATION THROUGH WORD AND HISTORY	8
3. THE THEME: THE KINGDOM OF GOD.....	10
4. THE COURSE OF THE KINGDOM	13
5. CLASSIFICATION OF THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.....	14
I THE CREATION AND THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT MAN AND THE PATRIARCHS (GENESIS).....	17
6. GOD'S CREATIVE WORK: IN THE BEGINNING (GEN 1:1, 2)	17
7. GOD'S CREATIVE WORK: CREATION IN SIX DAYS (GEN 1:3 et seq).....	19
8. EXPLANATION OF THE SIX DAYS OF CREATION.....	20
9. GOD CREATES MAN (GEN 1:26-31; 2)	23
10. MAN FALLS IN SIN (GEN 2, 3).....	25
11. PUNISHMENT AND GRACE (GEN 3)	27
12. HISTORY OF THE DISINTEGRATION OF MANKIND: CAIN'S LINE OF UNBELIEF (GEN 4).....	29
13. HISTORY OF THE DISINTEGRATION OF MANKIND: THE ELECTION LINE OF SETH (GEN 4-6).....	31
14. FAILURE, DOWNFALL AND SALVATION OF MANKIND: THE FLOOD (GEN 6-9).....	33
15. THROUGH HIS BLESSING, GOD BRINGS NATIONS INTO EXISTENCE (GEN 9-10).....	34
16. FALSE OBJECTIVE OF UNITY LEADS TO DISRUPTION (GEN 11)	36
17. ABRAHAM CALLED - TRUE UNITY FOR MANKIND (GEN 12).....	38
18. ABRAHAM AND LOT: A LIFE OF FAITH AND A LIFE OF OWN ABILITY AND NEED (GEN 12-22)	40
19. GOD ENTERS INTO A COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM, THE FATHER OF THE BELIEVERS (GEN 15-17).....	42
20. ABRAHAM SACRIFICES HIS SON, BELIEVING IN RESURRECTION FROM DEATH (GEN 22).....	44
21. THE COVENANT LIFE OF ISAAC AND JACOB (GEN 23-31).....	46
22. JACOB BECOMES ISRAEL (GEN 32,33).....	47
23. JOSEPH: GOD RULES THE LIVES OF MEN AND NATIONS (GEN 37-49)	49
24. END OF THE HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS: ALIENAGE AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE FUTURE (GEN 49,50).....	51
II INCEPTION AND FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL (EXODUS - RUTH)	53
25. MOSES CALLED AND PREPARED FOR HIS TASK (EX 1-6)	53
26. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF WITH THE COVENANT NAME YAHWEH (EX 3,6).....	54
27. THE MEANING OF MOSES AND THE EXODUS IN REVELATION HISTORY (EXODUS)	56
28. THE EXODUS AND THE PASSOVER (EX 6-15).....	58
29. GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL AT SINAI - BACKGROUND AND NATURE OF THE COVENANT (EX 19).....	60
30. THE GOD WHO GIVES THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (EX 20:1,2).....	62

31.	GOD'S TEN COMMANDMENTS (EX 20).....	64
32.	THE HOLY GOD MAKES A COVENANT WITH A SINFUL PEOPLE (EX 20-24).....	66
33.	AN UNDESERVING ISRAEL: THE BREAKING AND RESTORATION OF THE COVENANT (EX 32-34).....	68
34.	THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ISRAEL'S CEREMONIAL AND VARIOUS OTHER KINDS OF LAWS (EX 25 ET SEQ; LEV).....	70
35.	THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT: THE LORD CONTINUES WITH A COMPLAINING PEOPLE (LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, DEUTERONOMY)	73
36.	BEFORE THE PROMISED LAND: THE LORD IS THE RULER AND OWNER (NUM 22-25; DT 28-32; JOS 1-5)	75
37.	JERICHO: THE LORD CONTROLS THE GATEWAY TO CANAAN (JOS 6,7)	77
38.	THE ERA OF THE JUDGES: A TIME OF TRANSITION FOR ISRAEL (JUDGES).....	78
39.	THE JUDGES: DIVINE SALVATION IN AN EMERGENCY SITUATION (JUDGES)	80
40.	RUTH: THERE IS REFUGE WITH THE GOD OF ISRAEL (RUTH).....	81
	III THE ESTABLISHMENT AND COURSE OF THE MONARCHY (SAMUEL - ESTHER)...	84
41.	SAMUEL - THE LORD BEGINS ANEW WITH ISRAEL (1 SAM 1-7)	84
42.	THE MONARCHY: A QUERIED AND YET BENEFICIAL INSTITUTION (1 SAM 8).....	85
43.	ISRAEL'S FIRST KING: TOO IMPERSONAL IN HIS RELIGION: SAUL (1 SAM 9 ET SEQ)	87
44.	DAVID: A CHARISMATIC KING (1 SAM 16 ET SEQ; 2 SAM; 1 KI 1,2)	89
45.	JERUSALEM BECOMES THE CITY OF DAVID AND OF GOD (2 SAM 5 ET SEQ)	91
46.	THE LORD BUILDS DAVID A HOUSE, NOT THE OTHER WAY ROUND (2 SAM 7).....	93
47.	DAVID: SINNER, BUT ALSO SPIRITUAL WARRIOR (2 SAM 11 ET SEQ; 1 KI 1,2)	95
48.	SOLOMON: PRACTICAL WISDOM WITH AND WITHOUT LIVING FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD (1 KI 1-11; 2 CHR 1-9).....	96
49.	SCHISM: TWO SIMILAR AND YET DIFFERENT KINGDOMS (1 KI 12 ET SEQ; 2 KI; 2 CHR 10 ET SEQ).	98
50.	ELIJAH: MORTAL COMBAT AGAINST THE BAAL CULT (1 KI 16-18; 2 KI 2).....	100
51.	ELIJAH AT HOREB: GOD ALSO WORKS AND PROVIDES UNOBTRUSIVELY (1 KI 19 ET SEQ; 2 KI 1-8).....	102
52.	JEROBOAM II AND HIS SUCCESSORS: THE GOLDEN AGE AND DOWNFALL OF THE KINGDOM OF THE TEN TRIBES (2 KI 9-15)	104
53.	REHOBOAM AND THE LINE OF JUDEAN KINGS: DIVINE GRACE (1 KI 14 ET SEQ; 2 KI 8 ET SEQ)	105
54.	NATIONAL DOWNFALL (2 KI 23 ET SEQ; LAM).....	107
55.	NATIONAL RESURRECTION: RETURN AND RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE (EZRA)	109
56.	EZRA AND NEHEMIAH: MILITARY AND POLITICAL BUILDING AS WELL AS RELIGIOUS REFORM (EZRA; NEHEMIAH)	110
57.	ESTHER: GOD'S ABSOLUTE DOMINION AND HIS COVENANT FAITHFULNESS (ESTHER)	112
	IV THE POETIC BOOKS: TO FEAR THE LORD (JOB -SONG OF SONGS).....	114
58.	MAN'S ANSWER TO GOD'S REVELATION: "THE FEAR OF THE LORD"	114
59.	JOB: THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION IS TO SERVE GOD FOR HIS OWN SAKE.....	114
60.	THE PSALMS: ANSWERING TO THE WORD OF GOD WITH HEART AND LIFE	116
61.	MESSIANIC PSALMS	119

62.	PROVERBS: PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF LIFE	121
63.	ECCLESIASTES: EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS - WHEN HUMAN UNDERSTANDING IS THE PRIMARY MEASURE.....	122
64.	SONG OF SONGS: THE EXCLUSIVE UNION OF LOVE	124
V	THE PROPHETIC BOOKS: THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS (ISAIAH - MALACHI)	127
65.	THE PROPHETS:THE LORD'S ACTIONS ARE SOVEREIGN AND PERSONAL.....	127
66.	THE PROPHETS: THE LORD'S DOMINION IS LIFE-GIVING.....	129
67.	THE PROPHETS: THE LORD ACTS THROUGH HIS WORD AND IN HISTORY	131
68.	I ISAIAH: "THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL" - PUNISHMENT AND COVENANT FELLOWSHIP	134
69.	II ISAIAH: "THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL": THE LORD IS UNIQUE AND SAVES THROUGH SERVITUDE	137
70.	JEREMIAH: THE LORD TOUCHES MAN IN HIS INNERMOST BEING	139
71.	EZEKIEL: THE LORD TAKES HIS PEOPLE THROUGH DEATH	141
72.	DANIEL: THE LORD IS THE TRUSTWORTHY RULER OF THE WORLD, EVEN IN THE MOST DESPERATE SITUATIONS	144
73.	HOSEA: GOD'S ENDERADICABLE LOVE FOR HIS APOSTATE PEOPLE	146
74.	JOEL, OBADIAH: TERRIFYING WORLDWIDE JUDGEMENT.....	148
75.	AMOS: FORMALISM AND SELFISHNESS PUNISHED BY THE LORD	149
76.	JONAH: THE LORD IS FREE IN HIS BOUNDLESS JUDGEMENT AND BOUNDLESS GRACE	151
77.	MICAH: A MESSIANIC KINGDOM OF PEACE, AS OPPOSED TO FORMALISM AND DOWNFALL.....	153
78.	NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH: GOD'S WORLDWIDE DOMINION	154
79.	HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH AND MALACHI: A CALL TO LIVING FAITH AND EXPECTATION.....	156
80.	THE FULFILMENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.....	158

1. INTRODUCTION

1. The Current State of Old Testament Research

In the past the Old Testament was approached in a very individualistic and academic way -the theologies (note plural) of the Old Testament were strongly emphasised. The current approach is more sociological: the emphasis is on the input of Old Testament believers as a group in the formation of the Holy Scriptures. There is a stronger emphasis on the experience of revelation by Israel as a "congregation".

Three quite dominant 20th century scholars of the Old Testament are W. Eichrodt (1961; 1967), G. von Rad (1962; 1965) and Th. C. Vriezen (1966). Eichrodt's approach to the Old Testament is from the perspective of the covenant. He concentrates his discussions on themes, and also establishes links with the viewpoints of Israel's neighbours. Sometimes his work shows a pronounced slant towards history of religion. Unlike Eichrodt, Von Rad prefers to work historically, rather than thematically. According to him, the Old Testament is primarily concerned with recounting the history of Israel. However, this recounting is first of all concerned with stating a confession of Israel's faith within a specific temporal situation, and is, therefore, much rather preaching in the mould of history. History was continually "reinterpreted": adapted and changed in order to provide a message for every new situation. What the Bible now presents as history is, to a considerable extent, a theological construction. Von Rad's work is quite existentialistic in its approach (cf Eichrodt, 1961:512-520), with a soteriological element. God's work of salvation is emphasised at the expense of his also being Creator. All of the Old Testament was meant to give salvation history. Vriezen, on the other hand, approaches the Old Testament from the perspective of fellowship between God and man. Although the idea of the covenant is prominent in the Old Testament, it is nevertheless not the primary one, according to Vriezen. To the contrary, the entire Old Testament is determined by the prophetic spirit. Vriezen overemphasizes the prophetic element in the Old Testament, at the expense of the other central elements, namely those of kingship and priesthood.

According to C. Westermann (1978), not only salvation, but also God's blessings are central to the Old Testament. Historical continuity is thereby awarded a more important function than that granted to it by Von Rad. Furthermore, all of mankind is included, not only the people of the covenant. Even so, Westermann approaches the Old Testament more as a dialogue between God and man, than in the historical way in which the Old Testament presents itself.

The historical critical approach dominated the study of the Old Testament for a very long time. B.S. Childs (1979:40,58,74) formulates the objections of many scholars to this approach in a very systematic way. According to him, this method has as its premise a too strong emphasis on the original sources or the formative process of the text, rather than the canon as final product. The theological reflections of the society that used the documents are not taken into account; the historical process that led to the formation of the canon is explained merely in terms of sociological, political and economic forces. Childs states that the canon is divine revelation, not existential historiography as an expression of Israel's understanding of itself as a people. Israel's understanding of itself never had an autonomous place, but was always interpreted in the light of the authority of Scripture. Notwithstanding this strong viewpoint of Childs, he does overemphasize the interaction between Biblical scriptures and the society that made use of them. He wrongly grants too much formative influence to this society, at the expense of the idea of divine revelation.

According to J. Barr (1983:4-14), Scripture - like any other written documents - never played an important role in Biblical times, but oral communication definitely did. Jesus never even ordered his disciples to write down anything. Barr, therefore, alleges that Scripture has its origin in faith, not faith in Scripture. He consequently makes the mistake of thinking only in terms of Scripture and faith. He ignores divine revelation. This revelation already existed before any (human) faith. Scripture, therefore, has its origin not in human faith, but in divine revelation. Barr also does not give serious attention to passages that indicate Scripture as an authoritative unit. In this regard, reference can be made to the following: "the Scriptures say" (Mt 21:42; 22:29; 26:54); "it is written" (Mt 4:4,6; 21:13; 26:31); "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). He also does not take into account that Jesus indicated that he came to fulfil the Scriptures (Mt 5:17).

W. Brueggemann (1992:141) rejects the popular hypothesis of religious development or evolution as a hermeneutical model for the interpretation of Scripture. According to him, the central idea is not the reality of

development, but the reality of conflict in God's revelation of himself, as stated by the narrators and poets of Israel. The social reality of conflict consequently plays an important part in Brueggemann's work. His approach is strongly sociological, and does not do justice to the theocentric character of Old Testament revelation.

N.K. Gottwald (1975:42-57) approaches the Old Testament, and even God, from a Marxist perspective. According to him, Israel's view of Yahweh was the result of socio-economic influences, and the settling of Israel in Canaan was the result of a class struggle -contrary to what the Bible says.

2. Premise: the Corrective Word of God

This book is about the message proclaimed by Holy Scripture, and more specifically by the Old Testament. This "document" was handed down by the people of God, the church, following the Old Testament people of God, namely Israel. It is the result of what was faithfully transmitted through generations and ages by both the Old and New Testament people of God. It was not invented by these people. It is not Israel's understanding of affairs or of itself. The exceptional character of this document of Israel and the church is to be attributed precisely to the fact that it is, in an important way, a corrective both to Israel and the church. This means, at the same time, that this document is not intended either to belong to or to apply to any exclusive group; it is intended to be universal.

The corrective began right at the beginning of history, and continues to the end: it was a corrective to Adam and all of mankind, to Abraham in his conduct towards Pharaoh in Egypt, to Moses at his calling and when he hit the rock instead of addressing it. It was a corrective to the priests as represented by Aaron, to the kings as represented by David and Solomon, and even to prophets, like Nathan (2 Sam 7).

In the Old Testament we thus have God's revelation concerning himself and mankind. It is a call to man to change, to turn around and come back, back to God and thus to one another. This call of the Old Testament is reflected in the preaching of both John the Baptist and Jesus: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt 3:2; 4:17). This call was summarised by Jesus in the great commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:37-40).

The revelation comes from God. He has all initiative. Even in the Garden of Eden, it was he who went in search of man after his sin. In the same way, it is he who reveals himself to man on his own initiative. At the same time, this divine self-revelation enables man to discover himself - both as sinner and as highly favoured being, as someone with a calling, and thus with a task and responsibilities.

This book is concerned with what is taught in the Old Testament, as part of Holy Scripture, handed down to us by means of people, being the Word of God that is a radical corrective to mankind and its approach to things.

3. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1961:295,296) for the corrective nature of God's work.

2. REVELATION HISTORY: DIVINE REVELATION THROUGH WORD AND HISTORY

1. Special Revelation

All of creation proclaims God: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the works of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge..." (Ps 19:1-4).

God also reveals himself in a special and direct way, that is, through his Word. This Word was written down in the Bible. It tells us how God reveals himself in creation. Without this guide we will not be able to see it, or else will misunderstand what we do see. The other peoples in the time of ancient Israel never had this divine revelation. They misunderstood nature, and viewed the sun, moon and stars, winds and storms as

personifications of gods and worshipped them as such. Some modern philosophical schools teach that there is nothing of God to be seen in nature. It is perhaps true that God created the earth, but it now continues to exist on its own and is run by its own laws, without God being involved in any way. This is the viewpoint of some philosophical schools. It is wrong, however, and is the result of man being blinded by sin - he cannot see the presence of God in creation any more. In order to see it clearly, he needs the spectacles of the Word.

However, it is not only because of sin that God reveals himself in a special way. He created man after his own image: man is like a child of God. God does not want to rule man in an impersonal way - he wants to have personal fellowship with him. He does this by means of his special revelation, especially by means of words, or language. The Word places us in a special relationship with God. The believer listens to the Bible like a child listens to his father when he speaks.

2. God Reveals Himself - by Means of People

In the special revelation, it is God who reveals himself, but he employs people to this end. The contributions of some of these people are clearly the result of meditation, observation or research. However, it is more than only the result of human effort or human theology. The Old Testament does not present the theologies of different people that could turn out to be different or even conflicting. It presents the revelation of God that came to a variety of people in a variety of vocations, handed down through the generations in this way. Even so, it is still an essential unity as the one divine revelation. This is the reason why we can also speak of revelation history. In the light of the above, the popular term "Theology of the Old Testament" can better be avoided. It is both confusing and misleading. It has also gained various doubtful connotations through its theological history.

3. Word and History are Strongly Linked

God reveals himself not only by means of creation and his Word. The revelation tells us not only who or what God is, but also what he does. This is the way in which the first book of the Bible begins. It says: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It then goes on to describe what else God did at the time of the creation.

The Word is especially concerned with God's actions in and by means of history. The books of the Old Testament present us primarily with history: from Genesis to Esther. It recounts true history, events that really took place, not only representations, conceptualisations, ideals and statutes. It is about concrete history, and has something to say to us concerning our concrete, everyday life. It is practical religion.

The history presented by the Old Testament does not stand on its own, but is strongly linked to the word revelation. The word revelation is not a mere commentary on history after the historical events have taken place, but often preceded the events themselves, announced them, introduced them and gave rise to them. In Genesis 1 we already find that God "said" what had to happen. It was the same in the case of Abraham and the prophets, as a consequence, the Old Testament contains a strong element of promise. It is concerned with things announced by the Word that would, however, only find their complete fulfilment later in history.

4. The Revelation is Historical

The Old Testament presents revelation history, or to state it in a different way, history of God's revelation. This idea also contains that of unity within the revelation. From the beginning there is an idea or a truth that is embryonically present, and which applies throughout history. This idea or truth has its own history, a continuation. The revelation of God's work of salvation, for instance, became clearer from Abraham to Isaiah. God continually used new events and historical situations to unlock new aspects of his redemptive plan with mankind by means of his Word. However, this was not a mere natural and gradual development, growth or evolution under God's control. There was also a supernatural element. God intervened in a surprising way and caused events and human thoughts to progress in a different way than would be expected naturally. An example of this is Israel's salvation from exile in Babylon. It was over and done with concerning the people of the covenant, but God in effect resurrected his people from death (Eze 37).

Even though the theological discipline of Revelation History clearly has a historical approach, it nevertheless

follows its own method, and not that of ordinary historiography. The Bible does not recount everything in strict chronological order (cf the poetic and prophetic books). The temporal aspect is not of primary importance here.

Revelation history does not differ in any essential way from Biblical history as such, even though it is more interested in the meaning and coherence of facts than Biblical history. It is for this reason that it is also interested in non-historical parts of the revelation.

5. Revelation about God

The revelation is not primarily concerned with the creation, the history of peoples or the history of Israel. It is first of all revelation about God. It tells us something about his dominion and his fellowship with man. It does not present the patriarchs or David as beautiful examples of heroic believers. The revelation is primarily concerned with God's faithfulness, even despite the unfaithfulness and failure of mankind. The history of the kings is never presented from the viewpoint of their degree of statesmanship, but always from that of their relationship with God and his covenant faithfulness.

The purpose of the revelation is to enable man to recognise God's dominion as well as his fellowship with mankind. He has to subject himself to this dominion, and live in true fellowship with God. This also entails a relationship of justice and love with his fellow man. The Bible should not be read as a source of information on all kinds of things, but in faith and with an attitude of worship.

6. Notes

1. Compare Helberg (1993:1-45) for a more detailed discussion of the concept Revelation History of the Old Testament.
2. Compare Childs (1979:40, 58, 59, 74) regarding the fact that the Old Testament is not a description of Israel's understanding of itself.

3. THE THEME: THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1. The Kingdom as Theme of Both Old and New Testaments

The rich diversity of the Old Testament has to be taken into account when its contents are formulated in one theme. These contents may not be forced into any system. This having been said, the Word of God is still a unity, and must be approached as such. In this book a historical method derived from the Old Testament itself will be used; it should be sufficient to safeguard the Old Testament from being forced into any system foreign to the Bible itself.

The idea or concept of the kingdom of God runs right through the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi, even though the term as such never occurs in it. It was, however, well known when Jesus used it (Mk 1:15) - he never explained it when he used it, and nobody ever asked him what the kingdom was. The Old Testament proclaims God as holy and loving ruler (cf Ps 24, 33, 23). Everything and everybody has to acknowledge and confess this dominion, so that God can thereby be honoured and his Name be exalted (cf Ps 19:1 et seq; 8:2 et seq). The kingship and dominion of God is a present reality in the Old Testament. The Old Testament also transcends itself by indicating a future where the kingdom will find its complete fulfilment. This fulfilment is to be found in Jesus Christ (Mt 3:1-31; Lk 24:27).

2. The Concept: Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God involves God's dominion, exercised in such a way that this dominion will finally be acknowledged by everyone. It entails God's dominion in connection with creation, fall and redemption.

The first book of the Bible already makes it quite clear that God is not a part of the cosmos, as was the case with the gods of Israel's neighbours or the divinities of pantheistic religions and philosophies. God is the creator of the heavens and the earth. There is an essential difference between him and creation. God is also not a mere heavenly God who is far away or who went into passive rest after he had created everything. He continually

rules over all of creation, and sustains each and every creature. He is also not a mere idea that can be thought about or studied. He exercises dominion over everything, is in control of everything, and requires man's acknowledgement of this in his whole life.

Man is the crown of God's creative work. God created everything, including man, in such a way that it was "very good" (Gen 1:31); despite this, man was unwilling to acknowledge God's total dominion. This had a radical effect on his relationship with God, and also his relationship of the rest of creation with God and man. However, God is not only a God of great power, but also of love. That is why he brought about redemption. The Old Testament teaches both that and how God was en route with mankind towards redemption. The focus is specifically on the people he chose for himself and with whom he made a covenant. He was (and still is) en route to a day when he would have a people who would serve him willingly and perfectly.

Important events on this route were the following: man's banishment from the Garden of Eden - he became a stranger on earth; the calling of Abraham - God started anew by choosing a people and making a covenant with them, as well as promising them a land in which something of the lost Garden of Eden is symbolised; the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Ten Commandments - God determined the way in which he was to be served; the kingship in Israel, specifically as embodied in David - the imperfect representation of God's kingdom, but with emphasis on man's failure; the exile and return - a prime example of God's wonderful and life-giving care for his people; the promise of God's eventual coming to his people - an event in which all of mankind will share.

By way of summary then, the kingdom of God can be described in the following terms: God rules everything in a holy and life-giving way, and has personal, covenant fellowship with man. He does this despite man's mortally fallen state in this world. Both his dominion and his fellowship are exercised by means of his revelation in his Word and in history (including the creation of nature). The kingdom entails that God constitutes a people for himself, a people that shares in his redemptive grace; believes in his life-giving power; that feels deeply dependent upon him; that lives in gratitude and an awareness of vocation towards God, mankind and nature; places its hope upon God in this broken world; believes in his promises, and lives from the expectation of his coming to establish his total dominion and to bring about total redemption.

3. The Characteristics of the Kingdom of God

The characteristics of the kingdom of God were clearly brought to light when God revealed himself to Moses with the name Yahweh or Lord, the characteristic covenant Name of the God of Israel. At this event, Moses was brought deeply under the impression of God's inaccessible holiness. He could only speak with God from afar and without shoes on (Ex 3:6). Even so, God had personal fellowship with Moses; he "was" with him and his people (Ex 3:12,14). God is the God who rescued his people in a life-giving way out of Egypt; he reveals himself by means of his Word (Ex 3:15) and in history as a life-giving God (Ex 3:12-15; cf chapters 23 and 27). This also includes his actions in nature (Ex 7:14 et seq: the plagues).

The characteristics of the kingdom of God are proclaimed even by the first chapters of Genesis: God is the holy, exalted creator of all things and rules over it with absolute authority. He demands unconditional obedience, and punishes disobedience with death (Gen 2:16; 3:16-19). However, he also created man after his own image (Gen 1:26). This implies that man is at the same time both deeply dependent upon God and that he has personal fellowship with God (Gen 2:7). Man is a representation or effigy of God, nothing more. He has just as little life or potential within himself as a statue, and just as little possibility of life on his own as a shadow. And yet, because he was created in the image of God, he is just like a child of God (cf chapter 7).

Through his disobedience, man broke the bond with the living God, and fell in the grip of death, both physically and spiritually (Gen 3 et seq). Man was king of the earth, and, therefore, the earth fell together with him. And yet God continued his dominion over mankind and the earth in a life-giving way, by means of personal fellowship with man. He banished man from the Garden of Eden, but also gave him clothes as lasting token of his grace. The history of Adam and Eve carries the imprint of death and sorrow (Cain and Abel), but also of life, expectation and worship (Gen 4:25,26). In the genealogy of man the constant chorus of "death" is to be heard, but also that of "life" (Gen 5). History ran into destruction, and yet God created life out of death. He allowed history to continue (Gen 6-8). This life-giving conduct of God characterises all of Old Testament history, also the whole existence of the believer, including his spiritual life (Ps 16; 51:7-12). God accompanies

history with his Word (Gen 1; 4; 6-8; Ps 33:6,9; 19:8 et seq; Isa 55:6-8).

In the situation of death through sin, unwillingness and revolt, God brought redemption by means of his elective and redemptive grace. His redemptive grace was specifically illustrated in the sacrifices that played such an important role in the life of Israel. God made a covenant with the people he had chosen, and had covenant fellowship with them. This covenant fellowship was a source of animosity between the people of the covenant and the unbelieving nations. The notion of a horizontalistic religion, in which the distinction between the people of God and the world falls away, is foreign to the Old Testament.

The Lord's covenant is a covenant of grace, and is not founded upon human merit. It is for this reason that it specifically involves the "poor" and the "helpless". This indicates neither material nor merely spiritual poor and helpless people. The poor and helpless are those who do not live by their own abilities, but depend upon God for their material as well as their spiritual existence. The true believers are actually the "remnant" saved by the life-giving power of God, the shoot from the stump of mankind.

3. Calling

The kingdom of God implies that God rules and that he has the initiative in all things. It also implies that God has fellowship with man. For this reason, it involves a mutual relationship between God and man, and calls man to be energetic in his daily work and service of God. The believers, as God's covenant people, are called to believe in God and his life-giving power (like Abraham, Gen 15:1-6; 22), and to depend upon him alone. They have to live in enmity with sin within themselves, and with every power in revolt against the dominion of the living God. They are a kingdom of people called to live a life of love and faithfulness towards God and their fellow men. They have to exercise justice, and show compassion towards the poor and helpless who have nobody but God to help and protect them. In all events and in all aspects of creation they have to see the hand of God, and they have to live according to the Word of God in all aspects of their lives. It is a life in a broken world of death and suffering, but also a life in which gratitude, joy and an awareness of vocation predominate, a life lived in hope and deep dependence upon God (Dt 6:5 et seq; Lev 19:18; cf Mt 22:37-40).

4. God as the Living and Life-giving God according to Jesus

Jesus also said that the Old Testament proclaims God's life-giving power and personal fellowship with man. Through his Word and history, God continues his dominion and personal fellowship, even right through death. As proof of this, Jesus referred to the revelatory Word of God: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." The implication of these words, Jesus said, is that there is a resurrection from death, for God is not a God of the dead, but of the living (Mt 22:29-32). He is not only a mighty God, but also a God who has unbreakable personal fellowship with man, despite the brokenness of this world and this life which eventually ends in death.

5. Notes

1. Compare Bright (1953) for a good discussion of the kingdom of God in both the Old and the New Testament. Bright emphasizes the historical nature of the Old Testament, and also the unity of the theology of the Old Testament, as he calls it. This unity is especially to be found in God's kingdom dominion, as well as unique aspects of Mosaic belief, especially monotheism. Israel's monotheistic faith also included a strong eschatological and historical consciousness. However, Bright emphasizes the historical aspect to such an extent that the revelatory aspect sometimes seems to vanish completely, like in the so-called prehistory (Gen 1-11). He also places too much emphasis on God's kingdom dominion in and through David, instead of in and through Adam (cf Helberg, 1976).

2. Compare the article of R.C. Dentan (1972:1159-1166) for a discussion and overview of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament.

3. Only with Israel, with its monotheistic religion and its belief in God as Creator, could there be any mention of divine choice and God's covenant with his people. The nature deities of Israel's neighbours were confined to territories and countries, and there was a kinship between the gods and their worshippers.

4. The various liberation theologies are constructed on the basis of the exodus from Egypt, and the status quo theologies on the time of the kings. Both kinds of theologies lack the more comprehensive perspective of the Old Testament, especially the new emphasis of the exilic and post-exilic era.

5. The strong emphasis in the Old Testament on God's presence and the unbreakable, personal bond between God and the believer, effectively rules out the possibility of ancestor worship, as in traditional African religions and Buddhism.

6. Fohrer (1972:98-102) places strong emphasis on God's dominion, on the one hand, and his personal fellowship with man, on the other hand, but does not link these aspects to the kingdom of God.

4. THE COURSE OF THE KINGDOM

1. The Line through the Old Testament

After the fall, man was banished from the Garden of Eden, and thus became a stranger in his relationship with God, himself, his fellow man, and with the earth. Through God's grace, these relationships were, however, still continued, even though in a broken manner. Because of man's sinfulness, history headed towards another disaster, namely the destruction by the flood. In the midst of this God made a miraculous new beginning with mankind - through Noah. However, history continued with an even greater estrangement between God and man. This was caused by the building of the tower of Babel. Again God made a new beginning with mankind, but this time by means of a part of mankind: God chose Israel to be his people and made a covenant with them. He did this by calling Abraham and making a covenant with him. He promised Abraham to make him into a great nation that would serve him. Even so, a universal perspective was maintained in that God also promised that all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham. This would be brought about by means of faith in God. The land promised to Abraham was a symbol of the lost Garden of Eden. Divine promises, and consequently also human expectations concerning the future, play a major role in all of the Old Testament. Both are essentially about only one thing: God's dominion as king, his being en route with his people towards his full dominion over everyone and everything.

With the exodus from Egypt, God saved his people from material slavery, and made a covenant with Israel. This was accompanied by the giving of the Ten Commandments, intended to be the foundation of the people's lives. These commandments are not concerned with material property, nor with cultic or ceremonial responsibilities, but are religio-ethical by nature - they concern the right relationship with God and one's fellow man.

The kingship in Israel was meant to symbolise something of the kingdom of God, and was especially manifested in the reign of David. Human kingship failed, however, and expectations were more and more placed on the future coming of the saviour. He would be more than an earthly king - he would be the messiah.

The failure of the human kingship was sealed by the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the consequent exile. This event was experienced as God's punishment for the sins of the kings and the people (cf Lamentations). They had completely broken the covenant. For all practical purposes, the kingship of Israel now vanished. God's grace remained, however. Hope was now placed on a new covenant (Jer 31). The miracle of the return from exile transcended that of the exodus from Egypt as the central act of salvation in the history of Israel (Jer 16:14; 23:7, 8). The emphasis shifted from military and external victory, from political domination, to a change of heart. Israel's position as a people called to service in the midst of the nations, was also emphasised. The trust in God's continuing dominion continued, as did the expectation of the coming of the full dominion of God to save his people. This would happen when God would come to his people in the eschatological future, and everything would then change dramatically.

In all of this, God is very seldom portrayed as king. Isaiah 6 and 44:6 do it, but the idea of God as king does not have a central role in chapters 1-39. Isaiah 44:6 is determined by the framework of God as creator, which strongly determines all of chapters 40-66. This indicates the difference of God's kingship and kingdom. The same is indicated by the name used for God, dominating the whole book, namely "the Holy One of Israel". The difference centres around the covenant, divine choice, and the fact that the covenant is first of all concerned with the condition of the human heart. This particular covenant also differs in an essential way from those between victors and vanquished.

2. God Rules with Life-giving Power

The main content of the Old Testament has already been discussed under the paragraphs concerning the kingdom of God (cf 3.2, 3.3, 3.4). In this paragraph only the line followed through the Old Testament will be indicated. The Old Testament says: God is life and rules with life-giving power.

Man's physical, material and spiritual life, as well as all of history, stands under the token of adversity, destruction and death. The whole creation, or all of nature, was subjected to the curse because of the sin of man. The result was disharmony between man and nature. Even so, man was still a king appointed by God to rule nature, and he could still see the good hand of God everywhere (cf Gen 9:9 et seq; Ps 8; 19; 23; 104; 148; cf also the many proverbs and metaphors derived from nature in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Prophets). Man was so rebellious against God and so mortally fallen in sin that his life, as well as history, continuously ended on the brink of an abyss. It always seemed as if God's kingdom, his dominion and fellowship, would not continue. And yet he always made a new beginning by bringing about prosperity out of downfall, and life out of death. At first all people were part of the people of God, but this eventually ended in downfall, and only Israel was resurrected from that process of death and dying. In a like manner, it was eventually only the remnant of Israel that was spiritually resurrected. Even so, this remnant was called to be a light for the gentiles (Isa 49:6).

Throughout the course of history God accompanied history with his Word, and impelled his people to serve him willingly, in gratitude and joy, and to love their fellow men. God preserved his original work. Because of man's sin, however, this could only be brought about by means of drastic renewal: the old was put to death, and the new was brought to life. In the end, the whole Old Testament dispensation made way for that of the New Testament.

Despite this, it was still the same kingdom, namely the kingdom that was already a present reality, but that would also come, and then only through a process of death and resurrection. The focal point was to be found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By means of the resurrection of Jesus, there was a New Testament, one that had been resurrected from the Old. It is for this reason that the New Testament always has to be read within the framework of both Old and New Testaments. In the same way, the Old Testament has to be read in the light of the New Testament and the whole of both Old and New Testaments.

The focal point of the New Testament is not to be found in the development of some or other new idea, but in the fulfilment of that which was already embryonically present in the Old Testament. This eventual fulfilment was also promised in the Old Testament. The actual fulfilment was historical and personal, and was brought about by the historical and personal coming of Jesus Christ. In him the five elements of the kingdom of God are brought to the fore.

1. In him God's absolute power and dominion are revealed. God even has power over life and death, even though this power is hidden beneath Christ's serving conduct during his first sojourn on earth.
2. In him God's intimate fellowship with man is revealed. Christ is Immanuel, God with us. God and man are reconciled with one another. The believer can now address God as Father.
3. God's salvation through life-giving power is revealed in that Christ died for man, and was resurrected from death. Through the Holy Spirit he is also resurrected in the hearts and lives of men, and he brings them to repentance and conversion, as well as a new life with God.
4. In Christ, God's work through the Word is also revealed. Christ is the Word who became man, and through whom the reconciliation between Word and man has become possible.
5. God's work in and through history is also revealed in Christ in that he came historically, brought about salvation and now reigns at the right hand of God. Everything is directed towards his coming when he will hand over all dominion to the Father, when God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

5. CLASSIFICATION OF THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Historical, Poetic and Prophetic Books

The classification of the books of the Old Testament given here, corresponds with that handed down to us by

the New Testament church in the Greek and Latin translations. The classification is: historical, poetic and prophetic books. The historical books (Genesis to Esther) are concerned with the course of the kingdom of God in history. It can be further divided into three parts:

1. the time of the patriarchs (Genesis);
2. the time of Moses, i.e. the exodus from Egypt and settlement in Canaan (Exodus to Ruth);
3. the time of the kings (Samuel to Esther).

The poetic books include all the books from Job to Song of Songs, while the prophetic books include all the books from Isaiah to Malachi.

Kingdom in the Old Testament

Historical Books (Gen - Esther)

Poetic Books (Job - SS)

Prophetic Books (Isa - Mai)

- The time of the patriarchs (Genesis)
- The time of Moses (Exodus - Ruth)
- The time of the kings (Samuel - Esther)

2. The Creation and the History of Ancient Man and the Patriarchs (Genesis)

Genesis describes the situation from the creation to the patriarchs, and shows how God's dominion and fellowship continue, despite the breach in the relationship between God and man, wrought by sin. (Cf the history of paradise, the flood, the tower of Babel and the genealogy ending in the barren couple Abraham and Sarah.) This is clearly shown in the covenant through which God binds the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to himself. God's relationship with people on a personal level is very important here. This period can be characterised as the creation and preservation of the kingdom.

3. The Inception and Formation of the People of Israel (Exodus - Ruth)

God saved Israel from their slavery in Egypt, made a covenant with them and separated them from the nations. They were his own people and, therefore, received his commandments in order to live according to them. They were settled in the promised land. The purpose of their salvation was that they would be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). This meant that they had a missionary task over and against the nations, and that each and every one of them had personal access to God. God continued this relationship, despite Israel's continued obstinacy and rebellion, which always caused them to end up in a situation of downfall. This period also ended in a nadir in Israel's history; it can be characterised as the calling to a priestly kingdom.

4. The Establishment and Course of the Kingship (Samuel - Esther)

The books describing the beginning and end of this period recount salvation from situations of mortal danger, in the time of the Philistines and Persians respectively. God remained true to his covenant with David. The kingship, just like the people at whose request it was established, built on own power and human potential, and was therefore doomed to failure. However, God brought it to a triumphant climax in David. Throughout this period, which had more lows than highs, God preserved both his people and the kingship. Because of the sins of people and king, the empire was split in two, and the resulting two peoples eventually both entered into the death of exile. However, at a time when everything seemed to be lost, the promise of a new David was heard. There was also miraculous salvation from exile. This period can be characterised as the continuation of God's kingdom despite the establishment and failure of a human kingdom.

5. The Poetic Books: To Fear the Lord (Job - Song of Songs)

These books have a pronounced subjective character in the sense that they are the human answer to God's revelation in the Word, in history and in nature. Despite this fact, these books are thoroughly stamped by divine sovereignty. They emphasise that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Prov 9:10). In this instance, "to fear" means to completely hand over your life to God and to receive it from him anew. These books, therefore, teach that one should look at things with a reborn heart and mind. This is especially applicable to that great mystery of life: it seems to be going well with the godless, while believers are suffering. One can only find peace in the unconditional acknowledgement of God's absolute sovereignty, and in subjection to him (eg Job, Ps, Eccl). True wisdom is given by God himself, and consists of acknowledgement of one's own inner depravity (Ps 51:7,8; 90:8,11,12). These books can be characterised as: kingdom and the human spirit.

6. Prophetic Ministry and Action (Isaiah - Malachi)

God addressed his people in a strikingly direct and personal way through the prophets. It is quite typical of the prophets to say: "this is what the Lord says" (Jer 2:1,5 et seq; Eze 2:4; 3:27; etc). The words of the Lord then usually follow in the direct speech, as if he himself is still speaking.

The prophets proclaimed that God rules over all things. He is king of the nations and the whole history of the world. The prophets also proclaimed a very direct relationship between God and the members of his people. They called people to personal responsibility instead of formalism.

In the prophetic books we also find evidence of the stressful nature of the kingdom: history will end with a frightening day of judgement, the Day of the Lord (Isa 2:12 etc.). This spells doom and death. On the other hand, the prophetic ministry also told of God's forgiving, life-giving and redemptive grace. The people who broke the covenant and, therefore, met with downfall, was God's people (Isa 41:9). That is why there was salvation, even though it was only for a remnant. This remnant was the people who, right through death, shared in the resurrection life (Isa 11).

This people was also the servant of the Lord (Isa 42:1), and was therefore in his service in a very special way. This is why God gave a deeper significance to the suffering of his people. Their suffering became more than just punishment of sin; it became subservience on behalf of the nations (Isa 42:6). However, because God's people could not and would not do this, he gave his own Servant to replace his people (Isa 53). Through him God would fully bring about the miracle. In the Servant, in a historically real way, God would generate life through death. In this Servant, the whole history of Israel, therefore, reached its culmination point. In him man was reconciled with God and his Word. The redeemer was, however, not only a suffering servant, but at the same time the Son of man who received dominion over everything from God (Dan 7:13,14).

I THE CREATION AND THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT MAN AND THE PATRIARCHS (GENESIS)

6. GOD'S CREATIVE WORK: IN THE BEGINNING (GEN 1:1, 2)

1. God is King of Creation and History

The first verse of the Old Testament is a kingdom verse: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This, however, should be read in the context of the whole first chapter, as it is focused on the creation of man, who stands under the dominion of God and who lives in fellowship with him. Genesis proclaims God as the absolute creator of and ruler over all things. God was before all things. No eternal power or matter coexisted with him. He created absolutely everything, and, therefore, has right of decree over everything.

The Old Testament does not begin with a description of static characteristics of God. It also does not portray God as being in the temple, or resting. God is active and dynamic. One should, therefore, not merely meditate on him or only worship him in a ritual way. He should be acknowledged and worshipped as king of and ruler over all things.

"The beginning" is mentioned in the very first words of the Bible. Chapter 2:4 continues, and gives an account of what happened to everything: the continuation, the history of it. God preserves everything he created, and also determines history. Chapter 12 et seq goes even further, and describes God's actions towards the patriarchs, including his promises to them concerning the future. This tells us that God's dominion over creation is purposeful, and that everything is moving towards a certain end in the future. One's life is, therefore, supported by him who was there in the beginning, who now rules over all, and who gives one hope for the future as an important driving force in one's life.

On mere grammatical grounds, it is also possible to translate Genesis 1:1 in the following way: "In the beginning, when God made the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and empty...". This would indicate that there was already a formless and empty earth when God began his creative work, and that he only gave shape to it. This would, however, be contradictory to the rest of the Old Testament. According to the Old Testament, God is the absolute creator of everything (cf Isa 40:21; 41:4; Prov 8:22). The alternative translation mentioned above is also contradictory to the spirit and emphasis of the first chapter itself. In this chapter, the work of God is always the main idea, and is always formulated in the main clause. Chapter 1 strongly emphasises God's absolute initiative: he does everything. It is he who is speaking and acting every time. In the above translation God and his work are described in an adverbial clause, and is, therefore, of secondary importance. The earth and its condition is described in the main clause, and is thereby ascribed primary importance.

2. God is the Free and Eternal Ruler

God "created" the heavens and the earth, that is to say, he brought it to light as something completely new (cf Ex 34:10; Num 16:30). That which exists, is not the mere result or development of what existed previously, but is the result of the direct action of God. Only God can create; in the Old Testament the word for "create" is never used for anyone's actions except God's.

God remains sovereign over and against his creation, that is to say, he remains a free ruler over it. Creation is not a part of God, nor is God a part of creation. This differs from the viewpoints of Israel's neighbours with their natural religions, as well as from some modern philosophies or religions, especially in the East.

God created "the heavens and the earth", that is to say, all things. He alone is "God". Everything that other nations thought about their gods could be said about God, and more. That is why the word "God" (Elohim) used here and elsewhere in the Old Testament is actually the plural "gods". The plural indicates God's majesty and fullness. He, the creator, is God in the absolute and exclusive sense of the word.

3. The Earth was Inhospitable and Fearsome

The condition of the earth at that stage is described as "formless and empty" (*tohu wabohu*). The meaning is adequately conveyed in the translation "formless and empty". It was inhospitable, without any possibility of life on it. The earth was completely barren and dark.

Some commentators see in this an indication of demonic powers in rebellion against God, or at least the result of their actions. However, this is contradictory to the meaning of these words in other passages of the Old Testament, as well as to the context of the chapter. The two Hebrew words are used together in only two other places in the Old Testament (Isa 34:11; Jer 4:23). There it also indicates fearsome barrenness - not a power in opposition to God, but a condition that is the result of God's actions. In Gen 1:2 it is also the result of God's actions. The only difference is that, in Gen 1:2, it is not the result of God's judgement, but of his creative work. Isaiah and Jeremiah teach us that God will bring a drastic judgement, so drastic in fact that the earth will once again be as it had been before God made it hospitable.

The shorter form (*tohu*) also sometimes indicates fearsome barrenness (Dt 32:10; Ps 107:40; Job 6:18; 12:24). Even then it never indicates demonic powers or the results of their actions. The word can often be found in Isaiah 40 et seq, and there it means: meaninglessness, emptiness, vanity.

The context of Genesis 1 also indicates that the expression "formless and empty" has nothing to do with demonic powers. Nowhere in this chapter is there any mention of any power or initiative in opposition to God. On the contrary, God is the only one who has initiative. Time and again it is strongly emphasised that his work was effective and was answered with immediate obedience. Every time we read "and it was so" and "God saw that it was good".

In the whole chapter there is also no indication of any conflict between God and such powers. The creation did not originate as a result of such a struggle. God only "said" every time, and then everything happened.

In the poetic books of the Old Testament, the sea is often associated with monsters that are in opposition to God and his people (cf Job 9:13; Ps 18, 68, 74, 89; Isa 17; Dan 7). This is poetic metaphor, however, and can be compared to the habitual practice among the surrounding nations. It cannot be used as a method to explain narrative material, like that of Genesis 1.

4. There was Darkness, but also the Spirit of God

In this condition everything was still in darkness. There was also no distinction between land and water, or even between the earth and the sky. The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters, and was performing some action to the benefit of creation.

Ps 33:6 and 33:9 also link the working of the Spirit of God and the creative work of God, especially through the fact that God spoke: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath (or Spirit - *FK*) of his mouth ... For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm" (cf also Isa 44:3,4; Ps 104:30).

Some commentators take the Hebrew word for Spirit to mean "wind" here. They interpret the expression "wind of God" as an indication of a tremendous wind. The three clauses of Genesis 1:2 then indicate the following: barrenness, darkness and storminess. Over and against this, it has to be kept in mind that this combination of words (*ruach Elohim*) in the Old Testament never means "wind of God" but always "Spirit of God".

The author of Genesis, therefore, knew of no conflict between God and the creation, of no dualism or split between material things and God. God is one; nothing and nobody existed together with him from eternity. He is in every sense the creator. The earth, the waters and everything else are his creations. He is the ruler and king who even controls the fearsome things. These things were actually the precursors of his habitable earth, on which he would place man to reign and to serve him.

5. Notes

1. The word "create" (*bara*) is used not only when God creates something out of nothing, but also when he creates something new, without any causal relation to what preceded it. "Create" is also used to denote the origin of living beings (Gen 1:21) and of man (Gen

1:27), as well as God's actions in nature and history (Isa 45:7,8; 48:7; 65:18; Jer 31:22; Ps 102:19). Genesis 1, however, describes God's creative work as something unique and not to be repeated, ending with his work on the seventh day (cf DuToit, 1962:27-29).

2. Israel's concept "heaven and earth" differs from our own "world" or the Greek "cosmos" (Von Rad, 1962:152; Vriezen, 1966:457). Israel did not view the world as a philosophically objectified unity over against man. Cf also Eichrodt (1967:93-107) regarding Israel's cosmology.

3. Although the name Elohim is the accepted one for "gods", it has a special meaning when used for God: "The use of the name Elohim gathers all the divine forces into a personal unity, and thus contrasts one absolute Lord of the divine realm with the polytheistic thinking of the heathen cosmogony"(Eichrodt, 1967:104).

4. Eichrodt (1967:105,106) emphasises the element of nothingness in the expression *tohu vabohu*. He further indicates (1967:114-115) that the Old Testament employs the myth as a mere poetic adornment in order to portray Yahweh's power in the boldest colours possible (cf the allusion to the sea-monster Tiamat in the word *tehom* = flood).

5. Eichrodt (1967:47, note 5) wrongly believes that Gen 1:2 does not refer to the Spirit of God as the principle of life, but rather to a storm of God, or a tremendous storm. Vriezen (1966:233) prefers to speak of the *ruach elohim* as the Spirit of God, and remarks that the Spirit of God did not have an independent role during creation and was also not mixed with the primordial waters. Creation as such is not a mixture of the divine and the natural. The *ruach* hovered over the waters in order to keep watch over it, like an eagle keeping watch over its young.

7. GOD'S CREATIVE WORK: CREATION IN SIX DAYS (GEN 1:3 et seq)

1. Diversity and Unity in the Creation

God created plants and trees, birds and fish and animals according to their own distinctive natures and kinds. In this way the earth not only became a place where there was food enough for man to live on earth, but it was also adorned with great diversity. There is beauty in God's creation.

The creation also forms a unity, which is most clearly seen in man. He is the crown, the king of creation. Mankind was created to be a unity, not various different kinds (cf also chapter 14).

There was order as well as progress in God's creative work. God created everything in six separate days: on the first day, light; on the second day, the expanse called sky; on the third day, dry ground and vegetation; on the fourth day, the heavenly bodies; on the fifth day, fish and birds, and on the sixth day, wild animals, creatures that move along the ground, and man.

2. God Creates by Means of his Command

God created everything by means of his command. Time and again it is mentioned that he "said" that something should happen. He created through his word (cf also Ps 33:6, 9). The New Testament teaches that there is also a much deeper dimension to this, namely that God created through his Word Jesus Christ (Jn 1:1-3; Eph 3:9; Col 1:16). The word was more than a mere sound: it was powerful, effective and purposeful. Every time we read "and it was so" and "God saw that it was good". Even so, these were not magical words that had any power within themselves or by themselves, apart from God. It was an expression of God's will, and he was always in personal control of it. God also maintains all of creation, as well as history, through his word (Isa 55:8-11).

This creative work of God through his word or command bears witness to his absolute dominion; he only has to command and it happens. It also bears witness to the fact that God is active as a personal God. He is not some vague, impersonal creative force or a mysterious Supreme Being. He is a Person who "says" and "sees" and "rests".

3. God Completes his Creative Work by Resting

Even though God finished his creative work on the sixth day, we read that he completed it on the seventh, by resting. Completion of work, therefore, also includes rounding it off by resting. This rest of God is not resting in the sense of regaining strength after becoming tired, because God was not tired: he created by merely speaking a word. The Hebrew word used for "rest" (*shabat*) essentially means "to stop working". God's rest is,

therefore, of a royal nature. In resting, he demonstrated his authority over his work - he is not subject to it, neither is he an automatic worker. In a like manner, man also should not be addicted to work on this day, nor should he do nothing. He should rule over his work and over creation in a positive way. This includes that he should delight in the way creation finds its meaning and purpose in God.

During the six days, God often pronounced an evaluation of his own work, for instance "that it was good". On the seventh day, however, the focus is on God himself, he who towers above his creation. For this reason one cannot celebrate this day by only looking at and enjoying nature. God Himself should be the centre of one's attention on this day.

God did not detach Himself from creation on this seventh day, so that it had to continue on its own, governed by its own laws (deism). He continues to rule over it personally. On the other hand, his creative work was completed on the sixth and seventh days. The creative work does not continue as one prolonged process of evolution up to today, and from today onwards, into the future. The word "to create" is sometimes used to indicate God's work in nature, history and man's life. However, this is because the word is not a mere technical term for God's creation in the absolute sense. It rather indicates God's sovereign, free act which results in something totally new without any original link with that which preceded it.

God further completed his creative work by blessing the seventh day and making it holy. He thereby indicated that this day would be set apart for Himself, and that those who would keep it would receive his blessing.

4. The Concept "Day"

There is considerable difference of opinion among commentators as far as the exact meaning of the word "day" in Genesis 1 is concerned. These differences of opinion are not only the results of scientific discoveries which led to questions on the origin of the earth and of man. The great father of the church, Augustine (4th century), already did not interpret these days and their succession literally. Some scholars view the days as artificial and schematic, while others interpret them as periods of time; still others view them as real days of unlimited length, or as a prophetic-historical description, in which chronological and logical order are mixed, or as literal days of 24 hours each.

God's creative work was a great miracle. It cannot be clearly formulated in human language, nor can it be fully explained to the human mind. The creation of man, for instance, is described from totally different points of view in Genesis 1 and 2 respectively. Each is intended to throw some light on a specific aspect or situation.

Genesis 1 is about the proclamation of God as the creator of all things. Man, says Genesis 1, is part of this creation, even though he is a unique being. He is king of creation, and is subject to God's dominion, together with the rest of creation (cf Chapter 9).

5. Notes

1. Eichrodt (1967:107-111) indicates Israel's optimistic or positive approach to life based on the perfect and purposeful nature of God's creative work, as well as the fact that he has dominion over everything. He also indicates the purposefulness of creation, linked to a sense of the unfathomable mystery of creation.

In a certain sense, God completed his creative work on the sixth day by finishing the work he had been doing (Gen 2:2, NIV). Even so, his activities of creating and resting should not be understood as two separate activities. He finished his work by resting on the seventh day (cf also Von Rad, 1962:147). Man should also not merely do nothing on the seventh day, but should contemplate the meaning of his work and of human nature.

8. EXPLANATION OF THE SIX DAYS OF CREATION

1. The Days Seen as Schematic Representation

Some of the fathers of the church, like Athanasius and Augustine, who lived in the 4th century, interpreted Genesis 1 in such a way that the days of creation represented only a logical order, not in any way a chronological one. They were of the opinion that the earth had been created in one moment.

The cadre hypothesis (championed by scholars such as A. Noordtjij and N.H. Ridderbos) also holds that the six days merely indicate a logical order. The subsequent days represent an artificial cadre or scheme employed by the author to arrange his thoughts in such a way as to emphasise the fact that there is order in God's creation. The supporters of this hypothesis usually point out the schematic character of Genesis 1 with its various refrains.

There are, however, various objections to this hypothesis:

1. Genesis 1 is presented in a strongly historical way, verbs characteristic of narrative passages are employed and the historical progress of God's creation (second day, third day, etc) is strongly emphasized.
2. With descriptions like "and there was evening and there was morning" (that is: it became evening, and after that morning), the author positions himself within a decidedly chronological order of events. These descriptions are not evidence of a scheme enforced from the outside to indicate the mere logical order of creation. If this were the case, we would have read something like "on the third day", etc.
3. This explanation fails to solve the problems concerning the formulation of the sabbath commandment in a satisfactory way. The hypothesis claims that God's work is presented in a framework of six days plus one, on the basis of the usual Israelite practice to work for six days and then have one day of rest. However, when viewed from this perspective, God becomes a follower of man. The motivation for the sabbath also loses its solid foundations, because it would then be based on a mere schematic representation of God, not in any way linked to concrete reality.

2. The Days Seen as Periods of Time

Some scholars claim that the days are intended to indicate periods of time. Again, there are three objections against this:

1. Why are we not simply told that the days are intended to indicate periods of time?
2. The days are carefully defined by the descriptions of evening and morning. This is never to be found in connection with mere periods of time. The fact that the evenings are always mentioned before the mornings, also excludes the possibility of viewing evening and morning as the beginning and end of periods of time. Contrary to this, the formulation corresponds well with a normal chronological and literal interpretation, when it is understood to mean: it became evening, and after that, morning. In a very practical way the beginning of a day is then understood to be the moment when it starts to get light in the morning.
3. This interpretation also goes against the formulation of the fourth commandment, which says that man should work for six days because God created the heavens and the earth in six days.

3. The Days Seen as Days of Undetermined Length

This point of view is presented by G.Ch. Aalders and others. In this case, the days are understood to be "days of God" that could have been shorter or longer than our days. Supporters of this hypothesis point out that the first three days, at least, could not have been linked to the sun and moon, and could therefore not have been measured in the normal timescale. It is also emphasised that the word "day" has various different meanings in the Old Testament (for instance: daylight, a day delineated by evening and morning, day as opposite of night, a day of 24 hours, "days and years", the whole period of God's work of creation; cf Gen 1:5; 1:5; 1:14; 1:14; 1:14; 2:4).

An objection to this point of view is the following:

1. Despite the different meanings of the word "day" in the verses mentioned above, the meaning is not in constant flux; it is quite clear what the word means in every instance. The six days are also clearly delineated by evening and morning, differing from any other place.

4. An Eternal Seventh Day

Some scholars (among them also J.H. Kroeze) deduce from the fact that the seventh day is not delineated by the mention of evening and morning, that it actually never came to an end but continues to this day. It is then intended to indicate the time of God's keeping of his creation.

Contrary to this, however, is the fact that it is clearly stated that God rested "on the seventh day". By this time the author of Genesis 1 would have been sure that his readers would understand the meaning of that "day".

5. A Prophetic-Historic Explanation

S. du Toit follows those who are of the opinion that the days were days of undetermined length. He decidedly rejects the meaning of an ordinary day. His point of view is that Genesis 1 presents not only a chronological order, but a chronological order mixed with a logical order. The author of Genesis 1 then presents a prophetic-historic view like that in a painting. He sees events that occurred in the remote past, of which the (chronological) distances and perspectives seem to merge when viewed from a distance. Only as they come closer to the present do the descriptions begin to yield more detail, that is, do they become more exact.

This explanation is appealing, as it tries to find a method of explanation from the Bible itself, and provides solutions to various problems, especially to such scientific ones as scholars are confronted with in the interpretation of Genesis 1.

Despite this, there are objections to this. Genesis 1 is not a prophecy, and its descriptions are not of a prophetic nature. The language is that of historical material, and is in any case not poetic. The presentation is also historical, other than in the case of prophetic material in which the prophetic visions occur. If Genesis 1 were to be considered prophetic, then it would not be in any other sense than the early prophets (the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings). Logical and chronological orders are not mixed in such a way either, in this material.

6. Conditions for the Correct Understanding of the Concept "Day"

The following has to be kept in mind for a correct understanding of the concept "day". Genesis 1 is not part of a scientific textbook, but of revelation history. On the one hand, Genesis 1 does have a historical aspect; it pleads for a historical and literal meaning. There is a delineation, a sequence and even a numbering of days. The narrative mode is employed: "and then...". On the other hand there is also a very schematic aspect, with regular refrains like "and God said"; "and it was so"; "and God saw that it was good". This fact demands care and consideration for the special nature of the description. Finally, an interpretation can only be acceptable if in harmony with the fourth commandment.

7. Ordinary Days, but Viewed from the Perspective of Revelation History

In the light of the preceding paragraph, the following might present an explanation: the days are literal, historical days, but described from a certain perspective. Our methods of explanation should not be merely derived from other disciplines like historiography, or even our own logic, but from the way the Bible itself sets about its descriptions. The Bible is historical and to a certain extent follows the standards of historiography, but not fully. It follows its own standards. The genealogy in Genesis 11:10 omits at least one generation (that of Cainan, between Arphaxad and Shelah; cf the Greek translation as well as Lk 3:35-36). The fact that one generation is omitted, makes it possible that both Genesis 11 and Luke 3 omitted even more. From the formulation of the genealogy itself, it could never be deduced that one generation was in fact omitted, because it presents the generations in a closed sequence of succession (cf "When Arphaxad had lived 35 years, he became the father of Shelah", 11:12). The author is however not interested in the actions of the individual generations or their chronological details. His presentation is not intended to provide a description with the exactness of a notary, but to show how God's work progresses: through the generations in history.

When all of this is taken into account, it becomes possible that Genesis 1 mentions six days without a closed succession. It is, therefore, possible that God's work of creation did not last a mere six days, but that it had at

least six cardinal points of concentration or intervention. On these days, God's actions had a close link with his final purpose. This purpose was personal fellowship between God and man, in which context man would be able to serve God.

8. Notes

1. Compare Helberg (1988:39-58) regarding principles of interpretation for Genesis 1-3; the revelation content of Genesis; the fact that biblical revelation frees man; the fact of creation and sin.
2. Compare Schuurman (1980) regarding evolutionism and creationism.

9. GOD CREATES MAN (GEN 1:26-31; 2)

1. Two Descriptions of Man's Creation

The creation of man is described twice at the beginning of Genesis, in Genesis 1:26 et seq and in Genesis 2. This indicates the special importance of man in creation. The two descriptions are given from different perspectives. Genesis 1 concerns creation as a whole, but also indicates how it all climaxes in the creation of man. Genesis 2 is about man in particular. It only mentions other aspects of the creation in as far as and to the extent that it has direct relevance to the position of man. This is the reason why the author of Genesis 2 did not keep to a rigid chronological order of events.

2. God's Creative Work is Directed at Man

Before God created man, he did something he had not done when creating everything else. This indicates the distinctiveness of the creation of man. God deliberates with himself and says: "Let us make man in our image...". The "us" is God himself, not angels or other heavenly beings, because neither in the immediate, nor in the wider context of Genesis 1 is there any mention of such beings, only of God himself. In the next verse it is also explicitly mentioned that God created man "in his own image" (1:27). The plural "us", indicates a distinction within God himself, but this only becomes clearer in the New Testament. The mentioning of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters (1:2) and the creation by means of God's command or word also vaguely indicate this (cf also Ps 33:6,9; Jn 1:1-3). It is the Trinity: Father, Son (Word) and Holy Spirit.

After God's other creative acts followed the words "And God saw that it was good", but after the creation of man there follows "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (1:31). Man is, therefore, not merely one more creature in the long line of other creatures, but in him the creation of all other creatures are drawn together in a single point. They find their true meaning in the existence of man; they are no longer merely "good", but all together they are "very good". Only then do they fully comply with God's intentions.

Man is the crown of God's creation - its ruler (1:28). He has a distinctive position and nature: he is created in the image of God. In this his special resemblance to God is demonstrated - he is a ruler. On the other hand, it indicates that man is totally dependent on God and that he is God's servant. This will be discussed in more detail later on. God's creative work thus draws together in man, but then a man who is intended to serve God and live in fellowship with him. Creation is theocentric: it is directed towards God. Man exists in order to glorify God with his existence and dominion. This is beautifully described in Psalm 8.

3. Man is the Image of God

Man was created in the image of God, that is to say, he is a representation of God, a mirror image or shadow of God. With this, two opposite characteristics of man are indicated. On the one hand there is an essential difference between God and man. Just as an image of a person is not that person himself nor has any of his characteristics, so man is not God, and neither is he divine. Man is totally dependent on God for his existence. Like a shadow, he cannot exist on his own. At every moment he receives his life from God. Viewed from this perspective, on the other hand, there is also a great resemblance between God and man. Man is like a child who is the likeness of his father. Adam was created in the likeness of God (5:1), and he had a son "in his own likeness, in his own image" (5:3). Man is like a child of God, but the author of Genesis 1:26 avoided the use

of the word "child", because he wanted to emphasise that there is no real mention of any direct kinship with God. There may also not be any familiarity. Man is the representative of God -nothing less but also nothing more. Man, in his total physical and spiritual humanity, is the image of God, but God is not material (Isa 31:3).

As the image of God, man is also an individual and personal being. God created the other creatures in groups of the same kind, but he created man as an individual personal being. Each person is the image of God and is attributed great value by God. He is not primarily interested in man as a group, in such a way that the interests of the individual are dominated by those of the group, with the individual vanishing in the group.

Because man is the image of God, he is the ruler over creation, but then deeply dependent on God. Man receives his dominion as a command from God (1:28), and is therefore responsible to God. Because he is in the service of God he can exercise his dominion with a sense of vocation, certainty and joy.

As the image of God, man has a meaningful knowledge of creation. He knows himself and all other things in their deepest dependency on God. He knows, therefore, how to live in the right way and how to sanctify his life. He was created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness (cf Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

Man, being the image of God, has the inborn ability to live in fellowship with God. God, therefore, gave him life in an intimate way: he breathed the breath of life into his nostrils (2:7). This does not mean that man received something divine, for it was not God's breath that was breathed into him, but the breath of life. Man is only dust (2:7) and has nothing within himself to boast of. Only when he receives his life out of the hand of God in deep dependence on him, is he more than dust. In this sense he should live as a child of God.

In his pattern of life, namely work and rest, man should mirror something of God as creator and ruler of all things. He should work for six days, and rest on the seventh. Only man can do this, and no other creature, for man alone was created in the image of God.

Man is the representative of God - no more and no less. He differs essentially from all other creatures.

4. Man Differs Essentially from Animals

There is great resemblance between man and animal. Man was created from the dust of the earth, also on the same day as the animals. Even so, there is also an essential difference. The Bible does not know a situation in which man and animal stood on the same level, or even enjoyed fellowship with one another. Man was the image of God right from the beginning; he differs from animals and rules over them.

Other than animals, man is also an individual personal being. He is not merely a gregarious animal. He has personal freedom and personal responsibility. On the other hand, he is also not an isolated individual, without any sense of belonging to a group or having a responsibility towards that group.

5. Man is Male and Female

As individual, man is a complete human being - or is he? As an individual, he is the image of God. This applies to both man and woman. They are not the image of God only when they come together, but individually (1:26). Even so God says that it is not good for man to be alone; he would make a helper suitable for him (2:18). Every human being, as man or woman, is complete within him- or herself, but also needs to be supplemented.

Man and woman form a wonderful duality within marriage. Each is a separate personality, but together they form a unity. The woman was made from one of the most intimate parts of the man, a part close to his heart, namely one of his ribs (2:21). She is completely one with him (2:23). She is, however, not a mere part of man, nor did she develop out of man; she was created by God himself as a complete human being (2:21). Notwithstanding this, man was created first, and is the first among equals. He has to accept the responsibility and act accordingly (1 Tim 2:13), but then with an attitude of service, and not in order to rule. He does this out of love for his wife. That is why he forsakes everything for the sake of his wife, even his father and mother (2:24). Husband and wife form an unbreakable unity, and their union is that of these two people alone (that is, monogamous; cf Mt 19:4-6).

Marriage serves the great purpose of God's creation: man must fill the earth and subdue it. This should be done in such a way that God can be glorified as king and man can live with him in joy. As image of God, as rational and moral being, he should consciously do what the rest of creation does unconsciously: sing the praise of God (Ps 8, 19).

6. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:122-133), Van Selms (1967:35-36) and Vriezen (1966:188,189,446,447) on the matter of the difference between God and man, on the one hand, and the intimate relationship between God and man, on the other hand. The Old Testament does not speak of God as father in the generative sense of the word, which explains why it generally avoids the relationship of father and child as image of the relationship between God and man. The Old Testament world of faith was supported by the assurance of fellowship between the holy God and man. In the world of the ancient East, however, man was viewed as a divine child, on the one hand, and as nothing more than a slave of the divinity, on the other hand. Both the typical naturalistic view of life of the ancient East and the tragic view of life of the Greeks grew out of this.
2. Westermann (1978:83) wrongly limits the idea that man was created in the image of God to God's action, thereby excluding man's nature. According to Westermann, man was created in order to allow something to happen between God and him.
3. Even after the fall, man was still the image of God. In Genesis 5:1-3 the fact that man was created in the image of God is equated with the fact that Adam's son was "in his own likeness". Genesis 9:6 determines that anyone who kills a human being should also be killed, because man was created in the image of God. (Cf also Vriezen, 1966:446,447).
4. In Genesis 1 and 2 there is unity between man and woman, but there are also different roles and tasks for each of them (Vriezen, 1966:445; Childs, 1986:188-192).
5. The expression of the goodness of creation also contains a call to joy and praise (cf Ps 148; cf Westermann, 1978:79, 80).
6. For anthropology, cf the part on the Psalms.

10. MAN FALLS IN SIN (GEN 2, 3)

1. God Rules and Provides

God commanded man to rule over the earth, to cultivate it and to guard it (Gen 1:28; 2:15). Man is compelled by God's command to take care of the earth and protect it. He has to rule while he himself is under the dominion of God. According to Genesis, labour is an essential part of being human. Labour is associated with man's dominion over the earth and is, therefore, a joyous and royal task. Biblical religion impregnates life in its full daily reality and makes it meaningful. For the surrounding nations, labour was not a divine command. It was seen as a necessary evil in order to stay alive.

God equipped man well for his task, and gave him complete knowledge. He could fathom the animals in their essence and express this in their names. He was also completely able to make moral distinctions. God considered man to be morally so mature and responsible that he instituted capital punishment for disobedience (2:17).

God took care of man and provided in abundance: he could eat from all the trees in the garden. He was even sensitive to man's spiritual needs - he said himself that it was not good for man to be alone, and created a helper for him (2:18).

Man is therefore able to enjoy life on earth. Even so, it is not enjoyment that is primary in these first chapters, but the calling to do what God commanded. True joy is only to be found in fulfilling one's calling.

2. God Limits Man

God has absolute dominion and demands unconditional obedience. This was his reason for placing a ban on eating the fruit of one of the trees in the garden. The Bible does not say what kind of tree it was, because that would really be beside the point. It was not that the tree could provide knowledge or stimulate man's brain. The important factor was rather whether man would obey God or not. He was not allowed to eat of the tree for the simple reason that God had forbidden him to do so. Man had to acknowledge God's authority over him

unconditionally, also God's authority over his knowledge.

God's prohibition, therefore, had nothing whatsoever to do with the tree or its fruit as such, but with man's personal attitude to and relationship with God. The name of the tree was "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil", or "the tree of knowing good and evil" (2:17). This name does not indicate that man would obtain knowledge of good and evil by eating of the tree's fruit. He already had this knowledge, as was shown above. The primary concern here was the question as to how man would exercise his knowledge of good and evil. Would he also acknowledge his dependence on God in his knowledge? Would he live as the image of God, that is to say, as ruler, but then under the living and personal dominion of God? Or would he consider himself to be independent in his knowledge and his decisions regarding good and evil?

God rules with absolute authority over man, but not as a tyrant. He demands unconditional obedience, but this is not the same as blind obedience. Although he gave no reasons for his ban on the eating of this particular tree's fruit, it was not an unreasonable demand. Man did not know God's motivation for this prohibition, but he did know God. God had already revealed himself as a God who takes care of man's material and spiritual needs and provides in abundance. He is a God who can be trusted.

3. Man is Tempted to Sin

Man was tempted by the snake to disobey God. The snake was an ordinary animal, but he was "more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (3:1). Man wanted to be like God, independent and autonomous. Despite this, he did not exercise his dominion over the snake! He did not rebuke the snake, but subjected himself to its temptation.

It is true that there was another power or person at work behind the snake. God's work met with heavy resistance early on. This power or person would survive into future generations, even when the woman would not be there any more, but only her seed or descendants. This is shown in God's words to the snake: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (3:15). Note the turn in the parallel formulation: the seed of the woman will not crush the head of the snake's seed, but of the snake himself. The snake continues to exist, as incorporation of the devil (Rev 12:9; 20:2).

The idea to sin did not originate with man - he was tempted to sin. He is not created a rebellious being by nature. This does not, however, clear him of all responsibility, but makes his transgression even less pardonable. Genesis 3, therefore, strongly emphasises man's responsibility and guilt.

Desire played a very important role in tempting man to sin. Various words in 3:6 express this idea: "When the woman saw⁴²that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom...". Temptation and desire play an important role in making man sin, even to this day. There is usually some or other inducement to sin. This does not remove our responsibility or guilt, however; it is precisely at this level that sin is to be fought and resisted.

4. Sin is Disobedience, Unbelief and Ingratitude

This history teaches us the nature of man's sin. It is not merely a situation in which man is the unfortunate victim. It is also not something "material" which man ingested together with the fruit of the forbidden tree. Man was not "infected" by sin as if by a disease. Eating the fruit was nothing more than the consequence of man's decision to do something else than what God had ordered. Sin is essentially a wrong attitude, a wrong will; it is disobedience to God.

Sin is also unbelief. Man does not believe God's threat of punishment. Neither does he trust God - even though God has showed himself to be a God who intends and does only what is best for man. Man does not reveal anything of a personal relationship of trust with God.

Sin is also ingratitude. Man is supposed to be deeply grateful because of what God has done for him, and to demonstrate this gratitude in a concrete way. He feels, however, that God has withheld something from him by forbidding him to eat of that particular tree's fruit. Man does not trust God.

More positively this history teaches us the following: God is the absolute ruler over our lives, and requires unconditional obedience, also in the exercise of our knowledge and our decisions regarding good and evil. But this is not a mere legalistic matter; it is accompanied by personal fellowship. It consequently involves faith, trust, living with God; it involves knowing God as the one who provides in our needs. It also involves our gratitude. This applies to our everyday lives and the fulfilment of our ordinary human vocations. In this we should see God's goodness and praise him for it. Only then can we be happy.

5. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:127,128) for the surrounding nations' view on labour.
2. According to Westermann (1978:81, 82), the doctrines of the fall and of original sin cannot be based on Genesis 3, but are the products of Jewish tradition. According to him, this passage does not teach that death is the penalty for sin either. The penalty was rather man's banishment from the garden and, therefore, from God's presence. However, compare Childs' well-founded criticism (1986:225,226) of this view.
3. Compare Holwerda (1971:9-17) and Childs (1979:145-150) on the word *toledot* in Genesis, as denoting something which is linked to the preceding but has even more bearing on what follows.
4. Compare paragraph 3, Chapter 34, on the matter of sin.

11. PUNISHMENT AND GRACE (GEN 3)

1. God Shows Particular, Searching Love

God could have destroyed man without a hearing, because he had given his prohibition beforehand, and had stated the punishment for transgression (2:17). But God's love is great. After man had sinned, God took the initiative and came to him in his great love. He questioned him in order to give him a chance to repent, but without positive result. Man was more concerned about his nudity than his transgression. He was more interested in the results of his actions than the wrongness of it. He also excused himself and accused another, thereby indirectly accusing God: "The woman you put here with me - she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Gen 3:12). To this day, not much is to be expected from man's conscience. Only the Word of God can bring knowledge of sin: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?" (Gen 3:11).

2. Nudity as Embarrassment

Before his sin, man had seen both himself and the woman in an unprejudiced way, in their full humanity, both physical and spiritual - as fully integrated people. Their nudity had never bothered them. Now, after his sin, however, man became painfully conscious of his own nudity (3:7). He no longer saw himself or the woman as an integrated person, as a unity, but saw himself as a disintegrated being. He saw the various parts of his body in isolation, in an objectified and absolutised way. Through his nudity man became conscious of the fact that something was wrong in his relationship with himself and others. He was no longer perfect and holy in his appearance or thoughts.

Nudity, therefore, has no direct link with sin; it is not the occasion, cause or result of sin. Nudity in itself is not something evil, but something completely natural. The nude body as such may not be despised. God created man like that - it was good. On the other hand, the covering of our nudity is necessary in this sinful dispensation. God himself gave man garments of skin and clothed him. It is the only cultural product of which the Old Testament tells us that God made it. The Bible gives no indication of the required size or length of clothes. It does, however, indicate quite clearly that it should be worn with the intention to cover.

3. God gives the Maternal Promise

Before God pronounced judgement on man's sin, he already showed evidence of grace. He himself put enmity between man and the snake. This is the way it happens throughout history. God himself always takes care of

enmity against evil and the world, so easily befriended by man. This enmity is necessary for man's well-being.

God cursed the snake because he had tempted man into rebellion against God (3:15). This same curse also contained a promise for man. It is called the maternal promise, the oldest of all promises; it is a prototype of the gospel. It is concerned with enmity between man and snake, but also has a deeper meaning. The seed of the woman will gain victory over the snake itself, not over its seed or progeny. It is the Evil One that will be conquered. The seed of the woman in actual fact seems to indicate a person who would eventually triumph over the Evil One. The New Testament shows this person to be Jesus Christ. The Evil One did strike him, and it was a lethal wound, but he triumphed over the Evil One and was even resurrected from death.

4. The Earth is Cursed because of Man's Sin

Man is not merely one of the creatures. He was created as the crown and king of God's creation. He therefore took the earth with him into the abyss through his sin. The earth was cursed because of man (3:17). The disharmony on earth is the result of man's sin. It was not caused by demonic spirits, able to begin their destruction independent of man's decision. Man is not the unfortunate victim of miserable conditions on earth. These things are not the result of fate, nor are they accidental. They are also not the result of the arbitrariness, impotence or mutual conflict of gods or spiritual powers, as the neighbouring nations thought. Man is responsible for all of it.

On the other hand, this Biblical teaching stresses man's freedom. Demonic powers cannot rule over man without consent of his own will. Any belief in sorcery is hereby eradicated, and no provision is made for any such inner spiritual enslavement. Israel was also prohibited to take part in these practices of the unbelieving nations.

Harmony in creation can only be restored by taking away man's sin. This is indeed envisaged by the Bible and happens in and through Jesus Christ (Rom 8:20 et seq).

5. Man Becomes like God, Knowing Good and Evil

By eating from the forbidden tree, man became like God, but only inasmuch as he exercised his knowledge of good and evil independently (3:22). Man considered himself to be autonomous, his own legislator, just like God, and also acted according to this. The irony, however, is that this was only a dream. God remained & absolute legislator; he punished, commanded and banished man from the garden.

God now also forbade man to eat from the tree of life (3:22). By doing this, God intended to keep him from trying to obtain life on his own, independent of God. He was not allowed to eat from the tree as if it contained life-giving power in itself. Such a self-assertive, autonomous search for life would only cut the bonds with God forever. Eternal life obtained in this way would be just as ironical as the knowledge of good and evil, obtained after eating from the tree of knowledge.

6. Death as Fulfilment of the Threat of Punishment

When man cut the bond with God, death came. This was disintegration, even though it occurred gradually. God did not allow this disintegration to reach its full physical consequences immediately, but graciously postponed the disintegration.

Even so, disharmony was everywhere to be found: between man and earth, among people and in the course of history. Labour was no longer pleasant and effective, but was accompanied by sweat and pain. For the woman, the joyful matter of childbearing and motherhood became a painful burden. The marriage relationship was damaged and reproaches were heaped on one another. Man ruled his wife. This subordination of the woman would last for a long time - until the seed of the woman, Jesus Christ, would restore her in her position as a complete person. To this day there is a breach in the marriage relationship; all marriages show signs of this. All of earthly reality is broken, even the most intimate and most beautiful of human relationships.

Man's life eventually ended in complete physical death (3:19) Despite this, his existence was dominated by the thought of life. This part of Scripture is dominated by God's grace, even though he also announced punishment

in a striking way. Immediately after the announcement of punishment follows: "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living" (3:20). God did not end human life on earth. His dominion over man, and his fellowship with him, continued, despite all disintegration. God's grace still mysteriously determined this whole history. This also applies to all of history: God allows it to continue by changing downfall and death into life.

7. Despite Man's Banishment, He is Still Shown Mercy

Because of his sin, man was banished from the garden, in order to prevent him from gaining access to the tree of life (3:23, 24). Death came irrevocably. From that time, man had to continue his existence without intimate fellowship with God. But even here he experienced the grace of God and received a token of it in the garments of skin God provided. To this day, clothing is a token of the broken relationship with God and man's fellowmen. At the same time, however, it is also a token of God's protection and grace.

8. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:159) on the basic meaning of man's relationship with the earth as well as the estrangement between man and the earth.
2. Compare Vriezen (1966:452) regarding his view that suffering and sin go together, but that happiness and faith do not always go together. Isaiah 53 and the end of the book of Job present the deepest solution to this puzzle. A tragic view of life is made impossible by the Old Testament.
3. Compare Eichrodt (1967:195,198,202,203) on the matter of cherubim (Gen 3:24) and seraphs. According to Vriezen (1966:463-464), there is very little space for mediating heavenly figures because of the personal and spiritual character of true Yahweh worship; the only exception to this is the later period of increasing transcendence of God(cf the chapter on Daniel).

12. HISTORY OF THE DISINTEGRATION OF MANKIND: CAIN'S LINE OF UNBELIEF (GEN 4)

1. Disruption and Stubbornness

Because of man's sin, his history has been one of disintegration. It began with the time immediately after his banishment from the Garden of Eden, a time of great expectations -and of disillusionment. A child was born, and when Eve named him she sang: "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man" (Gen 4:1). Soon afterwards, joy was replaced by sorrow, because Cain murdered his brother Abel. All harmony and fellowship between men were lost. From that moment on, human society would be characterised by disruption and mutual conflict. Sin is like a deadly cancerous growth. Cain was stubborn in his lack of love and selfishness, even after God had visited him to warn him against his wrong attitude (4:6-7).

Even after the murder, God did not leave Cain to his own devices. He visited him again, and gave him an opportunity to repent. However, Cain answered in a brutal and selfish way: "Am I my brother's keeper?", and "My punishment is more than I can bear" (4:9, 13). To this day, man's stubbornness is the cause of his downfall.
Divine Punishment and Patience

God is a holy and just God, who punishes sin. Because of Cain's stubbornness, he was punished more severely than his parents in the Garden. At that time, God had cursed the earth, even though it would cause greater hardship for man. This time, however, Cain himself was cursed. He who stubbornly continues to sin cannot escape the curse of God's punishment.

In all of this, however, God remained the patient God. Cain's whole history was determined by God's patience. Apart from the fact that God visited him both before and after the murder, in order to draw him closer, he also did not destroy Cain when he cursed him because of his stubbornness. He placed him under his protection, and gave him a sign so that he would not be killed for the murder of his brother. It is not clear what kind of sign this was. What is clear, however, and this is the relevance of it all, is man's stubbornness as opposed to God's patience. It is also clear that God's patience does not cancel his punishing righteousness.

2. Formalism and Self-sufficiency

Cain's motive for murdering his brother was the fact that God had accepted Abel's sacrifice, but not his. The Bible does not explicitly tell us why God accepted the one and rejected the other. Both the immediate context and the New Testament, however, clearly indicate that Cain's formalism was the cause. Cain did not bring his sacrifice in love for God and, therefore, became angry when it was not accepted. For the same reason he also became jealous of his brother, and wanted to take revenge on him, when his sacrifice was accepted. One of the facts mentioned, namely that Abel brought fat portions of some of the firstborn of his flock, may also point in this direction. It might mean that Abel brought some of the best portions of his flock as a sacrifice to the Lord. In Cain's instance, no such mention is made. This could mean that he brought just any kind of sacrifice, without thinking of bringing the best. It seems as if he thought that as long as he brought a sacrifice, God would be satisfied. For God, however, the attitude in which a sacrifice is made is more important. He asks one's heart (1 Sam 15:22). Cain's impersonal attitude is also indicated by his further actions. Hebrews 11:4 says that by faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. Abel's sacrifice, unlike that of Cain, was an expression of his bond of faith with God (cf also 1 Jn 3:12). By faith, Abel knew for certain that his sacrifice had been accepted. How Cain knew that his had not been accepted, is uncertain.

Cain did not recognize his mistake in his own attitude, nor the solution to his problem in the required change of this attitude. He did not repent, and did not seek personal reconciliation with God. He chose the way of autosalvation. He did not consider God's promise of protection to be sufficient, but went away from God in order to build himself a stronghold. In ancient times, cities were protected by strong walls or fortifications to protect the citizens from external dangers. This attitude of autosalvation also characterised the generations after Cain.

3. Development Without Gratefulness – Violence

God was also gracious towards Cain's successors. He granted them an undeserved and even forfeited right of existence, and opened to them great possibilities of development in all areas. They excelled in agriculture, mental refinement and technology. Jabal was the father of those who lived in tents and raised livestock - the migrant Bedouins. Jubal was the father of the musicians, and Tubal the father of the forgers (4:20-22). These people were pioneers in their respective vocations. It was a time of great progress and excellence in many areas. Cain's descendants, therefore, shared in God's blessings to mankind, which enabled them to build a culture (Gen 2).

This wonderful development and culture, however, soon turned against man. Pride and rebellion, oppression and violence were rampant. This is clearly indicated in the song sung by Lamech, the father of Jabal, Jubal and Tubal. It gives evidence of the fact that Lamech was a master of art and technology. It is, however, a song filled with hatred and threats: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times (4:24). Everyone was afraid of such a man, including his wives who had to listen to songs of this kind. Lamech was also the first man of whom it is said that he had more than one wife. His view of marriage was determined by selfishness, not by the idea of a personal relationship of love with a marriage partner. He did not recognise a woman as a complete person next to him. Lamech is described here in order to sketch the whole society of his time.

This negative result of good development and progress was caused by the fact that it was engineered by unconverted hearts. In the final analysis peace, rest and salvation are not caused by something like prosperity; it is much rather caused by the attitude with which prosperity is made use of. Even the gifts God gives do not bring joy or salvation when they are not recognised and accepted as God's gifts.

4. The Solution

This narrative teaches us that our world is a broken one, that it is full of inner disruption. The cause of this is deep inside man's heart. It is there that it must be rectified. Man is stubbornly rebellious against God. God, however, is also patient, even though he punishes sin. There is opportunity enough for repentance. The solution for man's problems are not to be found in economic prosperity, technical development, art or progress as such, but in the right relationship with God and one's neighbour. It is to be found in enmity against sin, and this enmity should in the first instance be directed against one's own sinful heart.

5. Notes

1. Compare also chapter 46, and the reference to Fohrer there.

13. HISTORY OF THE DISINTEGRATION OF MANKIND: THE ELECTION LINE OF SETH (GEN 4-6)

1. Divine Vicariate and Restoration

Mankind soon separated into two diverging lines, each with a different worldview and conduct. Cain's lineage was determined by the idea of auto salvation and self-preservation. As a consequence, they lived in rebellion against God and vindictiveness against their neighbours. Seth's lineage, however, was characterised by God's elective grace. On the one hand, it was demonstrated in this lineage that God ruled and that he acted on behalf of this line, in order to restore the broken situation caused by sin. On the other hand, this line demonstrated a deep sense of dependence upon God; they worshipped him and trusted in him. Other than the descendants of Cain, this generation did not fall back on revenge in times of hardship and injustice, but sought help from God. They waited for God to restore the situation. Eve, for instance, praised God for giving her Seth in the place of the murdered Abel (4:25). All history is actually history of restoration. God always makes a new beginning out of brokenness for mankind.

Abel's death seems to have brought man deeply under the impression of his own weakness and transience, as expressed in the name Seth gave his son: Enosh. This name means man, but often with the added nuance of frail or transient. As a result of this sense of being dependent on God, men began to call on the name of God, that is, they began to worship him collectively (4:26).

2. Death as well as Continued Life

On the one hand, the genealogy of Seth's lineage (Gen 5) emphasises that man's history is one of disintegration and destruction. Punishment for man's sin - death - has come irrevocably. On the other hand, the same genealogy emphasises that life continues. A sad refrain punctuates the genealogy: "and then he died". The threatened punishment of Genesis 2:17 has been fulfilled. Even so, life continues irresistibly through the generations. God's blessing, given at the time of the creation, is fulfilled despite the disintegration. Again and again we read in the genealogies that someone had sons and daughters, and only after that do we read about his death.

This genealogy teaches even more than that man only continues life in the generations. Enoch never died, but God took him away to be with him (5:24). The history of Enoch teaches that death need not necessarily have the last word in someone's life. History does continue in its normal way, while people live and die and are replaced by others. Despite all of this, God continues his wonderful revelatory work. He is in complete control of everything and sustains his dominion over and fellowship with man. His punishment of sin is completely fulfilled through death. It is still evident, however, that there is eternal life for man personally. The bond of life with God is an unbreakable bond, the history of Enoch teaches.

"Enoch walked with God." This expression is only used one more time, with reference to Noah. It supposes a particularly intimate relationship with God. To walk with God guarantees life, because God is the living God. The bond with God is accompanied by life. To be taken away to God is the direct opposite of death.

At this point, only enough was revealed to make man cling to God in faith, despite the hard reality of sin, punishment and death. The revelation was also quite sufficient to indicate the way for this: a life of total commitment to God.

3. Hope for Salvation from the Curse on Sin

Enoch escaped death, and his son Methuselah reached a very high age. This seems to have had a twofold effect

on his son Lamech and his contemporaries. On the one hand, they hoped to escape death, and on the other hand, they experienced disappointment, because death always returned. Man thus lives in a cursed world, and his existence is nothing but disintegration. This Lamech and his contemporaries differed from the first Lamech and his people whose lives had been characterised by vengefulness and auto salvation. This (later) generation accepted hardship from the hand of God, because they recognised it as the result of man's sin. It was for this reason that they sought help from God.

Lamech named his son Noah, because he believed that "He will comfort us in the labour and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed" (5:29). Lamech and his descendants thus hoped for change, for restoration by God's hand. This expectation was not directed at some kind of human endeavour, but at the birth of a child -it was linked to the promise of Genesis 3:15.

4. Divine Choice

The history of the descendants of Cain is characterised by human endeavour, while that of the descendants of Seth is characterised by God's work. The children of Seth set their hopes on God. This does not mean that only the children of Cain were active and that only they achieved anything. The author intended to show the difference in emphasis characteristic of the two generations. The course of the one is that of auto salvation and failure, while the course of the other is one of faith in God and of his saving dominion.

The history of the children of Seth is also not based on human excellence, but on God's elective grace. Genesis 4 and 5 clearly show that Seth and his children were only believers, and only walked with God, through the elective, life-giving and restoring grace of God. The descendants of Cain, however, continued in their stubborn unbelief, despite God's special intervention in their lives. This history also proves that God's choice is not an individualistic, arbitrary matter. It is organic and follows the line of generations, even though it is not limited to these generations.

5. Unlawful Marriages

Genesis 4-6 further indicates that the history of mankind is one of human unfaithfulness and divine faithfulness. The unfaithfulness also holds for the line of the believers. People from this line intermarried with unbelievers and eventually also became unbelievers. The believers are called "sons of God" (6:2). Other passages in the Bible also refer to believers as sons or children of God (Ex 4:22; Dt 32:5; Hos 1:10; Ps 73:15; Jn 1:12). For the unbelievers, the expression "daughters of men" is used. It would seem that the reason for this difference is that believing men usually married unbelieving women when they married foreigners (cf Ex 34:16). This is often still the case in our own time, because of the greater mobility of men and the protectedness of women.

Angels are sometimes also called "sons of God" (Job 1:6; 2:1). However, the Bible teaches that angels are spiritual beings that cannot marry (Mt 22:30). Some scholars are therefore of the opinion that the author followed mythological views here, in order to contradict the people in their own language and with their own concepts. His intention could then have been to say something like the following: you thought that such marriages would result in special people, namely giants; but reality has shown that people have actually become weaker and that they have shorter life-spans. Even though man boasts of a divine-human descent, the author would seem to say, he is in actual fact only flesh, that is to say, weak and mortal (6:3). This would, however, be the only passage in the Old Testament where such a style of reasoning is used.

This passage teaches that the believers did not marry in faith, but merely on the grounds of the others' beauty (6:2). Marriage, however, is a life commitment. These marriages were, therefore, accompanied by the intermingling of faiths. God punished this by shortening people's lives - from then on man would only reach the age of 120 years (6:3). The reference to 120 years could also indicate that the flood would come in 120 years' time.

6. Notes

1. The 1983 Afrikaans Translation translated "sons of God" with "hemelwesens" (heavenly beings). The reasons for this translation are given by Helberg (1986:48-50), as well as the glossary included with certain editions (cf 4th impression, 1989).

2. Compare Eichrodt (1967:49) on Genesis 6:1-4 as proof of the unbridgeable distance between creature and eternal God.

14. FAILURE, DOWNFALL AND SALVATION OF MANKIND: THE FLOOD (GEN 6-9)

1. Man as an Unworthy Ruler, Totally Corrupted

God describes man as being totally corrupted. His evil is considerable, comprehensive, within himself, absolute and lasting. With great emphasis the Bible says "...how great...on the earth...every inclination of the thoughts of his heart...only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5).

This was not merely a one-time situation or a characteristic unique to the people of that time. It is rather characteristic of fallen mankind. Even after the flood, new humanity was still the same (8:21). Man is described elsewhere in exactly the same way - it applies to all sinners without exception. 1 Kings 8:46: "...for there is no one who does not sin...". Job 14:4: "Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!" Psalm 14:2,3: "The Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." Psalm 143:2: "Do not bring your servant into judgement, for no one living is righteous before you." Proverbs 20:9: "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?'" Ecclesiastes 7:20: "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins."

This corruption is with man from the very first moments of his being, from his birth - Psalm 51:5: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." (Cf also Isa 48:8.)

Man is corrupt in all his parts, even in his heart (Jer 17:9; Eze 36:26), and in his deepest, immutable being (Jer 13:23).

2. God Punishes Destructively, but also Saves from Death

God shows a profound disgust at man's sinfulness and actions - it is even said that he "was grieved" that he had made man (6:6). This means that God was disappointed, because man had not answered to his (God's) purposes for having created him. It does not mean that God regretted anything he had done, like someone who had made a mistake. The Lord makes no mistakes (1 Sam 15:29). Neither does he change at will. He does, however, change his attitude, because of the change in man and the situation. It is for this reason that the same chapter in 1 Samuel can also say that the Lord was grieved (1 Sam 15:33).

The Lord decided to destroy man because of his total corruption, and together with him also the domestic and wild animals, as well as the birds. The destruction was, therefore, intended for man and everything over which he had been appointed as ruler (6:7).

To stress the fact of man's essential corruption does not mean that every single human being became totally godless. The people were indeed evil, but nevertheless had normal and prosperous lives (Lk 17:27). Neither were their actions all alike. Noah was a sincere and righteous man among his contemporaries. He walked with God (6:9; cf also 5:24 concerning Enoch). This does not imply, however, that he was perfect. God's description of man after the flood and Noah's eventual drunkenness prove the opposite (8:21; 9:18 et seq). Noah's life was blameless and he lived in a particularly intimate relationship with God. It was in the first instance the Lord's grace that had made him what he was. This grace, therefore, is mentioned here before any further mention of Noah's righteousness is made (6:8,9). Noah was saved because he believed in God and, therefore, built the ark at God's command (6:22).

The rest of mankind, together with all the animals, was destroyed by the flood (7:21-23). Noah and his family, however, were miraculously saved from death. In the midst of the destruction, they stayed in the ark for a year, floating on the water. In this way they were kept alive as if in a coffin, and were saved from the clutches of death. Even the animals had the ark to thank for their continued existence, for two of every kind of animal had been taken into the ark to ensure their survival (6:19-20).

3. God Makes a Promise to Unchanged Mankind

After the flood, man's first act was to bring an offering to God in gratitude for his salvation (8:21). The aroma of the offering was pleasant to the Lord, for the saved are to him like fragrant incense, and so also their offerings (Eze 20:40-41). The Lord was therefore never satisfied with the mere fragrance of the offerings, like the idols were.

The remaining people were not essentially changed by the punishment - they were still the same as before the flood (8:21). However, the Lord decided not to punish them, precisely for that reason! It seems contradictory, especially when compared to 6:5-7. But God's logic differs from ours; his grace and saving actions go far beyond anything we can comprehend (Isa 55:6-8). From this point onwards, he would follow another way to exercise his dominion over mankind. What this way would be like is not yet stated. This history, however, clearly teaches that God takes more delight in man's salvation, even though he does punish evil in a destructive way. This applies particularly to those who are grateful for their salvation. All of history is characterised by the fact that God is merciful, despite man's continued failure. God always makes a new beginning: in Eden, after the flood, at Babel, during the journey through the desert, with the judges and kings, and after the exile.

4. God Guarantees the Continued Earthly Existence and Dominion of Man

After his destructive judgement, God made a covenant with man. This covenant guaranteed the continued existence of mankind, nature and the animals. Natural processes would continue in an orderly way, despite the disintegrating existence (8:22). There would never again be a flood to destroy all life (9:9-13).

The possibilities of man's existence became greater - he obtained the right to use animals as food (9:3), and they in turn would experience fear and dread for man. This would make it easier for man to rule creation, which had become rebellious because of man's sin (3:18). His original right to rule creation was reaffirmed. The animals would fear man, and if they were to rebel against him, God would demand an accounting for the blood of man from the animals (9:5).

Man's duty to be a king was also reaffirmed. He had to respect the animals' lives, because they belong to God. He was not allowed to eat their blood, because blood is the vessel of the soul, that is, of life (not soul in our modern sense of the word; 9:4). The animal had to be completely dead before it could be eaten.

God deemed man's life to be so valuable that he instituted capital punishment for murder. He clearly stated his reasons for this: man was created in the image of God (9:6). This high estimation for man also included that the life of a transgressor had to be respected. The Old Testament makes no provision for the death penalty in case of ordinary theft, in contrast to other nations, (The case of Achan in Joshua 7 concerns the extraordinary situation of a holy war, not the normal state of affairs.) The stipulation of the death penalty in case of murder also did not rule out the requirement that every case be considered according to its own merit. In the law of Moses, for instance, it is emphasised that one who killed unintentionally did not have to be put to death (Ex 21:13). Cain was also shown mercy, as was David. Man's life may, however, not be absolutised as if a murderer does not have to receive the death penalty. Murder is a serious offence against God and his honour, as well as against the other person who is the image of God.

God gave the rainbow as token of this covenant with mankind and creation (9:12-16). It is a guarantee for man and a reminder for God, even though he does not really need a reminder. This history at the same time bears witness to the downfall and the revival of mankind. God continues his life-giving royal dominion in the midst of a torn apart, corrupted and dying mankind.

5. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:389,407) regarding the evil nature of man in Genesis 6:5 and 8:21.

15. THROUGH HIS BLESSING, GOD BRINGS NATIONS INTO EXISTENCE (GEN 9-10)

1. God's Grace Continues Despite Noah's Sin

Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, were the fathers of a great number of nations. These nations were actually a divine blessing. First, however, we are told more about Noah, namely of his drunkenness and its results. God's way with Noah was not the human one of merit, but that of divine grace. The rest of this history also bears witness to the undeserved, elective grace of God. Three lineages originated with Noah, of which only one received a special blessing. There is no reason why Shem was chosen and not Japheth, except God's elective grace. It is to be noted that, in the blessing Noah pronounced over Shem, Shem himself was not blessed, but "the Lord, the God of Shem" (9:26). Not Shem, but the Lord who accepted Shem through his grace, was praised. Japheth did not receive a promise of special blessing, but he would nevertheless "live in the tents of Shem", that is to say, he would share in Shem's blessedness (9:27).

2. Ham's Son Canaan is Cursed

Ham had made fun of his father's drunkenness and nudity. He had sinned against his parent and was, therefore, punished as parent: his son, Canaan, was cursed. In this way it was made impossible for Ham to reproach his father, for he himself, as a father, now became defenceless against his own son's reproaches. This demonstrates the defenceless position one finds oneself in because of sin. Noah, of course, was in the same position. It must have been painful for him to pronounce this curse as a parent, the more so as he himself had been the direct cause of Ham's sin. It is true that Noah did not confess his sin, but he did not have to do it in the presence of his sons; it was something between God and himself. This account of what happened is therefore not complete in all its details. It also does not mention why Canaan was punished for his father's sin. Perhaps he was like his father, and shared in his sin. The fact of the matter, however, is that sin and its consequences spread widely, completely out of the sinner's control.

This history also teaches that God always shows mercy again. Not all the Hamites were cursed, but only the one son, Canaan, and his descendants. The possibility of repentance and grace, therefore, remained for the other sons of Ham. Elsewhere, rich blessings are promised to the Haraitic Egyptians, even though it only applies to the eschatological future (Isa 19:24, 25). The Hamites (except for the Canaanites) were not cursed, but they were also not included in the blessing. It is, therefore, a warning that it remained possible for Ham and his descendants to be included in God's blessing of Shem and Japheth, but that the only way for them to be included was to return to God.

Canaan's descendants, the Canaanites, ceased to exist as a nation. There are no grounds whatsoever for considering any contemporary nation as the bearer of Canaan's curse.

3. Mankind is a Created Unity, Without any Superior Elements

The Bible is the only book to teach that mankind is a created unity. All people are descendants of Noah, and through him of Adam. They are all equal and close relatives. This is stated in direct contrast to all other creatures. The other creatures were created according to their individual kinds, and were preserved as such during and after the flood (Gen 1; 6:20), but not man (Gen 1).

The Bible makes no mention of any inherent superiority of one group of people or one nation over any other. This is also shown by the fact that the table of nations in Genesis 10 does not concentrate on Israel as such, but on the whole of mankind. The lines of Shem, Ham and Japheth are all ended (separately, as well as jointly) with the same refrain (10:5, 20, 31, 32). It is the more noticeable when it is kept in mind that the author was an Israelite, a descendant of Shem. Although the author was a member of the chosen people of God, he did not take Israel's history back to the history of the origin of mankind. He did not pretend that Israel had already existed at the time of the creation and had been a special people even then. This account of history, therefore, makes no mention of any supnation. Shem was not blessed on the basis of merit, and neither was merit the basis for the calling of Abraham, a descendent of Shem, out of whom would grow the people of the covenant, Israel. It was an unmotivated act of God, the result of his elective grace, of his absolute, sovereign freedom.

4. Mankind Differentiates into Nations through God's Blessing

Mankind's essential unity does not imply that there either is or should be uniformity. On the contrary, mankind differentiates into a variety of nations through the blessing of God. This differentiation is strongly emphasised

by a refrain occurring four times in Genesis 10. It occurs every time after the nations that originated with Japheth, Ham and Shem respectively. After that it occurs a fourth time as a summarising conclusion (10:5, 20, 31, 32). The distinctive elements of the nations are indicated here as land and language. These are, therefore, elements of decisive importance for delineating separate nations.

This differentiation is the result of God's blessing of Noah and his sons. In his blessing he determined that they had to be fruitful and fill the earth (9:1). This blessing hails from the time of the creation (1:28), and is repeated for the new humanity. The differentiation of nations is not an unexpected event in revelation history, but is the natural result of the proliferation of man under the blessing of God. God wanted a diversity of creatures, including diversity within mankind. The difference is that, in the case of man, unity is primary, not diversity. The diversity of nations does not imply a rigid mutual closedness. The origin and existence of nations is a continuation and unfolding of life. God plans for the salvation of nations as nations. The blessing promised to mankind in the promise to Abraham concerns "all peoples", not merely "all people" (12:3).

5. Not Racial Separation, but National Diversity

The Bible does not speak in terms of race, not here and not elsewhere. It does not, however, deny the existence of various races. For the purposes of God's revelation, however, races are unimportant. The following is indeed important: mankind is essentially one, a created unity, and a unity in sin. God, through his blessing, caused a great many nations to come into existence - his blessing is intended for mankind in its unity, as well as its national diversity.

The table of nations presented here should be read in the light of its purpose as revelation history, just like the genealogies. It is not a purely ethnographic description. It seems that not only direct descent, but also geographic location and political association played a role in the systematising of some facts. Egypt (Mizraim, 3:13), for instance, is included under Ham, and not under the Shemites. The probable reason for this is the fact that Egypt forms part of Hamitic Africa. Egypt had a controlling influence on the land Canaan for quite some time. This could also explain why even the Canaanites are included under the Hamites, and not under the Shemites. The main purpose of the table is to teach that God's dominion is over all the nations, because he had called them into existence with his blessing. All the nations have to recognize his dominion.

The Bible, therefore, employs a much more subtle distinction than race. However, the primary element is not the nation as such, but God who has to be honoured and glorified. This should be done around the world in a multi-coloured way, by a humanity that is essentially one and that should, therefore, live as one family. The apostle Paul formulates this twofold truth as follows: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26- 27).

6. Notes

1. Compare Vriezen (1966:186) on the fact that the Old Testament makes no mention of human races that are inferior as such.

16. FALSE OBJECTIVE OF UNITY LEADS TO DISRUPTION (GEN 11)

1. Man Seeks Perpetuation of Life in an Unbelieving Attempt at Unity

Genesis 10 and 11 both discuss the origin of nations, but from two different perspectives. Genesis 10 recounts how the nations originated in compliance with God's will for salvation. Genesis 11 shows that it did not happen as harmoniously as it might seem at first glance. It happened against the will of man, so that God had to use some force in order to realise his own objectives. In stead of natural and harmonious differentiation, it became disruption.

Man did not seek assurance or continuation of life in faith in God, but in his own human plans and methods. In the author's version of what was thought, said and done, no mention is made of God - God is excluded. They

sought assurance for the continued existence of mankind in a unity that was to be brought about by means of centralisation. This contradicted God's command and blessing at the time of creation and after the flood, namely that man should fill the earth. To them, God's way seems to be the way of death, of dispersal, and dispersal meant death (Dt 4:27; 28:64; Eze 37). They show no trust in God that he would ensure both life and unity. They would rather do it themselves.

At Babel, man showed the same attitude of auto salvation as the Cainite line before the flood. He overflowed with self-confidence, was egocentric and wanted "to make a name" for himself: to gather fame or, in the metaphorical sense, to become immortal (11:4). However, the Lord considered them to be mere men, that is, weak and mortal (11:5).

What the people did here was an expression of a well-formulated, discussed and defined life philosophy: "Come, let us build ourselves a city...so that we may make a name for ourselves...and not be scattered..." (11:4). It was a philosophy of unity, an attempt at excellence and trust in human possibilities.

2. Man Relies on a City

At Babel, man harnessed architecture in an attempt to express his life philosophy. They built a city with a tower that reached into the blue sky. With this city, they wanted to consolidate their abilities on all terrains; their tower was to be a kind of head office of mankind. It is also possible that the tower was an attempt to reach the levels of divine power.

The tower was not a mere incidental building, an isolated monument or something to that effect, but a functional building. Various gigantic temple towers have been excavated in Mesopotamia. They were terraced, and generally consisted of seven levels which contained temples, palaces, administrative offices, trade offices, industries and much more. It was the religious, political and economic heart of the city and its population. It was the source of life. This city and its tower were, therefore, indeed a central point for mankind where everything came together, a symbol of unity and power, and a concrete expression of it.

Man, however, was divided within himself. He was self-satisfied, but at the same time afraid of becoming dispersed. He therefore tried to ensure immortality for himself. He had a deeply rooted fear, a fear of annihilation, or expressed in a modern way - an existential fear. This fear had likewise been felt by Cain. He had also not trusted God to ensure his continued existence, but had built a city to this end. In this way, man excluded faith in God and his personal guidance in his life at Babel, and rather placed his trust in his own structures.

3. Mankind Should not be One People with One language

The Lord did not approve of mankind being "one people speaking the same language" (11:6). And yet, even before this endeavour of man, there had been only one language on earth - "one language and a common speech" (11:1). The difference is that they now wanted to be "one people" with one language. The concept of "people" expresses the idea of something overarching, while "nation" stresses the idea of differentiation (10:5,20,31,32; 12:2; cf 22:18). These passages are, therefore, concerned with man's attempt at unity, regardless of God's will for differentiation. (The accepted distinction between "people" and "nation" is the direct opposite of the distinction made in the Bible. It is common, for instance, to talk of a certain people within the greater South African nation. This difference in expression has to be kept in mind in order to prevent confusion. It also has to be kept in mind that the two words are most often not distinguished from each other, but are used as complete synonyms.)

God said that this unity of man was only the beginning of his endeavour: in future nothing he could plan would be impossible for him (11:6). This does not mean that this matter and man's aspirations were a threat to God. What it means is that it is a negation and denial of God's sovereignty that went too far; man was created to acknowledge God's sovereignty. For this reason God had to end man's plans.

4. Language Confusion and Dispersal

God intervened in this endeavour of man, and caused a confusion of language so that people could no longer

understand one another. In this way he realised his original plan of language diversity. The difference is that what should have occurred harmoniously, now had to be brought about with violence. The difference in language that arose here, was more than merely a difference in meaning or language structure. The various languages were an expression of inner division and disruption. If the people had had a better attitude towards one another, they would have been able to learn one another's languages without much difficulty. They would also have been able to find enough common terms to be able to continue the project they had conceived of and started together. However, in this case inability, as well as unwillingness, stood in their way.

The attempt at unity that disregarded God and his command, therefore, ended in the direct opposite of unity for man. Mankind became divided within itself. The Lord also dispersed them over the earth and did to them what they had feared so much. But now they were dispersed in the full sense of the word: they were estranged from God who is true life. In this way man's endeavour brought disruption in stead of diversity, and dispersal in stead of distribution.

Because of this confusion of language and dispersal, the city was called Babel. The meaning is not related to grammatical deduction, but popular etymology. A foreign word is associated with a word in the own language according to its sound.

5. Pentecost as Opposite of Babel

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, the disruption of mankind, originating in Babel, was cancelled (Acts 2). Diversity as such was, however, not cancelled. At Pentecost, the people did not all hear the gospel in the same language, but each in his own. The diversity of languages, cultures and nationalities are, therefore, maintained by the Holy Spirit. Unity is also maintained, because the Spirit was poured out where all the people with different languages were together, and not on each group separately. The gospel therefore maintains diversity, but not separation. In the proclamation of the gospel, diversity of nations also has to be taken into account. Jesus commanded his followers to spread the gospel among all the "nations", not merely all the "people" (Mt 28:19). The gospel does not destroy nationalities, but claims and sanctifies it for the service of God. Nations will exist to the very end. According to the various ways in which they have given expression to the gospel, they will bring their splendours into the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:24-26).

6. Notes

1. Compare Vriezen (1966:56) on man's self-aggrandisement before God.
2. Compare Vriezen (1966:403) regarding the idea that cities and temples, like peoples, are not viewed as created things in the Old Testament. The various peoples were like one big family. Their mutual estrangement was the result of God's judgement.

17. ABRAHAM CALLED - TRUE UNITY FOR MANKIND (GEN 12)

1. God Makes a New Beginning with Mankind

The Lord reacted to the building of the city of Babel by dispersing the people. His answer to what happened at Babel was further to make a new beginning with mankind. He used a completely different method to bring about unity for mankind. With this in mind he called Abraham. The Lord maintained his dominion over man and his fellowship with him despite everything that had happened.

The Lord ordered Abraham to break completely with his surroundings and the people among whom he was living. This involved the whole existing order of life and the atmosphere of his time (12:1 et seq). The Lord was going to turn his back on those people who had turned their backs on him. He was going to start building his kingdom in a particular way, within a small part of mankind. He began with only a handful of people. This beginning was like a small shoot growing from a cut stump, like new progress out of downfall, like a little bit of life out of death.

Even the way in which the Lord treated Abraham was like life out of death. Abraham had to leave the protection of his own group and land, in order to face death in a strange land. The various nomadic societies of the time

were quite closed and very hostile towards any outsiders. Without the protection of one's own group, one was a defenceless prey for their attacks. God's way with Abraham required of the latter faith and trust in God's life-giving power and protection. Abraham had to be willing to let go of everything, even his life. He had to place it in God's hands, in order to receive it back from him, as it were.

The genealogy with which the author starts this history shows a descending line, because the ages of the people mentioned in it get lower and lower. This descending line reaches its lowest point in Abraham and Sarah who were unable to have children. This line therefore ended here. But God decided to link his plan of salvation specifically to them, and thereby demonstrated that his plan of salvation for mankind involved nothing less than creating life out of death. Faith is to have this trust; it involves surrendering to God's way with one's life.

2. All-powerful Divine Choice

The author gives no reason for the fact that God had chosen Abraham and had given him this command, and not another member of his family (12:1). Abraham was called through God's all-powerful choice. Humanly speaking, there were quite a few people who would have been more suitable. Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother, for instance, did have children (11:29,30). Right from the beginning, however, it was clear that the line of revelation was not to be maintained by man, but by God. God also did not merely choose people who were "naturally" suitable, or else he would not have chosen Abraham and Isaac. God himself provided the people in a wonderful way. The whole plan of salvation is one in which God acts in a miraculous way.

It was soon to become clear that Abraham had not been called on grounds of merit. The same chapter that describes his calling and his obedient reaction to it, also describes his lack of faith. Abraham told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister. He was afraid that Pharaoh would kill him for the sake of his wife (12:12). With this, Abraham displayed a remarkable lack of faith and trust that the Lord would actually realise his promises. The same happened again later on with the Philistines. Still later, when it seemed as if the promises would indeed not be realised because Sarah had still not borne any children, Abraham also doubted and took a concubine in order to continue his generation.

The author of the history of the patriarchs never intended to describe their faithfulness, but rather that of God. God continues his dominion and his fellowship with man, despite the considerable shortcomings that are so typical of human life.

These shortcomings cannot cancel the fact that Abraham and his family really were believers and obedient to God. When God called Abraham, he answered unconditionally (12:4). At a later stage, he would even go unconditionally to sacrifice his own son (Gen 22). But even this faith and obedience were the results of God's grace and election, and not something inherent in man (cf also Eph 2:8). Furthermore, this history teaches that all people, including the patriarchs and other blessed, are sinful and fallible. They still have to be picked up and carried by God's grace.

3. God's Promises Concern Natural Situations and Relationships

Abraham is the father of all believers. The promises of the Lord to Abraham are important, because they indicate the promises of the Lord to all believers. It is evident that faith is not limited to spiritual, vertical needs and relationships. It also concerns the completely ordinary, natural situations and relationships. The Lord promised Abraham a land (12:1), and this land always had an important place in the history of Israel (cf the fifth commandment, for instance). This was the case right through history, into the eschatological future. God also promised Abraham that he would make him into a nation (12:2), separate from all the other nations. This is in direct contrast with the people at Babel who wanted to be one "people". Nationhood is here understood to be nothing but the result of God's blessing, just like the lineage of Noah's sons (12:2).

Here also, like in Genesis 10, "nation" indicates differentiation. Abraham is made into a nation, clearly distinguished from the others.

The promise of nationhood was not only important with reference to Abraham, but would remain important throughout the history of Israel, even after Christ had come. Israel's nationhood did not make way for the church. In the Old Testament, Israel was the "people" of God, the overarching unity that included practically

all believers (cf the previous chapter on "people" as overarching entity). In the New Testament the church is the "people" of God. It includes all the believers from all the "nations". These believers are still members of their respective nations. This also applies to Israelites or Jews.

Faith in God is the primary factor, but it is not suspended in mid-air. God's promises to Abraham were related to his personal and family life, specifically his desire to have children and the whole human way of life related to this. From that point the promises reached out to all other relationships. These are just as important and should also be approached in faith.

4. Unity for Mankind Through Faith

At Babel, mankind was in search of an impersonal unity, devoid of faith. They wanted to achieve this by building a city. Organisation, administration, technology, economy and commerce were supposed to bring about this unity. In this approach, man as individual was lost in the masses and in organisation. There is, therefore, no mention of any individual people in this little episode in history.

God, however, achieved unity for mankind in a very personal way. He did not build another city as the opposite of Babel, but called an individual person and linked the unity to him (cf also chapter 45). God promised that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham. They would acknowledge that God is the only God who can bless, and would therefore be the people who believe in God. Unity will not come of its own accord, but only through faith. Faith is faith in God, the God who saves in a life-giving way, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac. He is the God who has total authority over life, and who, therefore, demands total and unconditional faith and obedience.

5. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:178) on the fact that the idea of Israel's divine election had already existed at a very early stage in the history of the people, although, in its radical form, it was manifested only much later. This was when a universalistic view of history originated, and when Israel's existence among the nations became a problem (Am3:2).
2. Compare Vriezen (1966:186): the Old Testament idea of fellowship between God and man, contained in the doctrine of the covenant and making all Israelites brothers, reached across the borders of Israel, because God was acknowledged as the Lord of the world. The other peoples could also be called, together with Israel, into the presence of God to praise him (Ps 96,98). This was only possible because of God's association with the covenant.
3. Kaiser (1978:35-69) emphasises God's promise as the unifying theme of the Old Testament. In each new era, the line from the past is integrated with the present.

18. ABRAHAM AND LOT: A LIFE OF FAITH AND A LIFE OF OWN ABILITY AND NEED (GEN 12-22)

1. Abraham Lives by Faith

The Lord's relationship with Abraham had a strong orientation towards the future. The Lord made promises to him that would only be fulfilled in the future. This made important demands of faith and required Abraham to be willing to wait a very long time for the full realisation of the promises.

This orientation towards the future of the Lord's relationship with Abraham also made Abraham's faith particularly strong. He would, for instance, remain a lifelong stranger in the promised land, without citizenship or property. He lived in tents, and never had a settled life (12:8; 13:3; 18:1,9). He found satisfaction and joy, however, primarily in his life with the Lord himself and also with the believers. Unlike the people at Babel, "he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebr 11:10). Only the burial site of the cave of Machpelah belonged to the patriarchs, Abraham had acquired it from the Hittites (23:20). It was a symbol to them that the land would indeed eventually belong to them and that the promises would be fulfilled (49:29-31; 50:24,25). In death they were no longer strangers. There was an unbreakable fellowship with God, even in death.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, waiting is also an important part of living by faith. Faith is to trust God, and to surrender oneself to him. It includes the willingness to accept God's will, and to conform to his way and time of action. This is clearly illustrated in the Psalms (cfPs27, 123, 130).

Faith, however, does not only direct one's life towards the future. Abraham also received promises concerning his concrete earthly existence: a land, descendants and nationhood. He was a big farmer, and was even able to build up an army to fight Lot's abductors. Abraham was no ascetic.

2. Lot Follows the Way of his Own Interest

Common, everyday problems, like overgrazing, were the cause of separation between Abraham and Lot. This illustrates the difference in worldview between the two of them. Abraham chose a life by God's promises; Lot, on the other hand, followed the way of own interest and material prosperity. He chose first - the parts that had the most water and were the most fertile (13:10,11).

This attitude towards life nearly cost him his own life and caused his history - as far as faith and the covenant were concerned - to come to a dead end. Lot was only saved from death by Abraham's intercession when his neighbourhood was destroyed. His marriage life seems to have been a failure - at least from the point of view of faith, because his wife turned into a pillar of salt as a result of her unbelief (19:26). His daughters were saved together with him, but they showed the influence of the morally weak Sodom (19:31 et seq). His descendants, the Ammonites and Moabites, lived outside of the covenant and were mostly hostile towards their brothers, the Israelites.

Lot was not an unbeliever - he really wanted to stay close to God. 2 Peter 2:7,8 even calls him a "righteous" man, who's "righteous soul" was tormented by the moral decay of his fellow citizens. Lot's half-heartedness and its results are a lasting warning to all generations. Whoever wants to serve the Lord not only has to see to it that his attitude is right, but also that the atmosphere in which he lives is right. Religion claims one totally, in one's complete humanity and in all relationships. Religion should be practiced daily; as soon as the right atmosphere is lacking, religion starts to wane.

3. Abraham Rescues Lot and Meets Melchizedek

At a certain stage, the citizens of both Sodom and Gomorrah were carried off by kings from the east. Abraham staged a rescue operation, and brought Lot back. At this occasion, he also met the mysterious Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Salem was most probably Jerusalem. Melchizedek also believed in God Most High, Creator of the heavens and the earth (14:18-20). Abraham told Melchizedek that this God was none other than the Lord (14:22).

Melchizedek was priest and king at the same time (14:18). This was never allowed in Israel, because of man's sinful tendencies towards dictatorship and tyranny. In Melchizedek we still see a symbol of man's original priesthood and kingship: the capacity to rule, but in true humility and submission to God. The New Testament book of Hebrews says that Jesus was also a priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:17). This means that Jesus was at the same time both priest and king. He was also without demonstrable priestly genealogy (Hebr 7:3).

This meeting with Melchizedek and Abraham's conduct towards him show that Abraham did not live in isolation. His contact with people was, however, in an atmosphere different from that of Lot. Abraham was never drawn into others people's sphere, but presented a clear witness to them in order to draw them into the sphere of faith.

The Lord did not continue his way of salvation through Melchizedek, but through Abraham. He entered into a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15, 17). (Cf the following chapter.)

4. Abraham Intercedes for Sodom

The Lord appeared to Abraham in human form at Mamre, and announced that the child of the promise would be born within a year (18:1,2). The believing generation was thus maintained. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, were destroyed, and together with them also the half-hearted Lot (18:20 et seq). Sodom

and Gomorrah were so sinful that they became proverbial for extreme sinfulness (Isa 1:9; 13:19; Jer 50:40; Lam 4:6). They lived morally poor lives, as illustrated by their homosexual actions against Lot's guests (19:4 et seq).

Abraham interceded for Sodom for the sake of Lot. He appealed to God's justness: God had to save the whole city so that the few righteous people left in it would not die unjustly (18:23-26, etc.). As it turned out, however, righteousness could not save the city, but only destroy it, because there were no righteous people left in it. No basis was left for Abraham's intercession for Lot, except divine grace! The Lord himself would manifest this grace, without Abraham having to plead for it (18:32,33; 19 et seq).

The Lord rescued Lot and his daughters. However, he demanded unconditional obedience and love. The mocking sons-in-law were, therefore, not rescued. Lot's wife also died, because she had turned back against God's clear command, thereby betraying her devotion to life in Sodom (19:14,26; cf also Lk 17:31,32; 9:59-62).

5. Faith and Lack of Faith

Abraham's way was that of faith. It brought about separation from Lot. This separation also occurred between the sons of Abraham, between Ishmael and Isaac. Even in the case of true believers like Abraham, faith and lack of faith alternate. It was the Lord who saw to it that Abraham remained faithful. This was also the reason why he repeated the covenant promises at more than one occasion - to sustain Abraham in his faith (15, 17). Hardly had Abraham done intercession for Sodom, when he told the king of Gerar that Sarah was his sister (20:1 et seq). The Lord sustained Abraham's faith by fulfilling the promise of Isaac's birth (21). In this way the way was paved for Abraham's great act of faith - the sacrifice of his son Isaac (22).

In this description of history the "angel of the Lord" is mentioned for the first time. It is not merely an indication of a normal angel, but a technical term for a very specific Angel. He speaks as if he is God himself (16:10). He is an appearance of God (22:11; Ex 3:2; Num 22:22; Jud 6:11; etc.). The angel of the Lord is probably mentioned in this history because the foundations of salvation history are laid here. This is also why some scholars see a resemblance between the angel of the Lord and Jesus Christ.

6. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:27) on the angel of the Lord as a form of God's self revelation, which explicitly safeguards his transcendent nature.
2. Compare Westermann (1978:61) regarding the fact that the word "believe" (cf Gen 15:6) in the Old Testament, unlike the New Testament, does not express a general or all-inclusive meaning regarding the relationship with God. The general expression "to believe in God", or "belief in God", does not occur in the Old Testament.

19. GOD ENTERS INTO A COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM, THE FATHER OF THE BELIEVERS (GEN 15-17)

1. God Enshrines his Relationship with Abraham in a Covenant

The Lord appeared to Abraham once again and enshrined his relationship with him in a covenant, something that was well known in those times. Covenants were entered into between two groups of people, and do not indicate a natural relation. A father, for instance, cannot enter into a covenant with his son in order to establish a relationship with him in that way. The fact that God entered into a covenant with Abraham indicates that God is not naturally related to man, as the other nations believed of their own gods. God's relationship with man is based on divine choice, adoption and grace.

A covenant between two people or groups of people did not necessarily have to be based on a free agreement between the two parties; a powerful king could for instance force a covenant on another king. The same also applies to the covenant between God and man. God himself chooses the other party for the covenant. He himself determines the conditions and responsibilities and imposes it on the other party. The covenant makes

the relationship between God and man firm and lasting, and it is God's honour that it will not be broken.

2. Abraham Believes in the Life-Giving Power of God

Before God established his covenant with Abraham, the latter first had to prove his faith in God. This faith was faith in the life-giving power of the Lord. Abraham had to believe that God could bring life where no life had previously existed. This was indicated by God's promise to Abraham, as well as Abraham's reaction to it. Abraham and his wife were unable to have children, and had also become far too old for it (cf also Rom 4:17-21). The continuation of Abraham's generation as well as God's work of salvation was cut off. That explains Abraham's sigh (15:2). But the Lord promised that he would ensure that a child would be born to Abraham and Sarah, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the heavens (15:4,5). Abraham believed this, that is, he trusted God to such an extent that he made this promise his own. That is why it was credited to him as righteousness - God credited it to him as if he had had a right to it (15:6).

Faith is, therefore, an appropriation, but not in self-righteousness; it is an appropriation of God's promises given in grace. Abraham's righteousness also indicates that he fulfilled God's requirements, and that he, therefore, stood in the right relationship with God. Abraham trusted God's life-giving power of salvation in his own life.

3. The Covenant Presents both Grace and Requirements

The Lord specifically promised three things in his covenant with Abraham, things that had already been promised when Abraham had been called out of his country (12:1-3). These things were a numerous offspring (15:5; 17:2,4,5), possession of the land (15:7,18; 17:8), and a blessing for all the generations (or peoples) of the earth (18:18; 22:18). These were gifts of God's grace. The promises, however, were only one side of the coin. The Lord also required absolute and unconditional obedience from Abraham. This obedience would be the fruit of faith. It originated from Abraham's belief that the Lord would save the believer, even if his obedience were to lead him into death. The Lord is the God who saves from death; he would, as it were, also cause Isaac to be born of death.

The covenant not only included grace, but also the punishment of disobedience. This punishment was implied at the time when the covenant was established, in that the Lord passed between the parts of the sacrificial animals cut in two (15:9-10,17). The parts of the animals symbolised that whoever broke the covenant would also be cut into pieces. The covenant was, therefore, a very serious matter. It spoke of life and death: miraculous salvation for him who believed in God's promise and who lived according to it, and death for him who broke the covenant. This held true for all who were included in God's covenant. There was no possibility for a non-committal attitude.

The establishment of the covenant was a far-reaching matter in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, and also in the lives of all who were part of the covenant. God emphasised this by giving Abraham and Sarah new names. The name Abram (which means Exalted Father) now became Abraham (Father of Many). Abraham would become the father of a multitude of nations (17:5). Sarah's name was also changed - from Sarai to Sarah (17:15). Both these names mean Queen or Empress. A new era in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, and in revelation history, now dawned.

4. The Sign of the Covenant

God established circumcision as the sign of the covenant. Abraham and all male children were to receive this sign. The children had to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth; this applied to all the members of Abraham's household, including the slaves (17:12).

Nobody could be excluded from this. There is no possibility to remain uncommitted concerning God's promises of grace, his requirement of obedience and his punishment of disobedience. It was God's all-powerful command, and he had to be acknowledged and honoured as the absolute ruler. Any uncircumcised male had to be cut off from his people (17:14), because it signified rejection of the covenant and of God's sovereignty.

This account of history clearly shows that Abraham had first believed and had been justified, and only then

was he circumcised. He was justified by faith, and not by circumcision (15:6). The circumcision was only the seal of faith (Rom 4:11,12). The actual and important matter was still circumcision of the heart (Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4), or putting off sin (Col 2:11) and the keeping of the commandments (1 Cor 7:19). This also holds true in the New Dispensation. Baptism, as sign of the covenant, has come in the place of circumcision (Col 2:11,12).

Because the actual circumcision was that of the heart, not all the circumcised were true inheritors of the covenant. The covenant was also not limited to the actual offspring of Abraham. Ishmael, for instance, was circumcised, but he was not a true inheritor of the covenant. He was arrogant and rebellious, just like his mother Hagar. He was as untameable as a wild donkey, and lived in continuous hostility towards his brothers (16:4,5,12). Ishmael was removed from the covenant family (Gen 21).

Contrary to this, people from outside the covenant with Israel were included into the covenant, like Rahab (Jos 2) and Ruth. The children of the promise are the ones considered to be part of the covenant (Rom 9:8). They are the ones who were born by miraculous birth, like Isaac, according to the promise. This miraculous birth is the birth by the Spirit of God. The children of the promise are, therefore, those who have been born again and who believe (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:7,14,29; 4:28).

5. Notes

1. Nicholson (1986) tends to date the covenant quite late. Compare Childs (1986:93-96) on the debate concerning the question whether the covenant in Israel was old or not. He rightly says that, despite the surprising lack of technical covenant terms with the Old Testament prophets, their message cannot be understood without acceptance of a special people of God.

2. Terrien's approach to the covenant (1978:26) is existentialists. According to him, the covenant is not the determinative idea in the Old Testament, but merely an instrument serving God's previous presence. The purpose of worship is to recall and anticipate the *kairos* of the divine encounter.

20. ABRAHAM SACRIFICES HIS SON, BELIEVING IN RESURRECTION FROM DEATH (GEN 22)

1. The Lord Gives Abraham a Heart-Rending Command

God tested Abraham with a heart-rending command, requiring absolute and unconditional obedience from him. He told Abraham: "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (22:2). With his choice of words, God prevented Abraham from arguing. He knew that Isaac was Abraham's only son, and that he loved him. But he, Isaac, had to be sacrificed, and no one else.

This command sounds strange and terrible. Did God not later forbid his people, under penalty of death, to sacrifice human beings? It was detestable to the Lord, and he hated it (Lev 18:21; 20:2; Dt 12:31; Jer 7:31; 19:5). The command also seemingly contradicted all God's promises concerning Isaac. It was through Isaac that Abraham would become a great nation.

The description of what happened here is moving and yet sober. It never mentions either Abraham's or Isaac's feelings, but only describes their various actions. The emphasis is not on human feelings, but on divine revelation. This is also the case in the rest of the Old Testament. Man's feelings and subjective experiences are not totally excluded, however. In the psalms, for instance, they are very important. Even there, however, it is not merely a matter of expression of feelings; the revelation or word has an important and determining position. The psalms are the result of deep thought concerning the word, and are man's answers to the word (Ps 1:2; cf chapter 59).

2. God's Command Comes against the Background of Isaac's Birth

The Lord's command can only be understood correctly if it is considered against the background of what he had already done for and promised to Abraham. It is specifically to be viewed against the background of Isaac's

miraculous birth, with which the Lord had created life out of death. Romans 4:17-21 says it clearly: "He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed - the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead - since he was about a hundred years old - and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

Hebrews 11:12 also mentions children from one who was as good as dead. By faith Sarah was enabled to conceive (Heb 11:11). The faith of both Abraham and Sarah was directed at God's power to create life out of death. This was also the case when Abraham received the command to go and sacrifice his son.

3. Not Blind Obedience, but Obedience in Faith

The strangeness and seeming cruelty of God's command must have caused Abraham to think deeply about it all: God's promise had clearly been linked to Isaac, and could only be fulfilled through him. If Isaac were to die, then surely God would have another miracle in mind, akin to the miraculous birth of Isaac. God would fulfil his promises, even if it had to be through the death of Isaac. The New Testament book of Hebrews clearly states Abraham's approach to the whole matter: "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Heb 11:17-19).

With the command to sacrifice Isaac, God gave deeper insight into the nature of his work of salvation. Salvation not only includes that God should bring life where there is no life or where life is impossible, but it also includes that he should bring to life through death. This had already been implied in Abraham's calling: he had had to depart alone and without protection, exposing himself to mortal danger, in the faith that God would give him life in this way. At this stage it became even clearer that God's way of salvation had to go right through death, and that faith was essentially faith in God's life-giving power and man's return from death. It could be called faith in resurrection from death.

Abraham's words to Isaac also have to be understood in this way: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gen 22:8). It was God's command and offering. Abraham trusted him to bring together all the loose ends. But he still had to sacrifice Isaac. It remained terrible. Only his belief in resurrection from death made it possible for him to bear it all in some way. He had to experience all the pain step by step as he built the altar, arranged the wood and took the knife to slay his son (22:9,10). His father heart had practically offered his son already. But then God brought about a change, as if he was creating life out of death for Abraham! In this way, Abraham practically offered his son as sacrifice, and received him back out of death.

4. God himself Provides the Burnt Offering and Repeats his Promises

The Lord prevented Abraham from offering his son and provided his own ram as burnt offering "instead of his son" (22:10-13). The Lord did not take back the command to bring an offering; Isaac actually had to be offered as sacrifice. The Lord only provided something in Isaac's place - he provides a vicarious offering. The promise to Abraham was, therefore, not fulfilled in an easy way. It required a terrible sacrifice to be offered. The reason was not given to Abraham, but is nevertheless clear from preceding passages in Scripture. It was man's sin; man has to die because of his sin. Genesis 3 teaches it and history verifies it, among others in the genealogy of Genesis 5 with its sad refrain "and then he died".

In Genesis 3 it was already implied that salvation would be possible. The sacrifice on Moriah taught that salvation could not merely sidestep death, but had to be salvation right through death. Man had to die and be raised from death. This was also implied by circumcision. Circumcision was a symbol of bloodshed and concerned that part of the body that is involved in creating new life. Circumcision, therefore, symbolised putting off the old life in order to gain true life. With the sacrifice on Moriah God taught Abraham that circumcision was not enough. Full bloodshed is required, circumcision in the fullest sense possible. Only in the New Testament would it become clear what it is: circumcision not done by the hands of men, sharing in the propitiatory death of Christ (Col 2:11).

The various lines of thought come together in Jesus Christ: the Father who sacrifices his son, the Son who actually enters into death and who returns from it, and the propitiatory offering that brings salvation for man. This envisages physical resurrection from death for man. It also implies, as was stated above, that man should put himself off spiritually, in order to be spiritually raised, together with Christ, to a new life.

After this testing of Abraham, God repeated his promises: a rich blessing, a rich and conquering offspring, a blessing for all the nations (22:17-22). It is specifically linked to the fact that Abraham did not hold back his son (22:16). The blessing for the world, therefore, comes through one person's obedience: he is the mediator. The blessing follows the way of a specific belief: that God has life-giving power and that he saves by raising from death. Salvation is life for man, life through resurrection from death.

This light of revelation is given in this specific history, because the salvation of all of mankind is contained in him, the son of the promise.

5. Notes

1. Van Selms (1967a:25-27) wrongly puts all the emphasis in Genesis 22 on obedience. Compare Von Rad (1962:174) on the central meaning of divine promise in this passage.

21. THE COVENANT LIFE OF ISAAC AND JACOB (GEN 23-31)

1. The Covenant Atmosphere is Established

Sarah died before Abraham (Gen 23). At the time of her death, they were still strangers in Canaan, without citizenship, despite the promises Abraham had received from God. Abraham, however, did not doubt and did not become despondent. He persevered in faith, and bought a burial place. That piece of land was his own property and symbolised his belief that his offspring would eventually own all of the land. In this way his act and the grave were lasting witnesses, and also served to strengthen the faith of his family.

Abraham also took care that not only his son would grow up in the atmosphere of the covenant, but also his grandchildren. That was the reason why his servant Eliezer had to swear that he would get a wife for Isaac from Abraham's family in Haran. Isaac was not allowed to marry one of the Canaanites (24:3,4). The Lord blessed this endeavour and answered Eliezer's prayer by indicating the right woman himself (24:12-19). Rebekah showed her belief in the dispensation of the Lord, and accompanied Eliezer as wife for Isaac (24:58).

Isaac himself was also a true child of the covenant. He did not come forward as strongly as Abraham and Jacob, though, and seems to have been more introverted. Despite this, he gave evidence of strong faith. When Abraham had had to offer him as sacrifice on Moriah, he had not rebelled or argued. He had accompanied his father on the way of faith, even though it was to his own disadvantage.

2. God Acts in a Life-Giving and Elective Way in Isaac's Family

Rebekah was also unable to have children, just like Sarah. The line of the covenant was once again threatened with extinction, and once again it seemed as if death would have the last word. But again the Lord created life from infertility, as answer to Isaac's prayer. Isaac believed in the life-giving power of God (25:21).

God's all-powerful choice is also clearly demonstrated in this part of history. Salvation would not be based on merit or any other human measure. Rebekah gave birth to twins, but even before their birth God had already indicated that two nations would be born of her, and that the older would serve the younger. Not the one who, according to the standards of the time, would be the natural heir of an inheritance both physical and spiritual, but the younger child would become the heir (25:23). God determines history and all events, and can announce events beforehand (Is 43:9; 48:3-8; Mai 1:23; Rom 9:11-13; Ex 33:19). This prediction was realised in history when Israel gained the victory over the Edomites through David (2 Sam 8:14; 1 Kings 11:16; 1 Chron 18:13), and through the victories of Amaziah (2 Kings 14:7; 2 Chron 25:11,12).

3. Divine Choice in the Lives of Isaac and Jacob

The life of Jacob showed that he could not claim any merit. He had only God's choice to thank for his position. He did not wait in patience for God to fulfil his promises, but grabbed at them in advance. He first bought Esau's birth right by exploiting his need (25:29-33). In this way he gained a double portion of the inheritance. He then fraudulently obtained Isaac's blessing (27:18-29). Jacob was instigated by Rebekah to do this. She also could not wait in faith, but stumbled, just like Abraham and Isaac earlier on. Jacob's conduct when he was with Laban also did not speak of honesty, even though it would only be honest to say that Laban himself was also covetous and a swindler. He deceived and attempted to exploit Jacob with both marriage and labour agreements (29:20-23; 31:7,41). Even before Rebekah's marriage, when Eliezer had gone to find a wife for Isaac, Laban had been very interested in external riches (24:29,30).

Jacob's election does not mean that Esau was a mere victim in that situation. As in other instances, like that of Cain, for example, it is clear that Esau was not worthy of the blessing and that he did not consider the relationship of faith with God to be of any value. Esau despised his birth right and exchanged it for a mere plate of food. He married daughters of the land, which shows that he was not serious when it came to the covenant (26:34).

4. The Circle of the Covenant Becomes Smaller

The circle of the covenant continued to become smaller: only the one son of Abraham, Isaac; only the one son of Isaac, Jacob. Children do not automatically share in God's covenant with their parents. The covenant does bring continuity, certainty and security within the circle of believers. It provides a secure basis for pleading with God for every believer. On the basis of the covenant the believer can plead with God for himself and his children. This may, however, never be approached in a mechanical way. Both the covenant and the promises should be accepted in faith. This should be a conscious acceptance. The circle of the covenant also shows that salvation is actually life out of death; it does not grow bigger of its own accord.

God himself, however, remained involved with the believers. When Jacob was fleeing from Esau, God visited him in his loneliness on the road to Paddan Aram. In a dream he assured Jacob of his saving presence and his covenant faithfulness through the generations. He called himself "the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac", and repeated the covenant promises to Jacob. Jacob's offspring would take possession of the land, and he himself would return there (28:12-15). Jacob called the place Bethel, which means house of God, surprised that God was with him in his loneliness in such a special way (28:16-19).

Much remained to be done in Jacob's life to make of him a true child of the covenant, however. He was still serving God far too much in his own way and according to his own conditions. This can even be seen in the vow he made to the Lord at Bethel: "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God..." (28:20,21). There is an element of beauty in this vow, but there is still too much of a condition in the words "then the Lord will be my God". It should not be understood in such a way, however, as if Jacob had up to this stage not served the Lord, or as if he would not serve him if he would not answer to his vow. Jacob meant that, if he would return safely from his journey, he would serve the Lord with even greater devotion than ever before. By his safe return he would also become a living witness of God's grace and covenant faithfulness.

5. Notes

1. Compare Childs (1986:200) on the entrance of God into human life as a permanent feature of Old Testament historiography. This does not exclude God's continued presence, but rather includes it.

22. JACOB BECOMES ISRAEL (GEN 32,33)

1. Jacob is Subdued, but Nevertheless Overcomes

Jacob was a conqueror of people, people like Esau and Laban. He had obtained Esau's birth right as well as his blessing, and had also enriched himself while he had been with Laban. The latter he had brought about chiefly by means of fraud. He had still not learnt to leave things to God.

At Peniel, however, he was confronted with death, as it were, both in front of the approaching Esau and when he struggled with God (32:11; 24-30). He struggled with God who had come to him in the appearance of a man. Only after Jacob had been hit on his hip, causing him to limp from that day on, was he overpowered. Brute strength was not enough to overcome him. But there was a greater power that eventually subdued him, which lay on another level than physical strength and human ability. Jacob was forced to believe and to confess his sins, and in this way was overcome. At the same time, however, he himself also overcame.

He held on to the covenant promises that the Lord had given to Abraham and had repeated to Jacob at Bethel. The fulfilment of those promises implied that he would receive the blessing. He now recognised that he had tried to obtain the blessing by means of trickery and fraud, by deceiving his blind father. He realised that he would not obtain the blessing in that way, and insisted that the Lord himself bless him (32:24-26). The Lord emphasised his earlier sin by asking him his name (32:27). His father had also done that, but Jacob had presented himself as Esau (27:18,19). He now acknowledged that his name was "Jacob", thereby also acknowledging that he had no right to receive the blessing, and that he was actually unworthy of it because of his earlier lie. Jacob overcame through perseverance in faith and confession of his sins.

After his confession at Peniel God did bless Jacob, but not as Jacob - he now became Israel. He received the blessing as one who had both struggled and overcome in faith. He had struggled with God and with men and had overcome. That was the reason for his new name (32:28). "Israel" means something like: God rules, or: may God rule, or: warrior of God. It is better, however, to deduce its meaning from the context.

2. God Reveals himself as Sovereign, Present and Life-Giving God

In his turn, Jacob asked God to reveal his Name, but God did not comply; he remained sovereign. In his all-powerful way he himself determines when and how he will reveal himself. Jacob's victory at Peniel did not mean that God was in his debt. It only meant that Jacob had moved God to mercy through his confession and faith. God was still the absolute sovereign, and Jacob the absolute dependent. Jacob had to realise that he only knew the revelation in part, and that he had to resign himself to whatever God revealed in his sovereign freedom. The rest he had to leave to God, and wait patiently. So far patience had not been a characteristic of Jacob's life.

At Bethel Jacob had been convinced of God's presence. At Peniel his conviction became even stronger. He named the place Peniel because he had seen God face to face without dying (32:30). Previous to his encounter with God he had believed - like all his contemporaries - that one had transcended the limits of this existence when one saw God. It would no longer be possible to return to this life.

The Lord reveals himself to be a life-giving God in Jacob's history, as in that of Abraham and Isaac. He is indeed the Holy God, and mortal man is afraid of his presence. But he is also the God of life-giving personal fellowship. This even applies to man in his sinfulness, but only if he confesses it, like Jacob had to do. Jacob was saved even from physical death by this life-giving God: he would soon change the heart of Esau so that he would not want to kill his brother (33:4 et seq).

3. Jacob as a New Man and Father of the People of the Covenant

Jacob emerged from the struggle at Peniel as a new man. He received a new name, signifying a radical change in his life. He put off his old life of self-assertion, and was raised with a new life, in a sense a resurrection life.

The new name later became the name of the people of the covenant which originated with Jacob. Abraham was the father of all the believers. God had first established the covenant with him, and had given him the promises. But Jacob also has a special place in the history of the covenant, because of the struggle of faith in which he overcame. The name was not intended to be one of pride and boastfulness to the people of the covenant. It was much rather intended to be a lasting reminder of what had happened at Peniel. The existence

of the people of the covenant was only due to God's life-giving power. Like Jacob, they also did not deserve it, and had to answer to it through a resurrection life, characterised by a sense of sin and submission by faith.

This name was also a lasting warning to the people of the covenant against the grave danger to which Jacob had yielded, and which continues to threaten all believers: to attempt one's own execution of God's plan of election because of a selfish attitude. By doing this, believers actually steal that which God indeed intended for them, just like Jacob. Believers should, therefore, not try and take hold of what is intended for the future. They have to realise their unworthiness before God and live in complete dependence on him. They have to be fully available to his service and await him.

The name Israel also contains an encouragement for the people of the covenant to persevere in their struggle, like Jacob at Peniel. They have to believe that God himself delivers from death, but only if there is a sense of sin and submission by faith.

4. Notes

1. Vriezen (1966:429) indicates that Jacob's victory points out the non-demonic nature of this history.

23. JOSEPH: GOD RULES THE LIVES OF MEN AND NATIONS (GEN 37-49)

1. Joseph is Chosen by God, but the Choice is not Dealt with in Faith

God chose Joseph, the son of Jacob, to great service. This choice was made known to him in dreams (37:7,9). Neither he nor Jacob dealt with this in faith. Joseph was very smug about his dreams (37:10). He was also a tell-tale, and acted like a spoilt child. He was favoured by his father, because he had been born to him in his old age (37:2,3), and, therefore, received no help from him in finding the right attitude. Both of them eventually had to pay dearly for these shortcomings. Their conduct was the cause of jealousy among Joseph's brothers. They hated him and wanted to kill him (37:20), but in the end sold him as a slave to the Midianites (37:28).

The conduct of his brothers also revealed their own weakness. They could not claim any magnanimity for their own part, but hated their brother intensely. They were not wronged by God's choice of Joseph, but were unworthy of his choice.

2. Jacob Gives Joseph up to Death, but Receives him Back

Joseph's brothers told their father that a wild animal had devoured his son. In this way, Jacob practically gave his son up to death. He was very sad, and refused to be comforted: "No, he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave, to my son" (37:35). When he eventually received the news that Joseph was still alive, it was as if he had received him back from death (45:26-28).

To a certain extent, there was a great resemblance between what happened to Joseph and what had previously happened to Isaac on Moriah. But there was also a significant difference: Abraham himself had had to kill his son. God had tested his belief in God's life-giving power. Abraham's belief in resurrection had been revealed on Moriah. Jacob did not have to kill his own son. In this history, the emphasis is on God's actions, on the fact that he gave Jacob a life that had been lost to him. Both accounts, however, reveal that God's way of salvation passes through death.

3. The Lord himself Protects Joseph and Makes him a Great Man

The Lord protected Joseph and executed his plan of election, already announced in Joseph's dreams. Genesis 39 recounts how Joseph was taken to Egypt, and immediately gives the reason why it was going so well with him: "The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered". This fact is repeated like a refrain in chapter 39 (39:2,3,21,23; cf also verse 5).

In Egypt, the Lord placed Joseph in a difficult position, in a crucible, but he learnt fast. The Lord saw to it that

Joseph emerged purified - he extracted something deeper from this erstwhile boastful tell-tale than was considered possible, humanly speaking. Because the Lord was with him, Joseph proved himself to be a noble man, pure of heart and able to resist even the most tempting of sins (39:7-10).

Later, when they were reunited, Joseph did not treat his brothers in a revengeful way. He was not blinded by human conduct, but recognised the hand of God in the events. God had done it in order to preserve lives - thus Joseph set his frightened brothers at ease (45:5; 50:15-21). He invited them to join their father in Egypt. He had first thoroughly tested them (42-44). Step by step, he guided them towards recognition of their earlier murderous intentions as well as repentance (42:9 et seq, 21-23 in particular). They were also persuaded to plead for their brother Benjamin with their father (42:37; 43:9). In this they revealed a totally different attitude from their earlier cruelty against their brother.

4. The Lord Reigns Both Over and Within All, Including the Nations

In this history, the Lord proved himself to be the ruler of all things and events. He rules in such a wonderful way that he even uses injustice to reach his objectives and to bring things to a good conclusion. First it was the injustice Joseph suffered at the hands of his brothers, and then the injustice concerning the wife of Potiphar. In this way, Joseph was sent to jail, where the Lord caused great things to happen through him. He showed himself to be a God who knows man out and out, including his subconscious and his dreams. This applies to the dreams of the baker and the cupbearer, as well as Pharaoh's. The Lord was able to explain the dreams himself, because he determines all things, the course of events, and nature with its clouds and rain. He even let Joseph become the viceroy of Egypt (40, 41).

These events also illustrate that the history of God's people cannot be separated from that of the surrounding nations. It took place within the greater framework of national and international events, all of these interwoven with the particular history of God's people. Abraham's family were members of a chosen and separate people, but they were not isolated. Believers are not of the world, but indeed in the world, and are called to be shining lights in this world.

The Lord saw to it that the chosen family was kept alive throughout the long famine, a strange land providing in all their needs. The Lord indeed delivers from need and death.

5. Joseph Receives a Wonderful Blessing

Jacob blessed his sons when he lay dying, and Joseph received a wonderful blessing: "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed flexible, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers" (49:22-26). Joseph was a blessing to others, and he himself received a rich blessing, because the Lord was with him and he lived with the Lord.

Joseph also lived to see both his sons receive a rich blessing. Even though they were partly of Egyptian descent, they were fully accepted within the covenant circle. They would even play an important role in the later history of Israel, and would receive the status of two tribes, namely Ephraim and Manasseh.

6. Notes

1. The history of Joseph strongly resembles wisdom literature. This does not, however, detract in anyway from the logical position of this history in the context in which it occurs (cf Van Selms, 1967a:182).
2. Compare Von Rad (1962:440,454) on the conviction of the fact of God's presence, but also the concealed nature of his action in this history.

24. END OF THE HISTORY OF THE PATRIARCHS: ALIENAGE AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE FUTURE (GEN 49,50)

1. The Deepening Mystery of God's Way with his People

It had already been a mysterious matter that Abraham had had to remain a stranger in the promised land. The mystery now deepened even further. Jacob had to leave the promised land and become a stranger in a foreign country. Something of this mystery can be recognised in Jacob's words to Pharaoh: "The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers" (47:9). But God himself saw to it that Jacob did not become despondent and confused about it. He appeared to Jacob in a vision at night and introduced himself as "God, the God of your father" (46:3). With this, he reminded Jacob of the promises he had previously made regarding the promised land. He added to it: "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." In this way the Lord ensured that the chosen family remained alive during the long famine. They went to a foreign country, but this country provided for them in their need.

Even so, an unsolved mystery remains, which becomes even more evident when the Lord's words to Abraham at the time of the covenant's establishment are considered: "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years" (15:13). The meaning is clear: Jacob's descendants would eventually be ill-treated in Egypt. With this history the nature of God's way of salvation would become even more evident. His way of salvation not only means that he gives his people life by avoiding death, but it is actually a way of life-giving out of death (cf chapter 27).

2. Jacob Blesses his Sons

The history of the patriarchs closes with Jacob as a stranger in a foreign country, but it does not close on a sad note. On the contrary, believing expectations and beautiful perspectives on the future are revealed in the blessings Jacob pronounced over his sons, and in the requests of Jacob and Joseph that they be buried in Canaan.

Before his death, Jacob had the privilege of blessing his sons, each receiving his own special blessing. It included both past and present, as well as guidelines regarding the future. Not all the sons received a blessing in the original sense of the word. Some received negative words, like Reuben, the firstborn. In those times, the firstborn was considered to be his father's "might, the first sign of [his] strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power" (49:3). Reuben, however, was removed from his position of honour because of having had intercourse with one of his father's wives. It is possible that he had done it to prove his status, or else to strengthen his claim to it, like a new king inheriting his predecessor's harem. Simeon and Levi also were the recipients of harsh words regarding their future, because of their violent conduct in the past (49:5-7).

This last task of Jacob also brought along a lot of pain. His end was troubled, just like his life had been. It interprets something of everyone's lives: joy in life does not mean the absence of hardship, pain or sorrow, but the ability to transcend all of these in the spirit.

God presented Jacob with a panoramic view of the future. Light and joy determined the atmosphere of Jacob's announcements. He indicated Judah as the prince and royal sovereign of his brothers (49:8-12). He called out: "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" (49:10). In some translations the phrase "to whom it belongs" reads "until Shiloh comes". Jacob's words constitute a prophecy regarding the kingship in Israel; the kingship would only be instituted much later, and beginning with David would be exclusively linked to the tribe of Judah. But Jacob's prophetic spirit seemingly also had insight in the remote future, and included him in whom the dominion of Judah would be fulfilled. The great messianic King would come from this tribe (cf Isa 9:1-6; 11:1 et seq).

3. The Sovereign, Elective Work of God in Jacob's Blessings

God's elective grace is strongly emphasised in Jacob's prophecy regarding Judah and Joseph, as well as that

concerning Ephraim and Manasseh. God cannot be dictated to, or held to human standards, in his work of grace. He remains sovereign at all times. Joseph dominated the last part of the history of the patriarchs. Humanly speaking, he was the "hero". Despite this fact, it was Judah who received the primary blessing. Judah had not been one of the principal characters up to this point; his only major role had been to plead with Jacob for the safe return of Benjamin from Egypt (44:18 et seq). It was because of God's sovereign and elective work that Judah received this special place in Jacob's blessing. Jacob did not pronounce this blessing over his favourite son. In his love, God had shaped Joseph through hardship and suffering to become a noble and powerful figure. He had made him a shining light to his family, and had used him for a great task. But in his free and sovereign work he now continued with Judah.

God's elective grace was also demonstrated when Jacob blessed Joseph's sons. Again it was not the elder of the two brothers, Manasseh, who received the blessing, but Ephraim, the youngest (48:14). That was the way it had happened in Jacob's own life too. It is untrue, however, that God always prefers the younger above the elder, or the poor above the rich. The patriarchs themselves were well off. Judah, chosen to be the actual ruler, was neither the youngest nor the firstborn. God cannot be bound.

4. Jacob's and Joseph's Funeral Wishes

Both Jacob and Joseph declared their immutable faith in God and his promises. They wanted to be buried in the promised land, thereby indicating their belief that the Lord would eventually fulfil his promises. They also wanted to be buried in the family grave (49:29 et seq). They believed that the bond with God and other believers could not even be broken by death.

With the closing of the history of the patriarchs, the book Genesis also closes. This book, the book of the origin of all things and of man, the book of life, ends - rather ironically -with death: "So Joseph died...". It is a reminder of the sad refrain so strikingly characteristic of man's life (5:1-32; 11:32; 25:7,8; 35:28,29). The results of sin committed in the Garden of Eden are still spreading. It has the last word in the history of Genesis and in the life of every man.

Despite this, Genesis ends with hopeful expectations. With Jacob and Joseph a new dimension is added to the refrain of death. They wanted to be buried in the family grave. Their vision transcended death and included the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham (12:3). Those promises had been concrete: offspring, a land and, as can already be seen here, continued life after death in some way or another.

5. Notes

1. Compare Vriezen (1966:478) on various kinds of messianic expectations.

II INCEPTION AND FORMATION OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL (EXODUS - RUTH)

25. MOSES CALLED AND PREPARED FOR HIS TASK (EX 1-6)

1. Moses is Saved from Death, Shaped and Prepared

Jacob's descendants had multiplied and become powerful in Egypt, and Joseph had been forgotten by the Egyptians. The Egyptians now feared that the Israelites would become too powerful for them, or would join Egypt's enemies in fighting her. They, therefore, oppressed the Israelites and forced them into hard labour. The Israelites built the store cities of Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh. Because the oppression did not have the desired effect, the working conditions of the Israelites were made even harsher. Eventually the midwives were ordered to kill all Israelite boys at birth, and when even this did not have any effect, the order was given to all the people of Egypt (1:1-22).

In this history, God would show that he rules and that he saves his people even through death. His plan of salvation is eventually carried through by means of Moses. As a little boy, Moses had also been saved miraculously from death under the conditions mentioned above. In this regard there is a striking resemblance between Moses and the people of Israel. This resemblance encompasses the very origins of the people of Israel, when Abraham had been called out of the security of his parental home and God had made a new beginning in Sarah and him, despite their inability to have children and their old age. It also includes the rescue from Egypt, where Israel, as a people, was in effect dying in slavery.

The child Moses was saved by a wonderful "coincidence", and by none other than one of Pharaoh's own daughters (2:1 et seq). God also employed Pharaoh, who was seeking the downfall of Israel, to prepare Moses for his task. After having lived with his own parents for a number of years, Moses was then raised by the Egyptian princess. The Egyptian royal court was a centre of learning, art and literature. Since ancient times Egypt had always maintained a very high level of civilisation. It was also one of the great world powers. In this way Moses was exposed to the international world and international relations. As a member of the group of slaves he would have been excluded from all of this. God was preparing a great leader and statesman for his people at Pharaoh's own court (Acts 7:22).

Moses never became an Egyptian at the court, however, but retained his love for his own people. Once he even defended an Israelite against an Egyptian and killed the latter (2:12). He thus took the matter into his own hands. He had to learn self-denial and to await God's time. Because of this murder he was forced to flee for his life. Forty years later he was still in Midian - as a shepherd.

2. Moses is Called for his Task

Humanly speaking, the possibility that the Israelites could be saved by Moses was now lost. As a young man, Moses had had the idealism to do something like that. He had also had possibilities, like contacts and friends at court, perhaps even important international contacts. At that stage, however, the Lord had not yet called him. Now he was an old man, far away from the Egyptian court and removed from all possibilities; he was no longer prepared for such a task. And yet it was at this stage that God called him! In so doing, he showed that the salvation of Israel was in the first and primary instance his own work. It was not a mere human heroic act. The Lord had all the initiative, and he would follow through with it. When God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, he was unwilling. He raised one objection after the other: he would not know what to answer when the Israelites would ask him the name of the God that had sent him to rescue them (3:11-13); he would not know what to do if it turned out that they would not believe him or even listen to him (4:1); he was not eloquent (4:10); the Lord could send anyone, as long as it was not Moses (4:12).

The Lord called Moses because he was moved by the plight of his people, and because he was thinking of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (2:23-25). On the one hand, he knew the sorrows of his people, and was not far from them, but quite near. On the other hand, he revealed himself as the holy God, separated from man by an unbridgeable distance. This explains his appearance to Moses in a burning bush that did not burn out. It spoke of his consuming holiness. Moses was also ordered to take off his shoes: he was standing on holy

ground (3:5).

3. God Carries Through his Calling of Moses

As stated above, Moses was unwilling to do what God called him to do, and raised all kinds of objections. Even when God enabled him to do miracles with his staff, he was still not convinced. His greatest concern was his lack of eloquence. This was a clear indication to all subsequent generations that what happened here was nothing else than God's initiative and work of salvation. It was not a heroic act by Moses, neither did it require any special abilities of him. God himself called Moses, prepared him for his task, equipped him for it and provided help for him by sending along his brother Aaron. The Lord never withdrew his demand that Moses, and no one else, go to Egypt (4:14-17).

Moses was, therefore, well-equipped when he went to Egypt to persuade the Israelites to leave with him. The Lord prepared Moses and also prepared the way: when Moses arrived in Egypt, the people believed him and worshipped the Lord because he had seen their misery (4:31). However, the Lord never gave Moses the assurance that there would not be problems along the way and that everything would go without a hitch. On the contrary, he clearly told Moses that Pharaoh would not be willing to let the Israelites go (3:19). Quite soon it also became clear that the Israelites were a half-hearted people, without any perseverance, but with a lot of reproaches. Pharaoh refused Moses's request; he made their hard labour even harder. Even at this first setback, the Israelites called down the judgement of the Lord on Moses and Aaron because they had made Pharaoh and his servants hate the Israelites (5:19-21).

Moses had to approach the matter in faith in God's ability to work wonders (3:20). When he had called Moses, the Lord had revealed himself to him as Yahweh, the God of saving presence among his people (3:14,15). He had assured Moses that he would be with him (3:12).

4. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:169) on God's control of historical events.

26. GOD REVEALS HIMSELF WITH THE COVENANT NAME YAHWEH (EX 3,6)

1. A New Revelation

In Egypt, the Israelites had become so ignorant regarding God, mostly because of the slavery that they were in need of a new revelation of God. One of Moses's objections to the fact that he had been chosen to lead Israel out of Egypt was also about that. He was afraid that they would ask him the name of the God of the fathers who had sent him.

When he called Moses, God identified himself as Yahweh (3:13-15). According to Exodus 6:2 he told Moses "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by the name the Lord (or Yahweh) I did not make myself known to them." These words probably have to be understood in the following way: the name Yahweh had been used previously, but its full depth and significance only became clear from the time of Moses. Genesis 4:26 mentions that the name of Yahweh had been called on from the time of Enosh, the son of Seth. It is not clear, however, whether the name Yahweh as such had been used by the people. It could mean that they had started to worship God, he who later became known by the name Yahweh.

2. Revelation and Concealment

The name Yahweh was God's covenant name in particular. He linked this name to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with whom he had made the covenant and to whom he had continually repeated it. This name was revealed to Moses when he was called to lead Israel out of Egypt, the same Israel with whom God would make the covenant at Sinai. This name would be firmly linked to the covenant throughout Israel's history.

The name contained elements of suspense. This is made evident by the way in which God identified himself

as Yahweh to Moses. He refused to name himself at Moses's request, and simply said: "I am who I am". He thereby maintained his absolute sovereignty and determined both what he would reveal of himself and how he would do it. This corresponded to his demand that Moses remove his shoes (3:15). With this demand God emphasised his holiness, inaccessibility and incomprehensibility. He could neither be defined nor confined by a name. His name could not be used like a magic charm to bring about salvation for the Israelites. God remained free in his actions; personal trust in him was required.

On the other hand, though, God did comply with the request of Moses to identify himself by means of a name. For this, he used part of the elusive words "I am who I am", namely "I am". This name indicated his omnipotence, his immutability and trustworthiness, his living and life-giving presence among his people and his bond with them. He who is and who had caused everything "to be" (Gen 1) would save his people in a life-giving way from their sorrow and hardship (2:23-25; cf also 1:13 et seq). In the name Yahweh both divine concealment and revelation are contained.

3. The Living God in a Living Bond with his People

God used three names with which to identify himself: "I am who I am", "I am" and "Yahweh" (3:14,15). All three of them are variations on the same basic Hebrew word, meaning "to be". The word "to be" not only indicates that God exists, but also that he causes everything else to "be" (Gen 1), and that he is present. He is not present in the mere passive sense, but actively and dynamically: protecting, saving, comforting. The Lord encouraged Moses, for instance, by saying that he would "be" with him when he would go to rescue his people (3:10). In the same way God often comforts and encourages other people, including the people of Israel (Isa 43:5).

The name Yahweh, therefore, contains the idea of association. This is indicated even more clearly by God's explanation of the name Yahweh: he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (3:15). There had been a personal bond between God and them, a bond maintained by himself. Even though they were no longer alive, their descendants were bound by the same bond as fulfilment of the promises of the covenant (2:24). God is, therefore, also the living God; people die, never to be seen again, but not God. He remains, throughout all of history.

The name Yahweh is a proper name. The fact that God could reveal himself by means of a proper name is related to the fact that he is a personal God. This is strongly emphasised in the Old Testament. The name of God should, therefore, also be approached in a strictly personal manner, devoid of all ideas of magic, as if the name has a magical power and can be used for purposes of magic, like placing a curse on someone. Yahweh is different from the gods of the nations.

4. Writing and Pronouncing the name Yahweh

In the past, the name Yahweh was for quite a long time written and pronounced as Jehovah. This was caused by confusion regarding the vowels of the word Adonai, which means "Lord". It had been the practice among later Jews not to use the name Yahweh, because of an exaggerated respect for it. In the written tradition, however, the consonants of the name Yahweh had been retained, but they had been supplemented by the vowels of the word Adonai. It had been quite clear to every Jew that Adonai was supposed to be read, and not Yahweh.

When the study of the original languages of the Bible, namely Greek and Hebrew, was revived in the sixteenth century, this fact was no longer known. The word Yahweh was read with the vowel signs written underneath it. This led to the pronunciation Jehovah, which is no longer allowed in academic study today. (The first vowel of Adonai, the "a", is reduced to a neutral sound because of its accompanying consonant. It is pronounced like the "a" in "embassy". Knowledge of the Hebrew language is required, however, to understand the changes in the vowel sounds under influence of the consonants.)

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint that originated before the time of Christ translated the word Yahweh with the Greek word for Adonai, namely Kurios (which means Lord). This translation was followed by the authors of the New Testament.

In most English translations of the Bible, including the New International Version, the name Yahweh is rendered in capital letters, LORD, in order to distinguish it from the translation of Adonai, or Lord. (The name Adonai, as a complete word, not merely the vowels of another word's consonants, also occur independently in the Old Testament.) The combination "Adonai Yahweh", also to be found in the Old Testament, should be rendered "Lord LORD" according to the convention mentioned above, but as this is rather awkward, the New International Version simply renders it "Sovereign Lord".

5. Names of God

The three most common names for God in the Old Testament and their meanings can be summarised as follows:

Elohim - God - Creator;

Adonai - Lord - Owner, Keeper, Ruler;

Yahweh - LORD- God who made a covenant with Israel.

These names are all synonyms - they do not each indicate only one characteristic of God; they do, however, sometimes emphasise one characteristic, without separating it from the others. They are also often used in a very general sense, without any emphasis on any particular characteristic. The names Adonai and Yahweh in particular have become interchangeable. As with all synonyms, the context determines whether the distinguishing meaning is emphasised or not.

Sometimes the names are used in combination (like Adonai Yahweh, as mentioned above). Various other names are also used for God, like Almighty; Yahweh Sabaoth (rendered "Lord Almighty" in the NIV, but traditionally translated as "Lord of hosts"); El, which simply means God; El Shaddai, also rendered as God Almighty.

6. Notes

1. Vriezen (1966:192-198) rightly says that the characteristic element of Old Testament revelation is included in God's introduction of himself to Moses (Ex3:13et seq). His answer to Moses amounts to the following: "Whoever I might be, I am here – trust me!". The Biblical revelation is that God himself comes to man, and that he introduces himself to man in terms of what he is to man, in whatever way. The God who reveals himself, also introduces himself in the first person, and he speaks a word referring to an action. God is revealed here only in terms of his "actuality", not in terms of his essential being. He is not a lifeless abstraction, a "Being" or "eternal essence" in the Greek sense of the word. He is always actual. Israel was conscious of the miracle of God's being in his unapproachable transcendence and his presence.

2. Regarding the above, compare also Von Rad (1962:180-185). He adds that this name never became a mystery to Israel, to which only the initiated had access. On the contrary, Yahweh had to be revealed to the world. "Israel... was not in a position to appropriate the name of Yahweh and make it the object of an abstruse mythology or of speculation: it was to be understood only in historical experience."

3. Compare Eichrodt (1961:187,191,206,208) on this matter. He says, among other things, that the divine name announced by Moses resembled the earlier Hebrew names of God in a striking way. It was opposed to everything that was merely naturalistic and part of the phenomenal world, a true characteristic of El-worship. By his own deed of giving himself a name, God chose to be described as the definable, the determinate, the individual. In this way Israel's faith resisted an abstract notion of the Divinity, as well as a nameless "foundation of being". Both the intellectualistic and mystical notions of God were rejected. This God was out of reach of any human pressure, and retained his freedom over against the people who worshipped him.

4. Terrien (1978:109-119) says that Exodus 3 gives no indication that the holy ground was still holy after the appearance of God. The holiness was not a permanent attribute related to topography, as in the case of Bethel, Shechem or Mount Zion. Hebraism is also not a religion of the eye, but rather of the ear. The name of God implied divine presence, but it also awarded this presence the quality of elusiveness. God is *Deus revelatus atque absconditus*.

27. THE MEANING OF MOSES AND THE EXODUS IN REVELATION HISTORY (EXODUS)

1. The Exodus as Motif in the Old Testament

The exodus from Egypt is of the greatest importance in the history of Israel, and forms a motif throughout the

Old Testament. The poets of the psalms, the prophets and many others continually refer to it as God's greatest act of salvation in revelation history. It remains the best example of God's omnipotence and his saving grace. It was also the lasting basis for Israel's pleading with God to show them mercy and deliver them from their need. They also praised God for this act whenever he delivered them from other needs at other times in their history.

In the history of the exodus, God showed himself to be the God who has all the power over nature and all phenomena, no matter how mysterious they might be. He also has all the power over a mighty people like the Egyptians and their ruler. God even rules the inner life and will of man.

The event of the exodus is also inextricably linked to the Ten Commandments. Whenever the Ten Commandments were read, the exodus was mentioned in its introductory words. It also occupied an important position in Israel's confession of faith (Dt 26:8). To this day, the exodus forms part of the introduction to the Ten Commandments and is still to be heard whenever the commandments are read (Ex 20:2). Even future salvation is described in terms of the exodus in the Old Testament.

2. The Exodus Speaks of Life-Giving and Reconciliation

God had promised Abraham, when he had made the covenant with him, that he would be made into a great nation (Gen 12:2). This would have had to happen in Egypt, because only a family had existed in the time of the patriarchs, not a nation. Even so, the inception of the people of Israel did not occur in Egypt. They were still a group of slaves with a matching mentality. Even after their rescue from Egypt, it still showed. Every time they met with disaster in the desert, they tended to avoid any responsibility. They wanted to return to Egypt where they had suffered, true enough, but where their masters had also supplied them with food.

It seemed as if the opportunity for becoming a nation was passing in Egypt. It was exactly the same as it had been with Abraham - the opportunity for Isaac to be born had also been going by. Israel's situation in Egypt was becoming more and more like a barren womb. There also the birth of a people and the continuation of the covenant line would only be possible through divine intervention.

The Israelites had also become ignorant about God in Egypt, and they were dying with regard to their religious life (Eze 16). God even had to give them a new revelation and identify himself with a name, Yahweh.

God brought about the birth of his people by means of a miracle. He divided the waters of the Sea of Reeds so that the Israelites could move out of the death of slavery to freedom. But salvation required reconciliation. The Israelites themselves were deserving of death; they were only saved because the lamb of Passover was slaughtered for them. It was, therefore, still exactly the same line of revelation as it had been when Abraham had been called, and when Isaac had been born and sacrificed on Moriah. It was the way of reconciliation and life-giving. As with Abraham, it required faith. The Israelites were only saved if they believed and put the blood of the lambs on the door-frames of their houses.

God did not save Israel merely because they were oppressed and poor; neither did their salvation merely comprise physical, material and national salvation and prosperity. God formed a people or congregation to serve him in faith. This fact contradicts horizontalistic theology which negates the perspective of faith and service to God. This kind of theology is primarily concerned with social and political salvation, and not so much with serving God as Person in a direct and conscious way.

The exodus was not a mere national event in which the people were politically liberated and went to live in another land, where they could live out their own national aspirations. It was primarily a religious event with important religio-ethical aspects to it. Before Israel entered the land, they first went to Sinai, where they received the law of God as foundation of their life with God and their fellowmen. They also first had to complete their journey through the desert, where they learned that to be a saved people did not mean that everything simply happened according to their wishes and desires. It was much more a matter of serving God in self-denial and perseverance.

Israel left the desert after they had received the law, which enabled them to live righteously. They then went to Canaan, where they had to do everything they had learned. The nations, whose measure of unrighteousness

had become full, were driven out.

3. The Meaning of Moses

Moses was a man of extraordinary calibre, and of particular importance in revelation history. He was a true, subservient and patient leader of his people, and was superbly equipped for his task. His Egyptian education had equipped him in a wonderful way, and God had also given him special abilities when he had called him in Midian.

Moses was a mediator of the covenant between God and his people, and held three offices at the same time, although not one of these in the usual sense. He held the offices of prophet, priest and king. Through him God revealed his divine will (Ex 20; Hos 12:14). Moses interceded for the people with God (Ex 17,32) and he also ruled them (Ex 18).

Moses announced the Ten Commandments, the basis of the covenant life of God's people, still being read to his people on a regular basis to this day.

The work of Moses was so important that future events of salvation was often described in terms of it (cf Isa 63:11; Jer 23:5-8; Mic 7:15). On the Mount of the Transfiguration it was Moses and Elijah who appeared together with Jesus. Together they represented all of the Old Testament dispensation, namely the law and the prophets (cf Mai 4).

Even so, Moses was a mere man in God's service. Neither the history of the exodus nor that of the journey through the desert is described in terms of human heroics. It is the history of the way in which God continued his dominion over his people, despite all stumbling blocks. These included stumbling blocks within Israel, even within Moses. Moses was the "man of God" because he had been called by God and served God (Dt 33:1; Jos 14:6). He is also called the "servant of the Lord" (Jos 1:1). This indicates a very intimate relationship with God, and is also used for the prophets. But Moses was only a man, as is emphasised by the expression "the man Moses" (Num 12:3). The Bible does not portray him as a perfect man, but as one who also sinned against God. That was why he also could not enter the promised land. There is indeed no one who does not sin (1 Kings 8:46). The true mediator would have to be greater than even this great figure.

4. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:175-176) on the central and confessional nature of the Old Testament expression "Yahweh rescued his people from Egypt". Israel never spiritualised this fact. Compare also Vriezen (1966:209).
2. Compare Stek (1978:133-165, especially 148,149): the way of salvation in the Old Testament is not out of Egypt and into Canaan, but out of Egypt into the desert – and to Sinai! The way is: out of Egypt into the desert, to teach Israel that man will not live of bread alone, but of every word that comes from the mouth of God.
3. Von Rad (1962:188): "The decisive and pre-eminent factor in the coalescing and aggregation of the many traditions was their common attachment to a place (Sinai), and to a person (Moses)."
4. Zimmerli (1972:49,51-53 = 1978:59-64) says that Israel did not experience God's confirmation of his existence in a hidden spiritual experience, but rather in concrete historical salvation, and, therefore, sang a song of praise (Ex15:21). Victory in battle was regarded as a gift of God. However, Yahweh was not a mere God of victory to Israel; victory was always a gift of God, and never an obligation. God's confirmation of the existence of his people was also not measured merely against victory or defeat of Israel as political entity. A prominent feature of apocalypics is that Yahweh's final victory does not require any military assistance of his people. Yahweh will act on his own.

28. THE EXODUS AND THE PASSOVER (EX 6-15)

1. The Lord Reveals himself to be the Absolute Ruler of Nature and of Man

When Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go, the Lord caused several natural wonders to occur in order to persuade the Egyptians. With this he proved himself to be the absolute ruler of nature. Some of these miracles could be imitated by the Egyptian magicians, but those done by Moses and Aaron were still determinative

(7:10-12,20-22; 8:7; 8:18). Whatever mysterious forces there might be, the Lord controls everything and can be trusted fully. The Egyptian magicians were powerless to change anything when the wonders that occurred in Egypt caused the Egyptian people terrible suffering. With these wonders, the Lord also demonstrated his power over the Egyptian deities, because the Egyptians worshipped their gods as gods of nature, particularly of the Nile. The Lord proved that he alone is God.

The Lord not only rules external forces, but also the heart of man. He made Pharaoh stubborn, so that he would not allow the Israelites to go (4:21). Through this refusal, God created an opportunity for himself to prove his power with yet more miracles. The fact that the Lord made Pharaoh stubborn should, however, not be interpreted as if Pharaoh would have been willing to let the Israelites go, but because of the Lord's intervention became stubborn instead. What it does mean is that the Lord was able to include Pharaoh's emotional condition in his divine plan, and to hand him over even more to his own innate stubbornness (8:15; 7:22).

The Lord also tested his people to see whether they really accepted him as their absolute ruler who had total control of their lives. He, therefore, determined things in such a way that the work of Moses and Aaron did not lead to immediate salvation, but at first to even greater suffering (5:6-9). In this way the Lord tested them to see whether they would trust him under all circumstances and await him, even when it was not going well at all. At the same time he caused it to be a learning experience for them. Faith demands that one should give priority to God's dominion and will, and that one should willingly submit to it, even if this were to bring about hardship. Religion first of all means that we are God's servants, not that God is our servant. The kingdom of God is of primary importance.

2. The Israelite Firstborn will not Die

God's miracles in Egypt were building up to a climax. It became more and more intense, closer to the people themselves, until even their firstborn died. The Israelite firstborn, however, were saved by the Lord. By saving them, the Lord showed grace to all of Israel, because the firstborn were the actual representatives of the families. The fact that the angel of death only passed the Israelites if they had put blood on their door-frames indicates that they too were deserving of death. It was only by the grace of God and his covenant faithfulness that they were saved, through atonement of their sins, symbolised by the blood of the slaughtered lamb.

The salvation of the Israelites was, therefore, a deliverance from death. It was a rescue out of the death of slavery and the death they deserved together with all people and nations. All people are sinners and deserving of death.

The Lord required the Israelites to believe, and their faith had to be manifested in a deed: they had to slaughter a lamb and put its blood on their door-frames (12:7,23).

The way in which the Lord rescued the Israelites from Egypt also indicates that their salvation was brought about by letting them pass right through death. The Lord did not lead Israel from Egypt along the usual route, but brought them to the Sea of Reeds, where they could go no further, even though they were being pursued by the Egyptians. This means that God practically led them right into the jaws of death. This history shows that believers must submit themselves to the Lord in the full assurance that he is the God who determines both life and death.

3. Passover is Celebrated and Established as a Lasting Ordinance

The Lord commanded the Israelites to take a year-old lamb (from either their sheep or goats), slaughter it and roast it - head, legs and inner parts - over the fire. Everything had to be consumed by the following morning (12:5-10). They had to hurry, and complete everything while being dressed for their journey. It was the Passover of the Lord (12:11,12). The word Passover has to be understood literally: when the Lord came to strike down the firstborn of the Egyptians, he passed over the Israelites (13:23).

For seven days they had to eat unleavened bread, made without yeast, and on the first and seventh days were forbidden to do any work (12:15-17). This was to become a lasting ordinance. Every year at Passover, the history of Israel's salvation had to be recounted to the children (12:17,24-27; 13:8- 15). The children had to be raised under impression of God's saving work.

The Lord maintained his claim on the firstborn without change. The firstborn of everything and everyone in Israel belonged to him alone and had to be sacrificed to him. He gave a substitute in the place of the firstborn of people, however. They had to be redeemed with a lamb (13:1,2,13). No human sacrifice was allowed. Later in the history of Israel, the Levites took the place of the firstborn of Israel, and they were completely devoted to the service of the Lord. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is seen to be the true Passover Lamb, sacrificed for the sins of man on Golgotha (1 Cor 5:7; 11:23-26).

4. God Saves his People at the Sea of Reeds and is Worshipped in Gratitude

At the Sea of Reeds the Israelites found themselves threatened by death. The Lord divided the water of the sea, however, and allowed them to go through on dry ground, while the Egyptians pursuing them, drowned (14:9-12,17-31). In this way the Lord revealed himself as the almighty Saviour of his people. Again his salvation follows a way right through death. The rescue at the Sea of Reeds, therefore, sheds light on the true nature of salvation. For the New Testament believer, it is embodied in baptism (1 Cor 12:1,2).

After the miraculous rescue and the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, Moses and the Israelites sang an impressive song of praise to the Lord (15:1 et seq). The purpose of the Lord in all salvation is to glorify himself (14:17). His dominion is of such a nature that he moves people in their hearts and brings them to true gratitude and worship.

5. Notes

1. God's miraculous actions can even be seen in the ordinary run of events. Miracles prove that the created order is dependent on the will of God, who created it. It should not be understood in terms of negation of the laws of nature (cf Eichrodt, 1967:162-167).
2. Compare commentaries on the concept of sanctuary in Exodus 15:17.

29. GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL AT SINAI - BACKGROUND AND NATURE OF THE COVENANT (EX 19)

1. God's Covenant both Resembles and Differs from Covenants of the Time

There are great similarities between God's covenant with his people made at Sinai and political treaties dating from the second half of the second millennium B.C. Regarding the Ten Commandments, commentators indicate the following similarities (although there is considerable difference of opinion on this topic): the words "I am the Lord your God" correspond formally to the introductions to vassal treaties, even though these introductions often differ according to the nature of the treaties. The vassal treaties had historic prologues, similar to the words "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery". Then followed the stipulations or regulations, corresponding to the commandments. Usually there were also stipulations that the treaty document be preserved and read at regular intervals. The Sinai covenant does not contain such stipulations, but other passages mention that Moses did write down the words and ordinances (24:3), even that God himself wrote down the Ten Commandments (Ex 24:12; 32:15,16; 34:28). The vassal treaties made provision for witnesses, but God does not need witnesses. He swears by himself (Gen 22:6). That is the reason why it is not part of the covenant document. In other passages the heavens and the earth are indeed (metaphorically) called as witnesses against the unfaithful Israelites (Dt 31:28; Ps 50:4; Isa 1:2). The vassal treaties further contained blessings for keeping the treaty and curses for breaking it. In the Ten Commandments, elements of this are to be found at the end of the second, third and fifth commandments, as well as at the end of the so-called Book of the Covenant (Ex 23:20-33).

The Lord conformed to an actual practice of the time in order to make his own covenant with his people easy to understand. With this phrasing of his covenant, the sovereignty of the Lord received special emphasis, because the "great kings" used to force their will on their subordinates in the vassal treaties.

The covenant relationship of the Lord is, however, also essentially different from the vassal treaties. Unlike the "great kings", the Lord had indeed saved the lesser party in his covenant, not to serve his own interests, but

in free grace. He only wanted the best for his people, and bound them to him personally as his only true people. On the other hand, he also bound himself to them as their God.

2. God is not an Equal Covenant Partner, but Has All the Initiative

The making of the covenant at Sinai was based on a divine bond that already existed. Before this covenant, God had already been at work - both choosing and saving - on his people. He had led them out of Egypt in a miraculous way, carried them on eagles' wings and brought them to him (19:4). Deuteronomy 7:7,8 formulates it as follows: "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt." The making of the covenant was, therefore, characterised by the fact that the Lord had all initiative and was no equal partner. He had saved his people, had called them to him, and it was he who was now formulating the stipulations of the covenant. God was speaking alone. The share of the Israelites only comprised their affirmation of the stipulations and their obedience to it. This was characteristic of the covenant relationship throughout the Old Testament. God can, therefore, not be called a "covenant partner", except with the greatest reserve. This limitation is often not respected adequately enough in modern theology.

3. God's Choosing Grace is to be Answered with Confession of Faith and Covenant Obedience

God's affection for his people and his choosing and saving work among them were neither mechanical nor automatic. It concerned a personal relationship and involved responsibility – thus the covenant with his people. At this making of the covenant they had to personally accept his choosing work and openly confess it. They had to listen to God and keep the covenant.

The divine choice, therefore, did not prevent God from making demands to his people. On the contrary, he said: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (19:5). The relationship could be terminated if the Israelites did not keep the covenant. Human responsibility was not cancelled, but this human element was essentially the result of the divine initiative and work. It was God who had brought them to him, even before he placed the responsibility on them (19:4).

4. God Maintains his Authority over Israel and the Nations

The Lord made it clear to Israel that he could have chosen any of the nations, had he wanted to. The whole earth belongs to him (19:5). As creator, he has a right to it. He also had particular authority over Israel, because he had led them out of Egypt. They were his special possession out of all nations. They were, therefore, to be a holy nation to him (19:6), which means that they had to be set apart for him and be devoted to him. This had to be embodied in the keeping of the covenant.

Their being set apart did not mean total isolation from the nations. On the contrary, they were to become a kingdom of priests. They had a priestly task regarding the nations: through them, the nations were to be reconciled with God. A missionary task is, therefore, implied here.

In this way, God maintained his authority over Israel and the nations. He was still the ruler with authority over all. The making of the covenant was also characterised by an atmosphere of divine holiness. There was a great distance between God and Israel (19:10-12), but also an intimate bond.

5. The Covenant Comprises an Intimate, Personal Relationship

The intimate bond between God and his people was also a personal one. The Lord reminded Israel that he had led them from Egypt and had brought them to him (19:4). He had saved them so that they could be with him and live with him. This life was to be one of obedience to the stipulations of the covenant. God was also present in person at the ceremony where the covenant was made, and the representatives of Israel "saw God" (24:11).

God wanted his people to be a "kingdom of priests". This not only meant that Israel, as a people, had a missionary task, but also that each and every Israelite was to have royal dignity and be a priest. They were

only able to serve God directly through knowledge of his covenant stipulations and personal fellowship with him.

Believers, therefore, all have a personal relationship with God. But they also form a unit, "the holy nation". They are a kingdom that bears witness to God's dominion over them and all nations.

6. Notes

1. Vriezen (1966:183-185): the covenant between God and his people did not place the two "partners" in a treaty relationship, but in living fellowship, initiated by Yahweh, by which Israel was firmly and completely linked to him, made dependent on him and confronted with the requirements of the covenant stipulations.

2. Compare Eichrodt (1961:295,296) on the important, yet relative and serving function of Moses in the interpretation of the will of God.

3. Vriezen (1966:403-405): Israel was conscious of the fact that God, in a wonderful and covenant way, was responsible for its existence as a people (Dt26:5-19). This people did not originate on the basis of a social contract, neither on the basis of a natural kinship of blood, but rather on the basis of a spiritual bond with those who worship Yahweh. Israel was preserved even when its national existence was destroyed. It could be called "*qahal*" (gathered men in the Deuteronomistic literature and Chronicles) and "*eda*" (congregation of the people, gathered around the Tent of Meeting). Compare also Eichrodt (1961:294).

4. Compare elements (1978:77-102) on the special relationship between God and Israel throughout the Old Testament, forming the basis of the characteristic account of the knowledge of God.

5. Compare Eichrodt (1961:41-69) on the theory that the ideas of divine choice and covenant, and closely related to these, divine legislature and the central position of moral requirements, became the decisive motifs of the Israelite view of history. The prophets placed special emphasis on love and loyalty, and resisted formalism and one-sided development of cultic aspects.

30. THE GOD WHO GIVES THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (EX 20:1,2)

1. The Lord First Confers Benefits and then Makes Demands

Before giving the Ten Commandments, God first identified himself. He revealed both who he was and something of his nature. By doing that, he also shed more light on his name, Yahweh. He said: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex 20:2). His commandments are always to be viewed from this perspective.

He revealed himself as the God who first confers benefits and then makes demands. It is always like this: first the divine gift, and then, on the basis of the gift, the demand. Even in the Garden of Eden it had been like that: first the permission to eat from all the trees in the garden, and then the ban on the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Compare also the history of Abraham: Abraham had received Isaac by means of a miracle, and then came the demand that the boy be sacrificed. The same motif also characterised the making of the covenant at Sinai: God had first saved the Israelites from slavery, and then came the demand that his commandments were to be kept.

The people were not required to make a covenant with an unknown God, but with a God they already knew through experience. He was their God, the God who had saved them and who looked after them. The covenant was, therefore, not a plunge into the unknown. This is also not the nature of Biblical religion, unlike the way many contemporary theologians and philosophers tend to understand it.

From the above it is clear that the commandments were not mere obligations forced on the Israelites, experienced by them to be a burden. On the contrary, the Israelites could and had to obey the commandments in gratitude to the Lord because of his saving work through which true life had become possible for them. Throughout the Old Testament, the commandments were seen to be a matter of gratitude and joy (cf Ps 1, 19, 119).

2. Through his Saving Work in History, the Lord is Known

In his introductory identification of himself, God said that he was the Lord, who had brought Israel out of Egypt. He revealed himself as the God who made himself known in history by saving his people. He is not

merely a God of isolated laws, morals or ideas, nor a God who is only active in the cult or worship service, who wants to be acknowledged and worshipped only there. He wants to be known as the God who acts in history and determines history. He has dominion over all of life with all its elements.

The Lord also revealed himself as the God whose saving work is life-giving. He is the God who called a people to life out of the death of slavery in Egypt. Later in history, with the terrible catastrophe of the Babylonian exile, the Israelites would also find themselves in a foreign country. The prophet Ezekiel understood the exile in terms of the death of a people, and the return from exile as a divine, life-giving miracle (Eze 37).

3. The Lord Works through Choice and Covenant

In the Lord's introduction of himself, both divine choice and covenant were included. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." He bound himself to his people with an intimate bond. The words "your God" speak of intimacy and a covenant relationship. This bond was based on God's gracious choice. God had first chosen the Israelites, then saved them from the death of slavery and bound them to him. He was now going to establish all of this in a covenant with them.

Contrary to this, other gods were mostly the products of their worshippers' choice. These were the worshippers who either adopted a god or invented one for themselves. The god belonged to them. The God of Israel, however, had proved with a concrete act of salvation that he had chosen his people, and that they belonged to him, not the other way round.

God established his authority over his people in a covenant with covenant stipulations. By keeping the covenant stipulations, they were bearing witness to his authority over their lives. The stipulations were written down and read at regular intervals. Thus the Lord revealed himself in history and in his Word.

4. The Lord is a Personal God, and the Commandments are Based on a Personal Relationship with him

The Lord is a personal God who insists on a personal relationship between himself and believers. In the commandments, he addresses every believer personally by formulating the commandments in the singular: "you shall..." or "you shall not...". The commandments are of a personal nature. In short, they are about man's relationship with God and his fellow man. The commandments are summarised in the so-called first and second tables. The first concerns man's relationship with God, and the second man's relationship with his fellow man. The second follows the first and is based on it: man's relationship with God determines his relationship with his fellow man. Only when the first is in order, the second can also be right. The prophet Amos, for instance, ascribed the oppression of the poor in his time to the fact that the people had forgotten God and had, therefore, broken his covenant.

Other covenant stipulations were also given, but throughout the Old Testament the Ten Commandments are understood to be the quintessence. The essence of the covenant and of religion was not sought in numerous ceremonial and cultic regulations, even though these were important as such. The most important aspect, however, was that which concerned the relationship with God and one's fellow man.

Because the covenant stipulations are by nature very personal, and are indeed primarily concerned with determining the personal relationship, the name "law" is not at all adequate. The term "law" evokes the idea of impersonal legal regulations. The Hebrew word is "torah", and means authoritative teaching.

5. The Lord is Absolutely Sovereign and Demands Self-Denial and Obedience

The covenant stipulations in the Ten Commandments are radical in their demands. They do not give any indication of punishment for disobeying the various commandments, but simply say: "you shall not...". The reason for this is God's absolute authority and his total claim of man as a person, without any reserve. Man belongs to God - he speaks like a father to his child.

But believers are sinners, and are always inclined to disobey the commandments. Most of the commandments are, therefore, formulated in the negative "you shall not...". It is as if God wants to warn believers against this inclination and draw them towards himself, his service and his grace.

6. Notes

1. Kraus (1972:377): the translation "I am Yahweh your God" instead of "I, Yahweh your God", is confirmed by Psalm 50:7 where it can only be interpreted in the first sense.
2. Vriezen (1966:242-246): God also wants to act through official representatives. In specific situations, he wants not only to warn, prescribe or help, but also to teach and educate through priest and prophet. This is lasting.
3. A striking characteristic of the Decalogue is that the moral requirements are strongly linked to the basic religious commandments. This results from the conviction that moral conviction is inseparably linked to serving God.
4. Zimmerli (1972:41 = 1978:50): in later literature (especially in parts of Deuteronomy) the covenant is linked more strongly to the pronouncement of the commandments at Horeb, while the demanding side of God's will is also emphasised more strongly (cf also Helberg, 1990:46-55).
5. Compare Westermann (1978:154-164) regarding the relation of commandment, law and God's saving action, through which the law may not be absolutised and viewed as the way to salvation.
6. Compare Childs (1986:50) on the relation between knowledge of God and the will of God, which has content and demands obedience.

31. GOD'S TEN COMMANDMENTS (EX 20)

The Ten Commandments are always to be understood against the background of the intimate bond with God as he has revealed himself in the introduction. The commandments concern the personal relationship with God and one's fellow man (cf the previous chapter).

1. The First Commandment: No Other Gods

In the first commandment the Lord is defined as the only God, as opposed to the polytheism of the other nations and the veneration of a multitude of spirits. The Bible is radical in its demand that only God be worshipped. This is at the same time a source of security and stability for believers. There is not a multitude of gods with conflicting interests who all have to be served. The worshipper does not have to become confused and entangled; there is only the one God. The believer can confidently surrender himself to this God. God is the God who guides the whole world, determines history and saves his people, as is confirmed by the introduction's mention of the fact that he led his people out of Egypt.

The first commandment is closely related to the introduction. This commandment, therefore, also implies that God is the only saviour. He alone has to be trusted for any salvation, no one and nothing else, not even one's own people or oneself.

The first commandment forms the foundation of all the others: there is only one God, and he claims man totally: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Dt 6:4,5).

2. The Second Commandment: No Images of God

The second commandment speaks of God's transcendence. God is distinct from man, as creator is distinct from creature. Man may, therefore, not make an image of God. God cannot be defined or confined. The true believer should also not have any need for an image of God, because God's relationship with man is of such a personal nature that he is depicted in man himself. Man himself is the image of God. This commandment, therefore, implies, on the positive side, that man should live in such a way that it will be clearly evident that he himself is the image of God.

God is not a static God who can be confined within an image, but he is the God who determines history. Those who want to confine him to an image are punished to later generations, right into future history. Contrary to this, however, obedience is answered to a much greater extent: he shows love to thousands of those who love him and keep his commandments.

3. The Third Commandment: No Misuse of God's Name

The third commandment is first of all directed against misuse of God's name in formulae of magic and sorcery. These practices were very important in the ancient heathen cults. God's name cannot and may not be used as something from which a magic force emanates (Dt 18:9-14 provides an overview of such practices. Cf also the discussion on the name Yahweh in chapter 26). Like the first commandment, this one brings special freedom for the believer. It saves him from the grip of spiritual slavery in which he could be caught by so-called exorcists.

This commandment also concerns the use of swear-words, because its intention is to bring harm to someone or to accomplish something by means of an authoritative word (a swearword is not merely an empty expletive!).

It is also a transgression of this commandment to use the name of the Lord frivolously or as a mere stopgap. God is a holy God and his name should be used with holy reverence.

The positive demand of this commandment is to call upon God, and to worship, praise and thank him (Ps 27:6,8).

4. The Fourth Commandment: Keeping the Sabbath Day

The fourth commandment demands that the sabbath day be kept. On the seventh day man should rest and no work may be done, because God also rested after his creative work. Man must follow his creator in this, because he is the image of God. Man should reflect something of God in his actions and live like a child of God. The third commandment forbids the manufacture of an image of God, but this commandment orders man to be an image of God.

Deuteronomy 5 also gives a version of the Ten Commandments. There are a few differences, however, with the version of Exodus 20. One of these concerns the motivation for the sabbath commandment. Deuteronomy 5 does not motivate the fourth commandment with God's rest after creation, but with his work of salvation by leading Israel out of Egypt and slavery. This dual motivation is made possible by the fact that Israel existed on the basis of both creation and redemption. In Egypt, the Israelites had been slaves - it had not been possible for them to rest and thereby to follow the rhythm of creation. Their rescue out of Egypt had in effect been a rescue out of death, a recreation enabling them to conform to the aim of creation. They were enabled to serve God with their lives and work, and to rest on the sabbath day, both physically and spiritually.

The redemption motive for the sabbath commandment does not contradict or nullify the creation motive by any means, but rather deepens its meaning and lends it an even more joyful element. The same applies to salvation in Jesus Christ. It does not cancel the command to rest on the sabbath, but deepens it. The Christian can have even greater joy on the day of rest. He does this on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because God's great work of salvation in Christ sheds a radically new and wonderful light on the Christian's life and work. The old dispensation has passed, the new has dawned.

5. The fifth to the Tenth Commandments: the Right Relationship with one's Fellowman

The fifth commandment demands obedience to parents that is people who exercise authority. Authority in the home is the pre-eminent basis of an orderly society. A promise is linked to keeping this commandment: a long life in the promised land. It implies, at the same time, that disobedience to parents and other people in positions of authority will result in the loss of the fatherland.

The sixth commandment forbids murder. This includes any offence against another person, as well as hate and vindictiveness. On the positive side, it demands that one should love one's neighbour, seek what is best for him and protect him.

The seventh commandment forbids adultery. It includes all immorality by words, acts or thoughts. It demands true love for the opposite gender, a love directed at only one person. It is love for the person himself (or

herself), and not a mere need to satisfy one's desires.

The eighth commandment forbids theft. To steal is to take something for oneself which actually belongs to or should go to someone else, by means of either blatant or very subtle dishonesty. It also includes covetousness, as well as wastefulness and extravagance. It demands that one further the interests of one's neighbour.

The ninth commandment forbids false testimony as well as gossip. It demands that one love the truth and protect the honour and good name of one's neighbour.

The tenth commandment concerns the most intimate and hidden part of man: his desire. Even in one's desires one may not transgress any of the commandments. Desires also fall under God's dominion and are brought to judgement. One must be totally committed to keeping all God's commandments.

6. Notes

1. Eichrodt (1961:74,75): the Mosaic law differs from the laws of the other ancient nations in the emphatic way in which the law is related to God, while any transgression of the law is at the same time an act of impunity against God. This concerns matters like absence of juridical casuistry (unlike the codex of Hammurapi, for instance); a deepened moral sense - unlike in Babylonia, capital punishment for transgression concerning property, was abolished; moderation of the cruelty of punishment; rejection of class differences in the exercise of justice; raising of moral sense in the relationship between the sexes - the position of the woman was better protected than elsewhere, and according to Genesis 2 the woman is equal in status to the man; the primacy of the commandment to love God; transcendence of the letter of the law, in order to help one's neighbour when he is in need of help. Compare also Childs (1986:56,57).
2. Eichrodt (1961:221-227) makes the following remark on the first commandment: "the essential factor in the emergence of a vital and moral monotheism was not philosophical speculation, but the experience of God's close living reality".
3. Bright (1953:24-30): the monotheistic religion of the Old Testament was unique. Other unique elements were based on monotheism, such as divine choice, covenant, historical consciousness and eschatological expectations.
4. The other nations bridged the distance between worshipper and god by means of statues; for Israel, the presence of God was given in the personal revelation of God.
5. The personal nature of the kingdom of God is clearly presented in the fifth commandment. The requirement of obedience to authority is organic, and begins with natural relations - those of the family. These are the most basic.
6. Compare Childs (1986:63-83) for a discussion of the individual commandments.

32. THE HOLY GOD MAKES A COVENANT WITH A SINFUL PEOPLE (EX 20-24)

The actual making of the covenant is described in Exodus 24, but 20:18 et seq describe matters important to the understanding of the covenant, and these are, therefore, also described here.

1. Inability of the People in the Covenant Relationship with God

The Israelites revealed an inability to tolerate God's presence and his direct word. When they observed the thunder, the lightning, the sound of the trumpet and the smoking mountain they trembled and told Moses: "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (20:18,19). They were afraid, and this fear brought distance between themselves and God, who was revealing himself to them. The same situation had occurred at the time of the fall in the Garden of Eden; it is actually quite characteristic of man's reaction to God's presence throughout history.

It is ironic though, because it happened precisely when God came with his living words, those words that form the foundation of a living covenant relationship with him. It was his living and life-giving words and presence that caused the people to fear that they would die!

2. The Called, Priestly Kingdom Shows an Opposite Character

The people's attitude and reaction to God's announcement of the commandments interpreted their character as called, priestly kingdom. It was full of irony. There was tension between what the people had been called to

be and what they were making of it.

They had been called to be priests and kings, people with direct and personal knowledge of God through knowledge of his covenant stipulations and personal fellowship with him. However, they preferred a less direct and less personal way: somebody else had to do it for them and on their behalf - Moses. They preferred the way of mediation, and were heading for a way of increasingly impersonal mediation. Soon they started to make images of the Lord; they wanted him to be visible and tangible, but at the same time impersonal and far away! (Cf the discussion of the breaking and restoration of the covenant.)

The result of this attitude was that the people were increasingly robbing themselves of their personal religious freedom. They were supposed to be a kingdom of priests, characterised by royal dominion and freedom, as well as grateful devotion to God. Distance was now created between God and them, and they were bound to an increasing number of external acts and prescriptions. This less personal relationship with God also caused them always to complain about God's way with them.

3. The Making of the Covenant Characterises it as a Covenant of Blood

The Ten Commandments are followed by the so-called Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22 to the end of chapter 23; according to some scholars, it only begins with chapter 21). The Book of the Covenant explains how the Lord's justice should be embodied in everyday relationships and actions. In a certain sense it is an application of the Ten Commandments. It is primarily concerned with mutual love and respect for people and their possessions.

The making of the covenant was also characterised by tension. On the one hand there was an enormous distance between God and the Israelites. On the other hand, there was intimate fellowship between them. This fellowship was based on the reconciliation worked by God himself in the making of the covenant. The covenant had the character of a covenant of blood (24:8). The people were sprinkled with sacrificial blood, in order to bring about their purification and reconciliation with God. The covenant could only be made and kept in this way.

It happened as follows: half of the sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the altar. It was the substitute for man's blood or life. Reconciliation was brought about in this way and the relationship between God and man, broken by sin, was restored. By being sprinkled on the altar, the sacrificial blood became the principal or source of new and holy life for the people. The same blood could of course not be sprinkled both on the altar and on the people. It was, therefore, divided in half, one part for the altar and the other for the people.

The making of the covenant was as good as creating life out of death. The existence of God's people was here typified as one which had gone through death and had been pervaded by God's grace. It was then returned to the people as a life renewed by God's grace. ("In the blood sprinkled upon the altar, the natural life of the people was given up to God, as a life that had passed through death, to be pervaded by his grace; and then through sprinkling upon the people it was restored to them again, as a life renewed by the grace of God" - Keil.)

4. A Direct Encounter with God

The making of the covenant also involved a direct encounter with God. At this event, the representatives of the people saw God and ate in his presence. Just like when the Lord appeared to Isaiah, no complete description of God himself was given here (cf Isa 6:1). The emphasis was on his glory. The given description, however, emphasises that the God of Israel was seated above the heavens, in great glory and undisturbed blessedness. There was an imposing distance between God and man: "...and [they] saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" (24:10; cf also Eze 1:26; Dan 7:9,13).

Even though God lives in undisturbed eminence, he wants his people to share in this blessedness. Even though the elders saw him, they did not die - unlike one would expect of sinful people who had seen God (3:6; 19:12; 33:20). Not only did they remain alive, they also ate in his presence.

The above involuntarily reminds one of Holy Communion. There also God's people have fellowship with him

after reconciliation have been brought about through the blood of Christ (Mt 26:28; Hebr 12:18-24; cf Ex 24:8). The true meaning of the covenant is revealed here.

The Lord wrote the covenant stipulations on tablets of stone (24:12), as symbol of their intransient power and value. The disappointing reaction of the people to God's personal words added another meaning to the letters on stone. The letters were typical of the actual relationship between the people and the commandments. It remained on the outside, written on stone, not on the heart, unlike God's original purpose and plan with it (Jer 31:31-34).

5. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:239-241) on the *kevod jhwh* (the power or glory of Yahweh).
2. Compare Zimmerli (1972:58-68 = 1978:70-81) on the presence of Yahweh: in the land, at certain places, through his "face", in the angel of Yahweh, in the Ark of the Covenant, in cult objects, and in his *kabod*.

33. AN UNDESERVING ISRAEL: THE BREAKING AND RESTORATION OF THE COVENANT (EX 32-34)

1. The People are Slavishly Dependent

The people linked themselves slavishly to the human mediator that was Moses. While Moses was still on the mountain to receive the tablets with the commandments, they complained that they did not know what had happened to him. They felt deserted by the Lord when Moses was not with them in person. God's personal presence was not enough for them; they wanted both him and his help to be visibly and tangibly present. They, therefore, made an image of God in the form of a calf, like the other nations also did. It portrayed God as the embodiment and source of life and fertility.

The Lord had just revealed himself to his people as a God who wanted to be remembered for his work of salvation (19:4; 20:2). One of the most important elements of faith is indeed to await the Lord with confidence, as exemplified in the psalms. The people, however, forgot their God in a very short time. This also happened regularly during the journey through the desert and is typical of sinful man.

2. The People Want a Passive God who is Mechanically Near

When the commandments were announced, the people showed that they neither could, nor wanted, to tolerate the Lord's immediate presence (20:19). They did want to have God near them in a visible and tangible way, but then mechanically so. In effect, this meant both impersonal and far away! This history is a warning not to depersonalise and mechanise the relationship with God, especially concerning the priestly and cultic service. It was Aaron, who later became high priest, who made the calf! Later on in history, the priests would often lead the people in formalism. The Lord despised this (Jer 2:13 et seq; Jer 7:4 et seq).

This deficiency was not, however, in the priesthood as such, but in the typical sinful nature of man. Man made something else of the priestly service than what God had intended. Aaron committed this sin even before becoming high priest, and also at the request of the people.

The Lord wanted his people to be a kingdom of priests (19:6), that is, all of them were to be kings and priests. This implied that everyone had to obey God's will. In a sense, they were to be democratic, but they made a caricature of it: the will of the people became the standard of their conduct, not God's commandments. To this day, this kind of democracy is typical of man.

3. Moses Intercedes for the People

The covenant relationship between God and his people was characterised by the breaking of the covenant right from the beginning. From the beginning there was a need for intercession and reconciliation, even for a mediator who could intercede in a substitutionary manner for the people. The covenant relationship was

characterised by divine punishment because of man's sinfulness, but also by divine patience and forgiveness.

When Moses came from the mountain with the tablets of stone and saw the calf Aaron had made, he broke the tablets as symbol of the broken covenant. Assisted by the Levites, Moses punished the people, after which he interceded for them in a striking way by presenting himself in their place to be punished by God (32:30 et seq). Their sins were unforgivable, and yet he pleaded for them. He was even willing to let himself be blotted out of the book of life in their place. The expression "the book of life" probably originated with the custom to note the names of all the citizens of a town or city in a big book. Moses's proposition amounted to nothing less than that he himself be cut off from the fellowship with the living God and excluded from the kingdom of those who lived before God! He had a wonderful love for his people, but never defended their sin. He always struggled with them over their sin. This example is a good one to be followed by all of us.

Human mediation is totally inadequate for fulfilling God's demand for justice. The Lord, therefore, did not respond to Moses's impossible proposition. On the contrary, he said: "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (32:33). Despite this, he did answer the prayer of Moses by granting partial reconciliation. He upheld justice, but also revealed his grace; the day of judgement was postponed. The people were allowed to go to the promised land, and would even be accompanied by the Lord's angel. In the end, the Lord restored his covenant that had been broken in such an unfaithful way (chapter 34).

4. The Lord Withdraws from his People, yet Reappears a Number of Times

The Lord decided to withdraw his personal presence from his people, instead of destroying them because of their stubbornness (33:3,5)! It was a terrible irony - the irony of our sinful existence. Sinful man cannot and will not tolerate God's dominion and personal fellowship, and yet he knows that without it he is doomed. The people, therefore, began to mourn.

Again God's grace displaced his wrath; he revealed himself in the most intimate way possible, by means of a mediating figure. He withdrew from the camp, but appeared to Moses in a pillar of cloud outside the camp (33:7 et seq). There he would speak to Moses in a very intimate way, face to face, as if talking to a friend. He did not even speak to the prophets in this way. Moses was a unique mediating figure.

Moses pleaded for the Lord's personal presence during the remainder of their journey. This presence was the factor that made Israel unique. It was also symbolised in the Tabernacle. Without the Lord's presence, the Israelites could not continue on their journey (33:12 et seq), was Moses's plea.

5. Moses Sees the Glory of the Lord

The Lord revealed himself in such an intimate way to Moses, that the latter had enough confidence to ask the Lord to see his glory. This was partially granted (33:18 et seq).

God emphasised, however, that his revelation to Moses was undeserved grace. No one could claim it as his right, not even Moses. God was absolutely free in his revelation: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (33:19). Moses could not see God's face, for no one could see it and live. God is far too holy and man too sinful: it would be like someone looking straight into the sun without any protection for his eyes. Moses could, however, see God from behind. Someone's inner being is revealed in his face, and his back only presents an incomplete and external representation of this inner being. Moses would, therefore, only see the reflection or shadow of God's glory as he passed him.

Moses and Elijah were the two people who saw the glory of God. They were the representatives of the law and the prophets (Mai 4:4,5; Mt 17:3). This indicates that seeing the glory of God was an essential element regarding the law (*torah*) and prophets. That was what the Lord had envisaged for his people. The people, however, deviated far from this purpose.

6. Notes

1. Eichrodt (1961:292): in the Old Testament, people's relationship with God is linked to the conduct of someone specially called and

equipped to act as intermediary. This idea is of lasting value for the nature of their concept and worship of God. The work of the intermediary was a strong reminder of the distance between God and man.

2. Compare also Chapter 32.

34. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ISRAEL'S CEREMONIAL AND VARIOUS OTHER KINDS OF LAWS (EX 25 ET SEQ; LEV)

1. The Cult as Expression of the Covenant Relationship

The cult of Israel was a symbol and expression of the living, personal covenant relationship between the Lord and his people. This is indicated by the fact that the cultic ordinances and prescriptions are described directly after the account of the making of the covenant (Ex 25 et seq). On the one hand, the cult was extremely important; on the other hand, however, it had no significance whatsoever if it was not an expression of the right covenant attitude. Then it became powerless formalism and the Lord despised it. Both the making and keeping of the covenant were only made possible by atonement through sacrificial blood (Ex 24:8). However, it was not the sacrificial or cultic acts as such that brought about atonement, but God's grace. Atonement of sins could not take place without personal intercession and pleading on the basis of the covenant. This is what Moses did for the people (Ex 32:11 et seq; 33:13 et seq).

2. The Priestly Ministry as Ministry of Atonement and Devotion

There was an unbridgeable gap between the holy God and sinful man. But God bridged this gap in a wonderful way. He brought about reconciliation by means of something outside of man. In this way, he made devotion to him a possibility. The sacrificial ministry was a symbol of this. The priestly ministry was both special and necessary because it was a ministry of this reconciliation. The sacrifice symbolised that salvation and life were brought about through death. This was made especially clear by the annual sacrifice of atonement on the Day of Atonement. On this day, two goats were sacrificed for the people - the one slaughtered, and the other freed. The slaughtered goat symbolised that the people actually had to die because of their sin, while the freed goat symbolised that they would live by God's grace and reconciliation.

It was not the priest himself who brought about atonement of sin - he was only a minister of the reconciliation. On the Day of Atonement he also had to offer a sacrifice of atonement for himself.

3. The Relationship Priest-Prophet-People

The history of the exodus and the giving of the law, including the cultic laws, was dominated by the figure of Moses. His person was much more important than any office.

He never held any of the offices of prophet, priest or king, even though he showed characteristics of all of these. He was called and equipped by God for all three functions that would later develop into three separate offices. The most important function of his ministry was the prophetic one - the great messianic Prophet would, for instance, be a prophet like Moses (Dt 18:15,18). Since the priesthood was a mere part of the total service of Moses, it had to be done in coherence with the whole, especially the prophetic service. Only in this way could the priesthood maintain its vitality and not deteriorate into formalism.

The priestly ministry also had to be performed in consideration of God's purposes. His people were supposed to be a kingdom of priests. The ministry of the priests was, therefore, intended to bring the people to individual, personal responsibility and obedience, as well as personal fellowship with God.

4. The Sanctuary - God's Dwelling Among his People

God gave Moses clear instructions concerning the construction of a sanctuary, because he wanted to dwell among his people (Ex 25:8; 29:45,46). This tabernacle or tent consisted of the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Only the priests were allowed to enter the Holy Place. In the courtyard stood the bronze altar for burnt offerings, as well as a bronze basin where the priests were to wash their hands.

The following articles were placed in the Holy Place: a lampstand with seven branches, symbol of the light that is with God, in which the believer shares; the table with the bread of the Presence on it, symbol of life preserved by God; the altar of incense, symbol of believers' prayers.

In the Most Holy Place stood the ark of the covenant, symbol of the divine throne. Here, in secluded, majestic darkness, God sat on his throne. All the other nations placed images of their idols on thrones, but this throne in the tabernacle was empty (Isa 45:15). The King of kings cannot be portrayed by means of an image. On top of the ark was the atonement cover, sprinkled with blood on the Day of Atonement, symbol of atonement for the sanctuary and the people (Lev 16:15 et seq). Two cherubim were placed on the atonement cover, as symbol of guarding the access to God, cut off by sin (Gen 3:24). In the ark were placed the two stone tablets of the Testimony. They symbolised God's dominion over his people. (Later on, a jar containing manna, as well as Aaron's staff - the one that had blossomed, was placed in front of the ark.) Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, but only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he had to offer a sacrifice there.

The sanctuary was a symbol of God's holiness and distance, but also of his presence (cf Isa 6). In true worship there was holy respect for God, but also a confident approach to him.

5. Holy People, Acts and Times

Apart from the priests (discussed in par 3 above) and the high priest, the Levites also worked in the sanctuary, especially in a serving capacity. From the time of the kings, the Levites played an important role in temple singing, that is to say, in the praise of the Lord. The Levites - especially in later times - did not belong exclusively to the tribe of Levi.

Among the holy acts, offerings, prayer and praise had a special significance. The offerings can be divided into four groups: firstly, the burnt offering, sacrificed totally on the altar. The emphasis in the case of this offering was on total commitment to God. It was brought daily, both in the morning and the evening, for the people. The second offering was the fellowship offering. It expressed the peace and friendship between God and the believers, as well as among believers themselves. The third one was the atonement offering, expressing atonement of sins, and which included the guilt and sin offerings. The first was intended as restitution of damage, the latter as atonement for wrongs done. The fourth kind of offering was that of the grain and drink offerings, which expressed gratitude to and worship of God.

Because of the personal nature of religion in the Old Testament, offerings and prayer went hand in hand. Offering was not a mechanical or merely technical action. Confession of sin, prayer and praise played an important role along with it.

The four most important annual festivals were: firstly, the Passover, linked to the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. At this occasion, the first fruit of the barley harvest was offered. In the New Testament, Jesus instituted Holy Communion in the place of the Passover. The second festival was the Feast of Weeks, seven weeks (or fifty days) after Passover, indicating the end of the harvest. This was also the day of Pentecost on which the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ was poured out. The third festival was the Feast of Tabernacles. During this feast, the Israelites lived in huts made of tree branches, commemorating their sojourn in the desert. The last one was that of the Day of Atonement, just before the Feast of Tabernacles. On this day, the high priest entered the Most Holy Place barefoot, and made atonement for the sanctuary and the people.

There were also the festivals of the sabbath cycle. These were: the sabbath on the seventh day of the week, the Feast of the Trumpets every seven months, the Sabbath Year in the seventh year and the Year of the Jubilee every fifty years (seven times seven). During the Sabbath Year all slaves of Jewish descent were freed, and the poor were free to harvest anything growing of itself on the fields. During the Year of Jubilee all pledged land and property were to be returned to its original owners. The religious and social laws, therefore, also paid attention to the plight of the poor. In this way, love for one's fellow man became concrete.

The holiness of the seventh day was a strong reminder that God is Lord of time, and that nothing, no matter how important it might be, should prevent man from regularly seeking fellowship with God. However, the

joyful character of the day of rest also teaches the believer that his God is a kind hearted Lord; he does not put a yoke on man which is too heavy to bear (Eichrodt, 1961:133).

The Canaanites practiced natural religion. Their gods were gods of nature, and their festivals were based on the cycles of nature and the agricultural seasons. Israel's festivals, however, were also related to the commemoration of God's actions in history. In their festivals, the Lord was worshipped as the God ruling everything, including history. He was the God who saved his people.

Israel had a multitude of laws regulating their religious, domestic and social life to its very fibers. This expressed the idea that their daily lives, to the finest details, were in God's service.

6. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:169) on the central meaning of the commandments and the establishment of a fitting cult in the origin and function of Israel as God's special people.

2. Compare Eichrodt (1961:167,444,476) on the important role of intercession regarding atonement; the absence of automatic or mechanical meaning of sacrifices and other cultic actions; the sovereignty of Yahweh in the answering of intercessory prayers.

3. Eichrodt (1967:380-383): there are different words for sin. The common basic meaning of these words is conduct contrary to the norm; it concerns the opposing directions of the will of God and the will of man. For the meanings of the words for sin, compare Kohler (1936:157-160), Vriezen (1966:451), Von Rad (1962:262-272), Eichrodt (1961:162): *chatat* (to miss the mark), *'avon* (to transgress, with emphasis on the moral aspect), *pesha* (to rebel, with emphasis on the will). Regarding sin and punishment, compare also Chapter 35.

4. Vriezen (1966:274-278; cf also 271-298 for a discussion of the cult and various festivals) mentions that the cult is not cosmic, but rather the means to fellowship. The cult in the Assyrian-Babylonian religion was the controlling means to preservation of god, world and man, and was intended to gain the favour of the divinity. The state was totally directed towards the cult. In Israel, however, the cult was intended to maintain the covenant fellowship between God and man. It was there for the purpose of atonement. The cult and temples were not related to creation, like in Babylon. In Genesis 1:28, at the time of creation, man was given a cultural mandate, not a cultic command. The cult had no cosmic meaning, but purely a religious meaning.

5. For Israel's neighbours, divine providence was primarily a matter of maintaining and restoring the present dispensation. There was no possibility of the current state of affairs being subject to a greater eschatological end, which would presuppose the eventual destruction of the present dispensation.

6. According to Eichrodt (1961:110), the Ark of the Covenant emphasised God's presence and his dwelling among his people, while the Tent of Meeting stressed God's inaccessibility. The latter indicated that God's self-communication was a sovereign act of his, "which [was] not at the beck and call of man".

7. Milgrom (1972:76): although illness was regarded as punishment of sin, a priest in Israel was not a doctor, like his unbelieving colleagues. In addition to the sacrificial cult, which included special offering sin times of epidemics (Num16:46;2 Sam24:25), the priests' only other responsibility was to act as quarantine officials in cases of skin disease.

8. Micklem (1953:11-13): an offering was basically a gift to God, a sign of self-sacrifice, an external symbol accompanying prayer. The worshipper identified himself with the life of the sacrificial animal, thereby giving part of himself to God, a part representing the whole. Offerings were intended as external expression of an inner, spiritual attitude (Ps 51:16,17).

9. Compare Eichrodt (1961:176): there was no place in Israel for mystic prayer, just as the God of the Old Testament was not a being resting content in his own bliss. The purpose of the believer was not the static concept of the highest good, but the dynamic fact of the kingdom of God.

10. Milgrom (1972:68,69,74): the cult of Israel also had the function of revelation, unlike the practice among the heathen nations, where it was the privilege of the priests. The purpose of the sacrificial system was revelation of the fact that God was with his people. However, unlike among the heathen nations, the idea that the cult controlled revelation was absent in Israel. God's revelation was always an act of his grace.

11. Vriezen (1966:280-282): the festivals were given in order to maintain fellowship between Yahweh and his people. In contrast with the festivals of the Canaanites, Israel's festivals were never naturalistic, or dedicated to increase of fertility. They were based on historical events and were agricultural festivals of thanksgiving.

12. The joyful character of the day of rest brings the worshipper to realise that his God is a merciful Lord, who does not over burden man (Eichrodt,1961:133).

13. Compare Von Rad (1962:272) and Eichrodt (1961:137) on cleansing, and also Eichrodt (1962:113,145) on the Urim, Thummim, Ephod and vows.

14. Compare Zimmerli (1972:79-84-1978:93-99) on the function of the priests.
15. Compare Westermann (1978:166-171) on the fact that Israel's worship service was not based on a revelation of God at an Israelite sanctuary, but rather on a revelation of God in the desert, on a mountain; Yahweh will not be bound, but is primarily the God of history.
16. Compare Westermann (1978:171-180) on the elements of the worship service: the sacred place, the sacred time, the accidental worship service, the actions and words of people in the worship service.
17. Compare Childs (1986:155-171) on the cult, among others: the sacred dimension of reality (sacred times: the festivals; sacred places: the tabernacle and temple; sacred objects; sacred personnel), the cult as blessing, and sacrifice and atonement.
18. Childs (1986:86-90) rightly criticises the viewpoint of a contrast existing between so-called ritual and ethical aspects of the divine demand, and the resulting development from the ritual to the ethical. The criticism of the Old Testament is directed at all human reactions intended to gain God's favour.

35. THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT: THE LORD CONTINUES WITH A COMPLAINING PEOPLE (LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, DEUTERONOMY)

1. Selfishness and Stubbornness

The Lord had called his people to be a kingdom of priests, obedient to his will. During their journey through the desert, however, it became increasingly clear that they still showed exactly the opposite attitude. Selfishness and stubbornness were the dominant traits among the ordinary people, as well as their leaders. The sons of Aaron, for example, did not obey the Lord's regulations strictly enough when they offered unauthorised fire before the Lord (Lev 10). In a certain sense, it was a repetition of Aaron's own earlier sin. It happened on the same day that Aaron had to bring his first offering as high priest. On the day when Moses had received the first set of stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them, Aaron had made the golden calf and had made the people worship it - in direct violation of the second commandment. Sin was deeply rooted in the generations. The Lord wanted to demonstrate that he would eradicate stubbornness among the priests. He punished Nadab and Abihu with immediate death, and they died without children who could take over their service (1 Chron 24:2).

The journey through the desert was characterised by constant complaints from the people, followed every time by the anger of the Lord: Taberah - complaints and a consuming fire (Num 11:1-3); Kibroth Hattaavah - complaints concerning a shortage of meat, greed and many deaths (Num 11:4 et seq); Hazereth - Miriam and Aaron opposing Moses (Num 12); Kadesh - first lack of faith concerning entry of the promised land, then arrogance and stubbornness (Num 13,14); rebellion staged by Koran, Dathan and Abiram (Num 16); Meribah - complaints about the excellence of Egypt (Num 20); Punon - impatience concerning the long detour around Edom, rejection of the manna and venomous snakes (Num 21). A bronze snake was placed on a pole, indicating the impotence of the snake. Those who were bitten had to look at the snake in order to be cured. Salvation here followed penitence as well as intercession by Moses, but only along the way of obedience by faith (cf also Jn 3:14,15). The journey through the desert was indeed difficult and made heavy demands on the people. However, this is often the way of faith. God confronted his people with a difficult test of their perseverance and gratitude. Israel failed the test, and in this they are typical of all believers, to this day.

The Lord acknowledged the leadership of Moses and Aaron in their respective positions. He also demonstrated that the priesthood was not a matter of dead formalism, but that it lived and grew and bore fruit. To this end, he caused Aaron's staff to be covered with buds, blossoms and almonds in one night's time (Num 17). In this way the life God wanted to give through atonement sprouted from Aaron's priestly service.

2. Insufficient Trust in God

Even Moses did not have sufficient trust in God, even though there was another reason for this than in the case of the people. Their continued complaints became an unbearable burden to him (Num 11). The Lord helped Moses in his despair, but also indicated that Moses had been sufficiently equipped for his task by the Holy Spirit. God then took of the Spirit that was on Moses and put the Spirit on seventy others who would in future be his helpers. The Spirit on Moses was, therefore, sufficient, but he became tired of making use of it.

It had never been the idea that only Moses would receive the Spirit, or that it would be linked exclusively to the sanctuary. The Spirit of the Lord also caused others to prophesy, both in the sanctuary and in the camp. Moses even wished that all the people could have been prophets (Num 11:19,25,26). This had also been the Lord's intention with his people (Ex 19:6), and was later clearly prophesied by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28).

Faith was required to enter Canaan. The report of the twelve explorers made it quite clear that entry into Canaan was impossible. It could only be different if it was kept in mind that Canaan was the land God had promised to his people. The explorers found a land that "does flow with milk and honey", that is to say, rich in agricultural products (cf also 16:13). However, the people who lived there were very powerful and their cities were fortified and very large. The Israelites were much smaller in numbers and also not adequately armed.

Ten of the explorers did not have sufficient faith and were of the opinion that the Canaanites could not be attacked. The people became afraid and discouraged and rebelled against Moses. They even planned to return to Egypt with someone else as their leader! Joshua and Caleb were nearly stoned because of their faith and trust in the Lord's saving presence, but the Lord saved them by letting his glory appear at the Tent of Meeting. He threatened to destroy his people and to make Moses into a nation greater than the Israelites. They were only saved because Moses interceded for them. He called on the Lord's power, patience and his covenant faithfulness. The nations could not be allowed to say that the Lord had left unfinished that which he had begun (Num 14:16,17).

His patience and covenant faithfulness forgave the injustice and transgression, even though he did not let it go by without punishment. He punished it even in the following generations (14:18). This history explains that true faith in God requires nothing less than that one would even surrender to death with the full assurance that the Lord can save from death and give life. In this, Joshua and Caleb were not disappointed.

In the end, the obstinacy of the people made Moses angry and caused him to stumble in his faith (cf also Ps 106:32). At Meribah he did not follow the Lord's instructions by speaking to the rock, but addressed the people and hit the rock instead. For this he was heavily punished: he would not be allowed to lead the people into Canaan as their mediator - and that after so many years of hardship, struggle and intercession. It is ironic that this was caused by Moses's handling of the same staff he had used so many times to save the people since the exodus. There is no mention of any power inherent in the staff itself. It was also not in the power of Moses to control the working of the staff. Only the Lord could determine that. The failure of Moses shows that no human being - no matter how patient, outstanding or faithful he may be - can ever be a true mediator for mankind. The people would drag him down in sin together with the rest of them.

3. God Continues his Dominion and Fellowship Despite Everything

Throughout the history of the journey through the desert, God showed himself to be a God of righteousness who always punished sin severely. His punishment was also not mere sporadic action against sins committed from time to time. It was focused and radical: the people would not enter the promised land, but would die in the desert.

Despite his severe judgement, the Lord still showed great patience and mercy: He always forgave again and made a new beginning with his people. He equipped the leaders of the people with his Spirit, Moses in particular, and brought about reconciliation and life for his people by means of the ministry of the high priest.

The journey through the desert was, therefore, characterised by human failure, to such an extent that there was no possible solution any more. That generation died without entering into the promised land. Even so, this is not the main emphasis of this history. The emphasis is on God's irresistible dominion. His sovereignty is clearly shown in his work that continued despite the death of his people and their mediator. Even death could not stop the fulfilment of the plan of God's dominion. He continued to be with his people, to dwell among them and to have fellowship with them - even though it was a people who had died and who rose in a new generation! Nothing could be seen in this people of the proposed kingdom of priests, but despite this, God remained underway with his people...

4. Notes

1. Compare Westermann (1978:102-109) on sin and punishment in the Old Testament, among others in the history of the people and of the individual, as well as on sin and forgiveness.

36. BEFORE THE PROMISED LAND: THE LORD IS THE RULER AND OWNER (NUM 22-25; DT 28-32; JOS 1-5)

1. Balaam: the Lord has Authority over People and Powers

Before Israel could enter the promised land, it was made clear that the Lord is the absolute ruler and owner of the land and all things. This was indicated by events just before the entrance, as well as a short time even before that, like the history of Balaam. Balaam was a magician from one of the other nations. The nations believed that magicians and sorcerers had influence over invisible things like spirits and demons, and in this way also over people's lives and events. Balaam was asked by the king of Moab to put a curse on the Lord's people. However, the Lord demonstrated that events are not merely the result of a game of power in which magic is an important element, but much rather of the personal decisions of the Lord himself. He is in control of everyone and everything - even magicians. His people could, therefore, trust him. Nothing could remove them from his protection. The angel of the Lord prevented Balaam from following his own heart and putting a curse on Israel. This was the same angel the Israelites had started their journey with; the Lord had remained true to his promises.

Balaam became a servant of the Lord against his will. His talking donkey was in a certain sense a mirror image of Balaam himself: Balaam acted in a very mechanical way, without interference of his own will-power. The Lord showed that his dominion is not merely external, but that he also controls the inner abilities of people. He even controls people who claim to be able to manoeuvre powers, like Balaam.

This event was also a warning that sorcery only leads to death. The senseless animal recognised the threatening angel who wanted to kill Balaam (Num 22:30), and thus saw more than the magician, who thought that he was able to see into and control the spiritual world. This kind of practice is powerless when confronted with God's dominion and totally blinds one. Balaam himself seemingly did not come to repentance and faith through in this amazing experience. He was later killed by the Israelites in their fight against the Midianites (Num 31:8).

The Lord's plan of salvation with his people was so unstoppable that he even made use of people and powers opposed to him to proclaim the future messianic king. Balaam uttered an oracle concerning the star coming out of Jacob (Num 24:17). This star - as was normal in the ancient east - indicated a king. Of this king Balaam said: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." In a preceding prophecy Balaam said of Israel: "Like a lion they crouch and lie down, like a lioness - who dares to rouse them? May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!" (Num 24:9). The first part reminds one of Jacob's messianic prophecy (Gen 49:10), and the second of Abraham's calling (Gen 12:2).

Balaam was not able to damage Israel by means of sorcery or curses. However, he did succeed in doing damage to Israel by advising the Moabites to draw Israel into extravagance and idolatry (Num 25:1 et seq; 31:16 et seq). The danger threatening Israel was, therefore, not to be found in a spiritual world against which they would be defenceless victims, but rather in temptation in which they had to make a personal decision and were personally responsible. This history, therefore, warned Israel to have the right perspective on their struggle and to go into this struggle with complete confidence in God.

2. In His Last Words, Moses Sets before Israel the Way of Life and the Way of Death

Moses's farewell message, intended to admonish and encourage his people, spoke of complete realism. He presented them with blessings for keeping the covenant, but also a number of curses for disobedience (Dt 28). He reproached this stubborn people for their past disobedience, for which the Lord had had to punish them so severely. At the same time he warned them of the punishment for future disobedience - the terror of exile (29:22 et seq).

The Lord, however, is also a God of grace, full of covenant faithfulness. Israel was, therefore, called to renew the covenant (29:1 et seq). God was still "the Lord your God", but he also demanded repentance (30:1,2). His grace was so abundant that he himself would change their hearts in order to enable them to love him and live (30:6). The intimate covenant expression "the Lord your God" is used no less than ten times in the passage of Dt 30:1-10.

The people had to choose. It was a matter of blessing or curse, life or death (30:19). To love the Lord was life (30:6,20); it was to do what had been written in the Book of the Law (30:10). This word of him brought life (30:14).

The part of revelation history that ends with the death of Moses, like the part ending with the death of Jacob, emphasises death and links it to man's sinfulness. The history of the exodus ended in death: a whole generation died during the forty year journey through the desert. Even Moses, the man of God, died without entering the promised land - also as punishment for his sin. In this way, sin destroys the ultimate goal of man's life. The most common Hebrew word for sin, *Chety* means to miss one's goal. From paradise, the line of sin and death marches irrepressibly through history. But there is also more than human sin, failure and death. There is also the life of love and fellowship with God. It was for this reason that the Old Testament believer clung to God, looking forward and waiting... The Lord is the holy God who never excuses sin, not even that of Moses. Even so, there was something speaking of reconciliation and peace in the Lord's actions. He showed Moses the promised land from afar; he himself took Moses away and buried him. And the people's journey towards the promised land continued.

3. The Land as Gift and Possession of the Lord

At last the promise of the land, which had taken so long to be fulfilled, was fulfilled. The land was a gift from the Lord, and he remained the owner of it (Dt 26:1-11). The people were aliens and tenants who occupied the land only by the grace of God (Lev 25:23 et seq). He divided it among the various tribes and families. Nobody could permanently estrange them from their land. Even when someone had lost his land by selling it or through debt, it had to be returned to the original owner during the Year of the Jubilee. In this way, the Israelites remained equals under the covenant. A supplanting of the covenant society by an individualistic class structure of rich and poor people was also prevented.

Land and nationhood, like land and language, were inseparably linked (Gen 10:5; 20, 31, 32). When he had called Abraham, the Lord had promised to make him a great nation and to give him his own land (Gen 12:2). With the entrance into Canaan, the promise to Abraham was fulfilled, and Israel was brought to life as a real people. Loss of the land would equal death; exile meant the death of a people, and return from exile resurrection from death (Eze 37). Possession of land was also part of the new covenant the Lord would make with his people at a later stage (Eze 36:28).

In order to have lasting possession of the land, Israel had to obey the Lord's commandments, particularly those concerning authority (cf the fifth commandment). It began with recognition of parental authority. Obedience to God's dominion and fellowship with him were primary. That is why Israel had received the Ten Commandments before they received the promised land. Before they entered Canaan, a renewal of the covenant occurred, and Passover was celebrated. This was intended to remind the people that their existence as a people was only the result of God's undeserved salvation, and that they were to live according to his covenant demands in the promised land.

4. Notes

1. Von Rad (1962:224): Yahweh's saving blessing is the land (*nahalah*) and rest of the surrounding enemies (*m^enuhah*). The concept of *nahalah* has a long history, and originally indicated the land Yahweh allocated to the clan or family.
2. Zimmerli (1972:53-58 = 1978:64-69): Israel never developed a consciousness of being indigenous to the land, but always regarded their land as a gift from Yahweh, who rescued them from slavery. The same compassion that granted them freedom from their oppressors, also granted them the possibility of life in the land. It was a gift from the hand of God.
3. Compare Helberg (1990) on the relationship of Israel to its land.

37. JERICHO: THE LORD CONTROLS THE GATEWAY TO CANAAN (JOS 6,7)

1. Through his Supreme Power, the Lord Brings About the Destruction of Jericho

From the east, Jericho was the gateway to Canaan. It was well fortified and situated quite strategically. It controlled both the passage through the river Jordan and the entrance to the mountainous interior. The Lord proved himself to have power over nature, as well as the nations, by destroying this mighty gateway to Canaan. Again he showed that victory was nothing less than his saving work for his people. They had no reason to be boastful – the promised land was a gracious gift from the Lord.

The city of Jericho was to be devoted to the Lord, like a first-fruit offering of the whole land that Israel would now occupy. The whole land and everything in it had to be destroyed. Regarding this, the following has to be kept in mind: Jericho was to be devoted to the Lord not merely on cultic grounds, that is to say, merely because the cult required a first-fruit offering. It was in the first instance to be devoted on ethical grounds: the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure (Gen 15:16). Early in history the Lord had already destroyed godless cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, most probably through a natural catastrophe. The destruction of Jericho proved that the Lord is not a nature deity or impersonal force that operates only through natural forces. He is a personal God who also works in and through historical events. In this instance, he used Israel to punish the Canaanites.

The Lord forbade the rebuilding of Jericho. With this prohibition he wanted to remind Israel of the fact that both the entry into and the occupation of the land were a gracious gift from almighty God. Whoever would undertake to rebuild Jericho would be cursed: "At the cost of his firstborn son will he lay its foundations; at the cost of his youngest will he set up its gates" (Jos 6:26). It was a matter of life and death that Israel had to trust the Lord and not their own abilities or strategies - therefore this terrible warning.

This divine warning was ignored by Hiel in the time of king Ahab, with fatal consequences (1 Ki 16:34). At the time it seemed as if the Baals predominated, because Baal worship was the official religion of the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes. Belief in the Lord as the only and living God, who both creates and sustains life, was exchanged for belief in the Baal gods of life and fertility. But then the Lord showed himself to be the ruler of life and death. He is more than a nature deity. He remains in control of history and operates with a grand plan, throughout the ages. He brought about the fulfilment of the ancient curse -he alone is God.

2. The Lord also has Mercy in Jericho

The Lord showed himself to be a righteous God. He did not allow sin to remain unpunished, but brought about a terrible judgement over it. At the same time, however, he is also a God of unfathomable grace and mercy. He spared Rahab and her family and thereby reversed his curse on Jericho. Instead of being killed, they were saved and also incorporated into the people of the covenant.

This event right at the beginning of the entry into Canaan has to be kept in mind every time the ban on the Canaanites is mentioned. It is probably not the case that there were no exceptions during these times of mass execution. It is, however, also clear that the alternative to the ban was not merely the saving of lives, but incorporation into the people of the covenant. One could say that salvation was only possible through faith and repentance.

To our refined sentiments, the ban seems to contain a revolting element. It has to be kept in mind, however, that it was common practice in those days to kill all the inhabitants of conquered cities, or to take them as slaves. The practice of the ban in Israel had as one of its objectives the prevention of plundering raids by the Israelites. The wars during the entry into Canaan were not intended to enrich Israel, but to fulfil the Lord's judgement over the Amorites, because of their sin. It is also to be kept in mind that God's righteousness demands punishment of all sin. Only through the suffering of Jesus Christ could another way be found, one in which both God's righteousness and his grace are evident.

3. The Lord also Brings About Inner Change in Jericho: Rahab

The history of Rahab proves that God's dominion is not merely the external overpowering of cities, people and

nations. He also brings about an inner change in the hearts of people. With the fall of the strategic city of Jericho, all of Canaan fell (in the military sense). In the same way it fell spiritually with the fall of the walls of Rahab's heart. Rahab was a prostitute. This was, in a way, characteristic of the religion and morals of the Canaanites. Their fertility cult included rites like that of sacred prostitution. In this way, the Canaanites endeavoured to share in the life-giving power of their deities, while at the same time stimulating that life-giving power. In the Old Testament, the worship of Baal and the goddess Astarte was, therefore, called prostitution. This idolisation of sex and the accompanying rites naturally had an influence on the Canaanites' morality. The measure of the sin of the people of Canaan was full indeed.

Later in their history, the Israelites were often enchanted and tempted by this religion, always with disastrous consequences. This account of what happened right at the beginning of the entry into Canaan shows that the exact opposite was intended. A missionary task for Israel was implied. People who have fallen into sin are supposed to be drawn to repentance and life by believers. God's power and grace enable them to do this. Rahab is presented in the New Testament as one of the outstanding examples of a believer (Heb 11:31).

4. The Lord Demands Unconditional Obedience of his People: Achan

The people of Israel's great victory at Jericho was followed by unexpected disaster at Ai (Jos 7:1 et seq), because Achan had stolen some of the devoted things at Jericho. Together with his family, he had to die. In this history of Achan the Lord showed himself to be a holy God. He demanded absolute and unconditional obedience of his people in the promised land. He also indicated that sin is not merely an isolated and individual matter. It also causes misery to other people close to the sinner. A society, like a people, is an organic unit, which explains why the conduct of one influences the lives of others. In a certain sense, people are responsible for each other's actions. Even today, in a very individualistic society, in some way or another this is still the case. One man is still the other's keeper.

5. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:428) on Jos 7:19 concerning the tendency in the Old Testament of convincing the sinner, within himself, of his own sin.

38. THE ERA OF THE JUDGES: A TIME OF TRANSITION FOR ISRAEL (JUDGES)

1. Occupation of the Promised Land Concluded under Leadership of Joshua

Joshua was Moses' successor and the man who led the Israelites into the promised land. He finished the work begun by Moses. There is a striking resemblance between the calling and work of Moses and that of Joshua. Joshua was encouraged before he led the people into Canaan (Jos 5). As in the case of Moses, the holiness of the Lord was emphasised when Joshua was ordered to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. Both Joshua and the people had to remember that they were totally in the service of the Lord.

Like Moses, Joshua also spoke last words of exhortation and encouragement to the people, and made them solemnly promise always to serve only the Lord (Jos 24, especially v. 14 et seq). Israel was in a time of transition. Even at the beginning of the entry into Canaan they had eaten roasted grain as the first produce of the promised land. The direct provision of manna had stopped then (Jos 5:12). Extraordinary provision only applied to extraordinary times. The Lord followed the natural course of things and provided for his people by way of their natural effort. This also applied to their military successes in the promised land. After the initial miraculous success, like that at Jericho, came a time when the Lord demanded much more of the people's exertion and perseverance. It was their lack of faith, effort and perseverance that led to the Israelites' failure to completely drive off the Canaanites (Jud 1:19).

2. A Time of Transition in International Politics

During the time of the Israelite occupation of Canaan, massive national migrations were taking place in the ancient world. Indo-Germanic peoples forced the Hittite empire, with influence extending into Canaan, to its

knees. Some of these Germanic tribes even attacked Egypt and weakened it considerably. Consequently, Egypt was – for the time being – unable to rule Canaan and Syria, which ensured the Israelites' safety from their former masters.

A part of the Indo-Germanic tribes, the Philistines, settled along the coast of Canaan in five city-states. The Philistines were among Israel's most dangerous enemies; they were so important that the later name of Palestine was derived from them. It was the beginning of the Iron Age, and the Philistines obtained a monopoly - enforced on all the people in the land - on the working of iron. As a result they had far better weapons than the Israelites, until such time as David would conquer them.

In the region east of the river Jordan nomadic tribes established small kingdoms, known as Edom, Moab, Ammon and Aram. They also made life difficult for Israel. Rapacious Bedouin tribes also posed a great danger because they stole the Israelite's livestock and even their harvests. The Midianites in particular were very dangerous, because they used camels to ride on and could attack quickly, vanishing just as suddenly as they had come.

The Lord revealed himself as the God who used all these events and situations to establish his people in the promised land - but not without effort, sacrifice and perseverance on their side. It was quite like the exodus and the remainder of salvation history: creating life out of a situation of downfall or even death.

3. A Time of Cultural Transition for Israel

It was a time of transition for the Israelites as well. They had to change from stock farming to agriculture, and in the process had to make many changes and adaptations. People used to living in tents now had to build houses and even learn to build fortified cities. Trade took the form of bartering, and travelling tradesmen introduced them to new things and ideas. The patriarchal management and legal organisation of the nomadic existence no longer applied in the towns and cities, a way of life that had preserved Israel's religious life now had to make way for a quite individualistic lifestyle in the cities and towns. During this time the Israelites were, therefore, in a very exposed and vulnerable position.

In contrast with the position of the Israelites, that of the Canaanites was favourable. They had an established culture, and were - culturally speaking - superior to the Israelites. This posed the threat that the Israelites could make the Canaanite ideas and concepts their own without thinking twice. Culture and religion are very interdependent, and for this reason cultural influence is usually accompanied by religious influence. Israel shared in the worldview of the ancient East. According to the last words of Joshua to the people, their ancestors, before Abraham, had worshipped strange gods (Jos 24:2). The concepts and ideas of idol worship, therefore, had an antique point of contact with Israel.

4. Religious Influences Prevented

The Canaanites had a nature religion. They derived their ideas about gods from nature and natural processes. In effect, their gods were personified natural phenomena. El was regarded as the supreme god of their pantheon. He was, however, very remote and in practical religion was replaced by Baal and Astarte. The name Baal is a common word meaning lord or owner. There were probably more than one local Baal. As a deity, Baal was supposed to be concerned with the fertility of the harvests. During the dry summer months the god Mot (whose name means death) gained the victory over Baal. In the rainy season, however, Baal was resurrected from death and then the green grass and the plants started growing. Baal was portrayed primarily in the form of sacred tree-trunks (*massebas*). Offerings to Baal and the goddess Astarte were brought on the heights, where worshippers considered themselves to be closer to the gods. Astarte was portrayed as a pole (*ashera*), and was the goddess of human fertility. At the feasts in honour of these two gods, drinking, wild dances and sexual excesses played an important role (1 Ki 18; Hos 4:11; cf also the discussion concerning Rahab).

The Israelites were indeed often tempted to partake in the Canaanite fertility rites. These practices and influences were, however, always denounced by God's spokesmen as being perversions and idolatry. It never gained a foothold in the internal structure of Israel's unique monotheistic religion. In this regard, the people of the revelation was distinguished from other nations. It was natural for conquerors to adopt the religion of the

inhabitants of the conquered land when they settled there. Each area had its own god that had to be worshipped there, or so they believed. The God of Israel, however, is not a nature deity and can, therefore, also not be confined to a specific area. He is the only God of the whole earth and all nations. He makes his influence felt and brings his people to recognise him, despite their unfaithfulness and idolatry. He is the true and living God.

5. Notes

1. See Eichrodt (1961:115-117) on the nature of Canaanite religion and its influence on Israel, as in worship of the sacred trees and the goddess Asherah, as well as worship of the bull.
2. Compare Zimmerli (1972:69 = 1978:81) for a comparison of Moses with Joshua.

39. THE JUDGES: DIVINE SALVATION IN AN EMERGENCY SITUATION (JUDGES)

1. No Central Political Authority in Israel

During the time of the judges, Israel had no central political authority. They were neither a geographical, nor a political unity and existed and acted to a considerable extent as individual tribes.

The river Jordan geographically separated the tribes to the east and west of it. To the west of the river Jordan the tribes in the southern Judean hills were separated from those in the mountains of Ephraim to the north. The plain of Jezreel separated these northern tribes from those in Galilee. It was for this reason that the Israelites had no central political authority or leaders at the time. They were actually only linked through their religion. The ark of the covenant was the binding factor. It was kept at Shiloh, although other places like Gilgal, Mizpah and Bethel could also have served as religious centres (Jos 18:1; Jud 18:31; 1 Sam 1:3; Jud 2:1; 20:1,18). The Israelites could only be a strong unity when the various tribes sensed and enacted strong loyalty to the covenant and its stipulations.

Some scholars hold that the Israelites were nothing more than a religious tribal alliance that was only formed at that specific time. According to them, the various tribes had no common descent. The six tribes of Leah would never have been in Egypt, but would have formed a confederation of tribes in Canaan. This confederation would have been well established by the time the house of Joseph, under leadership of Joshua, entered the land. Joshua would then have established the greater alliance or confederation. This kind of tribal alliance is often called amphyctyony. The word amphyctyon is derived from Greek history. Among the Greeks it indicated a group of cities or people with a common sanctuary and mutual responsibilities. Other scholars, however, are of the opinion that there is little resemblance between the Israelite structure and true amphyctyony. The hypothesis concerning a confederation of tribes, mentioned above, is also contrary to what the Bible teaches.

2. Apostasy, Oppression and Salvation

Characteristic of the time of the judges was Israel's apostasy concerning the covenant, their consequent oppression by their enemies and their eventual salvation through the grace of the Lord. During this time, two factors were in opposition. On the one hand, the people became unfaithful to the covenant. As a result, the feeling of national unity crumbled and Israel fell victim to its enemies. On the other hand, the Lord continued his dominion over Israel despite all of the above, maintained his special covenant relationship with them, and each time provided a new judge to save them.

The author of the book of Judges emphasised this fact by means of the structure of the book. It is dominated by the refrain: "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and he sold them into the hands of w , the king of x , to whom the Israelites were subject for a years. But when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer, y , the son of z . He went to war against w , the king of x , and saved Israel. So the land had peace for b years."

3. The Judges: not Human Achievement, but Divine Intervention

In the work of the judges, the emphasis is not on human action or achievement, but rather on the saving work of the Lord. Both religious and moral corruption characterised the people of Israel. This was even the case with some people called and equipped by the Lord to be judges. It is said of Samson and others that the Spirit of the Lord came upon them in power. This means that God intervened in a special and forceful way in their lives. It was probably a rather violent experience. Only in this way could anything in line with God's revelation history be done with these rough people in rough times. Samson and Jephthah were not the most exemplary of characters. They were overpowered by the Spirit of God, rather than living and acting in harmony with the Spirit and will of the Lord.

The judges were also not honoured in the first place as national heroes. They were much rather regarded as tools, used by the Lord, to maintain his dominion over his people despite the corruption within Israel.

Being a judge was not a matter of heredity, but was confined to one person called and equipped by the Lord to act in a specific situation. It was also not in the geographical sense a national matter. The judges only ruled locally, and only one or a few tribes. Only in times of great national emergency or a general and serious threat, did the other tribes also rely on the judges. The judges were, however, not merely military leaders; quite a few of them also pronounced judgement in legal matters.

4. Human Inability as Cause of the Failure of the Tribal Alliance as Governing Structure

The tribal alliance was not an ideal structure of government. Israel was much too sinful for it to succeed. The author of the book of Judges characterised the time as follows: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (17:6; 21:25). Neither was monarchy regarded as the ideal method of government. Gideon had the opportunity to become king, but he rejected it. He regarded it as contradictory to the theocratic nature of Israel's religion. The Lord was the King of Israel (Jud 8:25).

Israel was intended to be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). Every Israelite was meant to know the Lord through the covenant stipulations and personal fellowship with him. This was centred in the life around the ark of the covenant. But the Israelites all did as they saw fit.

It was the tribal alliance that failed, not the judges. The judges were not intended to provide a structure of government. It was an extraordinary measure taken by the Lord to save his people, replacing the failed tribal alliance. The Israelites did not want to and could not express their special character as the Lord's people of the covenant by means of a special governing structure.

5. Notes

1. Compare Zimmerli (1972:70-72 = 1978:83-86) for a comparison between the judges and nazirites.

40. RUTH: THERE IS REFUGE WITH THE GOD OF ISRAEL (RUTH)

1. Reality Seems to Belie the Dominion of the Lord

According to Ruth 1:1 the history of Ruth took place "in the days when the judges ruled". The book of Judges portrays the kingdom dominion of the Lord in terms of wonderful military and other victories. The book of Ruth brings to light another aspect of God's kingdom dominion - the invisible, inner and commonplace. In this history, however, it would initially seem as if reality belied the Lord's dominion. The name of Naomi's husband was Elimelech, which means my Lord is king. However, it seemed as if both the name and the confession it contained were misplaced. Because of famine, this man had been forced to leave the promised land and settle in Moab. This gives rise to many questions: was the promised land not the land flowing with milk and honey? Was the Lord not the king ruling this land and providing for it in a special way? Elimelech and his family had had no food in Canaan. His family line also came to an end in Moab. He died first, and then both his sons died without children. Only his wife, Naomi, was left, together with her two daughters-in-law.

However, despite the seeming contradictions presented by reality, the Lord was exercising his kingdom

dominion and fulfilling a great plan, a plan involving many nations. He was drawing a woman from a pagan nation into his covenant people. His plan also transcended both time and space. The end of the book emphasises that this woman would be part of the line of descent out of which the great king David would be born. (In this way, the woman also became one of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, who would bring about salvation for all the nations.)

2. The Lord is Truly Present in the Midst of Emptiness and Death

The misfortune of Elimelech's family was so terrible that there seemed to be nothing that would attract others, especially outsiders, to belief in his God. Naomi was a widow in mourning: poor, childless and desperate. But in this seemingly empty situation resounded the clear and poignant confession of God's actual presence. Although he seemed to be absent, he was actually so present that Ruth experienced the reality of it. The reality of God's personal presence is more than the things or people life is usually composed of. It is striking that it was in the midst of an atmosphere of death and mourning that Ruth found the Lord. The Lord was a greater reality to her than death that had seemingly destroyed everything in this family.

Of course Ruth had no way of knowing the true significance of this part of history. At last new life came to the family. Ruth was able to continue the family line for Naomi by marrying into the family and having a child. With this outcome the Lord revealed himself as the life-giving God. He had saved a family from death and had raised new life in it. This family had both died and risen from death.

David's line of descent, which eventually also included Jesus Christ, also included at least two more similar cases where the Lord gave life in a miraculous way. These were Isaac and Rahab (Mt 1). In Isaac's case it was physical life-giving and in Rahab's, spiritual. God's life-giving power would eventually be fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

3. The Lord Bends People's Hearts and to This End makes Use of Believers' Lives

Earlier in the history of Israel's settlement in Canaan the Lord had already revealed himself as the God who bends and pulls at people's hearts through his dominion. In the history of Balaam he had demonstrated his power over the will of man and his ability to use someone as a tool, even when he is unwilling. In the history of Rahab he had shown how he could bring about a positive change of heart in someone's life. In Ruth's case it was demonstrated even more clearly. Her history is described with great compassion, and her positive, striking confession quoted: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me" (1:16,17).

Ruth's conversion did not occur in a vacuum, but in and through her interaction with Naomi. Her confession also expressed this - she wanted to remain with Naomi. In this way she wanted to partake in her people and her God. It was through living with Naomi that she had become conscious of God's presence in Naomi's life. The book of Ruth clearly brings to light the personal character of Old Testament religion. It speaks of the personal presence of God and the personal fellowship between him and Naomi as well as between him and Ruth. It also speaks of the way in which Naomi's faith was expressed in her everyday interaction with Ruth. God's covenant implies love for God and one's fellow man. Ruth's confession of her bond with Naomi also speaks of the nature of the covenant. It implies a bond with God and with the people of the covenant.

4. The Lord Rejects Exclusive Nationalism

The book of Ruth shows that God's people – as he intended it – was not a closed entity. It was open to people from other nations who repented and were converted. The Lord was not a mere local God, but a universal God with a universal plan of redemption. Israel had a priestly calling regarding the nations and had to draw them to God.

This did not mean that Israel had to present an unlimited or unqualified openness to the nations. This is rejected in 1 Samuel, following the book of Ruth. The Lord and Samuel both rejected Israel's desire for a king so that they could be like the nations (1 Sam 8:5,6,20).

5. The Lord's Kingdom Concerns Ordinary People in Everyday Life

The Lord worked not only through the judges. He did not demonstrate his kingdom dominion only in an extraordinary way or through extraordinary and important people. Ruth's history is that of ordinary people in everyday life. It shows how God's kingdom dominion is concerned with ordinary life, with its ordinary human and personal problems. There God gives light, support and victory.

The teaching of the book of Ruth is in complete harmony with the teaching of Genesis 1. God's kingdom is not in the first instance a matter of kings, great institutions or extraordinary events, but of ordinary people. Man was created as a royal being. The kingdom is a burning question in everyone's life.

6. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:176) on the fact that everything is under God's decree.

III THE ESTABLISHMENT AND COURSE OF THE MONARCHY (SAMUEL - ESTHER)

41. SAMUEL - THE LORD BEGINS ANEW WITH ISRAEL (1 SAM 1-7)

1. The Lord Creates New Life out of Physical, Political and Religious Death

The book of Samuel describes the institution of the monarchy in Israel and the way in which it received its true expression in David. The book begins, however, with the family history of ordinary people, which speaks of the important place ordinary people have in the kingdom of God. First of all the genealogy of Samuel's father is given. It contains the names of unknown people. In this way the beginning of the book already shows that it is not concerned with human actions or achievements, but rather with the continuation of God's dominion through the generations.

The Lord created life out of Hannah's barrenness. This forms part of a theme that started with the beginning of Israel's history. In 1 Samuel we learn of three saving acts of the Lord. He created life out of physical, political and religious barrenness or death. Hannah sang a song of praise in which she linked these three things (2:1-10). Israel's political existence as a people was close to being ended by the hostile Philistines. Very soon we read of Israel's defeat and the terrible fact of the removal of the ark of the covenant by the Philistines (1 Sam 4). Religious life in Israel was in just as poor a condition. At the centre of worship it was the priests who acted in the greatest sinfulness (2:12 et seq). The low religious standards of the priests and the people were accompanied by insufficient revelation of God's word. The Lord withdrew his rich, personal fellowship from his people (3:1 et seq; 7:3 et seq; cf also chapter 61).

In the midst of this situation of political and religious death the Lord began anew. He sentenced to death the priestly generation of Eli and called a young boy through whom he would save his people from this situation.

2. The Lord Reverses the Roles in Society

Hannah's song of praise sheds light on the nature of the Lord's kingdom dominion. The Lord reverses the roles in society. He defends those who are unimportant and despised against the proud and haughty. Revelation history, as well as ordinary life, therefore, has a paradoxical character. Both are characterised by unexpected turns of events, because of man's sinfulness. Man always abuses his position, just like the privileged Peninnah over against childless Hannah, or the corrupt temple servants like Eli's sons. The result is always that God has to make drastic alterations.

Hannah's song of praise, however, does not say that God defends the poor and helpless just because they are poor, for it also speaks of them as God's saints - those who have been shown mercy by him, who live according to his covenant and who trust in him.

3. Eli: The Lord Punishes Impersonal and Half-hearted Service

Eli was a devoted high priest. He reprimanded Hannah, for example, when he thought that she had come to the temple in drunkenness (1:14). He also rebuked his sons for their sins and emphasised how serious a matter it was. It was sin against God, he warned, and no intercession would be possible (2:23 et seq). But Eli did not go far enough. The Lord, therefore, punished him, and so severely that he recalled his earlier promise of an eternal priesthood. Eli's priestly generation would end (3:13).

Eli did, however, also give evidence of something beautiful: complete subjection to God. His reaction to God's judgement was striking: "He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes" (3:18). However, Eli was far too passive and accepted the judgement too mechanically and meekly. He had no personal initiative, responsibility or daring. There is little evidence of struggle with God or people - so different from Jacob, especially when he had struggled with God at Peniel.

The Lord severely punished Eli because of this attitude. It was to serve as a warning to all priests after him: there could be no passivity in the priestly ministry. It could not be allowed to degenerate into formalism. At

the same time, through his punishment of Eli, the Lord wanted to encourage later priests to actively resist all evil and sin.

4. The Lord Rejects the People's Impersonal Approach to his Presence

The people had an impersonal approach to the Lord's presence. As a result, they had a certain magical view of the ark of the covenant and thought that the Lord's presence was automatically linked to it. They asked that the ark be brought to the battlefield to assist them in their battle against the Philistines. The Israelites, therefore, did not account for their personal relationship with the Lord, neither did they personally go into his presence (1 Sam 4). The Lord, however, is not an impersonal God, like an impersonal power, residing in something like the ark. The ark could not be used (or abused) to ensure the Lord's victorious presence with his people. As a result of their sin, he caused the Israelites to lose the battle and the ark to be taken away by the Philistines.

However, the Lord also clearly indicated that he had not lost any battle. Even in the territory of the Philistines he still had complete control over it. His "hand", or his power, was against the Philistines, while their own god lost his hands (5:4,6). The Lord himself ensured the return of the ark to Israel (6:1 et seq), but also punished his people for looking at it in a curious and disrespectful way (6:19). The ark was the symbol of the personal relationship of the Lord with his people, and could only be approached in personal trust and obedience.

5. Samuel Becomes the Centre of Israel's Religious Life

The ark remained in the border area between the Israelites and the Philistines. It lost significance as religious centre (7:2), and was replaced by Samuel. After twenty years of preparation of which nothing is known, he stepped forward as religious and political leader. By this time, the low morale among the Israelites had created exactly the right atmosphere for action; the people mourned and sought after the Lord (7:2,3). Like a true prophet, Samuel objected to the impersonal formalism that had taken root in Israel. He called the people to repentance and strongly emphasised that this repentance was to be a matter of the heart, to be directed to the Lord himself (7:3).

With Samuel, the powerful unfolding of the prophetic ministry began. Like Samuel, the prophets emphasised the inner nature of true religion, as opposed to the formalism of the people. Prophetic groups also existed in the time of Samuel (10:10; 19:20). The book of Kings mentions "sons of the prophets" in the time of Elijah and Elisha (1 Ki 20:35; 2 Ki 2:3,5,15; 4:1,38; 5:22). This expression probably means something like "belonging to the prophets", and merely indicates "prophets", just like the expression "children/sons of Israel" simply means "Israelites". Some commentators, however, interpret this expression as referring to disciples or students of some of the prophets.

6. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:426 et seq), with regard to 1 Sam 2:25, on the fact that God also punishes sin with sin.

42. THE MONARCHY: A QUERIED AND YET BENEFICIAL INSTITUTION (1 SAM 8)

1. Israel Trusts in a Change of Structure as Such

The people asked Samuel whether they could have a king. This request was not without grounds. The direct cause was the corruption of Samuel's two sons whom he had appointed as judges when he had become too old (8:5). The people followed the legitimate way when they requested to have a king, not a revolutionary way. During the time of the judges they had been so vulnerable and exposed to their enemies that they now wanted a king to lead men in battle (8:20).

They made one mistake, however: they expected their salvation from an impersonal, neutral government structure as such. They did not seek personal, heartfelt fellowship with the Lord, neither did they ask for an institution that would be responsible to him. They also wanted a king "such as all the other nations have" (8:5). With this they denied their special character as a chosen people. The nations became their standard, not God

and his will. The Lord showed, however, that man should not place his trust in neutral, generally human, structured institutions or solutions; to this day, these things are to be regarded as idols, because the Lord considered such trust to be idolatrous.

There were also other aspects included within the concept "king" which were contrary to Old Testament religion, like the idea of sacred or divine characteristics. Some of the characteristics of human kings were also transferred to the gods. Because of the often unacceptable associations of the name "king", this name was not often used for the Lord in the Old Testament.

The idea of a monarchy was not totally foreign or new. It had already been rejected earlier in Israel's history as contrary to God's special reign over his people (Jud 8:23; 9:8 et seq; cf also Isa 6:5).

2. The Monarchy is a Means of Punishment and at the Same Time a Beneficial Institution

The Lord punished his people by granting their request. Samuel had to confront them with its implications. They would lose their individuality and become a mere mass of people; they would lose self-determination over their children, harvests and property, as well as themselves: they would be the slaves of their king (8:11-17). Within the impersonal structure from which the people expected their salvation, government would become an objectified and absolutised institution. It would become a political machine. People would exist for the sake of the state, instead of the institution of government existing for the joint, as well as individual benefit of the people. Samuel's warning is still relevant, even in our own modern society.

The result of Israel's choice was that people and king would be irrevocably linked, even when the king acted like a tyrant. Henceforth, people and king would stand and fall together. This was God's judgement (8:18). However, the people and their king would also be linked regarding their inner attitude. The rebellion of the king would in effect be the same as that of the people when they asked to have a king. This was not a passing characteristic of Israel, but a very basic and essential one.

The request for a monarchy and its institution reveal a basic dualistic characteristic of fallen man and of history. Man was created as a king. He was supposed to be a ruler under direct authority of God, as in the Garden of Eden. He was, however, unable to tolerate God's personal dominion and fellowship. Indirect dominion of a human ruler, therefore, became necessary, but then dominion that would, in some way or another, be oppressive.

In his grace, however, the Lord also made of the monarchy something positive. He used it to maintain law and order, and also for something quite extraordinary: it would bring his messianic plan of salvation to fulfilment (cf 2 Sam 7), but not without an important change. Not the impersonal institution of the monarchy would bring salvation, but the person of the true messianic king. This king would bring about the direct, personal dominion of God in the lives of people.

There was something both miraculous and suspenseful to the monarchy. The people chose a dominion that would lead to death that would draw them down into the abyss (8:18). But the Lord would not reject his people, for the sake of his great and holy name. He would make them, together with and in spite of their king, to be his people (12:22,25). He would do this in a wonderful way, in wisdom surpassing human understanding - even that of the prophet Samuel (8:7,9,22). He would create life out of death.

3. The Monarchy under Prophetic Guidance

The Lord is and remains king. He did not relinquish his control of things merely because of the people's request for a king. To the contrary, He took the monarchy in his service and subjected it to his will. This control and subjection were exercised by means of the prophets. The same prophet who had earlier rejected the people's request for a king was now indicated by the Lord as a dominant person regarding the institution of the monarchy and the naming of a king. The Lord also renewed the covenant and allotted a fixed position to the monarchy within the covenant framework.

From the moment of institution of the monarchy and throughout its history, the prophets had an important task with regard to it. The prophet accompanied and supervised the king, and had to keep alive the idea that the

king was only king within the covenant framework. Within this framework there was only one Ruler and Legislator. All people, including the king, were subject to his covenant stipulations. It was on these grounds that the prophets were able to reprimand the kings when they acted contrary to the commandments of the Lord. Samuel acted in accordance with this regarding Saul (13:10 et seq; 15:12 et seq), Nathan and Gad regarding David (2 Sam 12:7 et seq; 24:12 et seq), Elijah regarding Ahab (1 Ki 21:20), Isaiah regarding Ahaz (Isa 7), and Jeremiah regarding Jehoiakim (Jer 26 et seq).

Unlike the other nations, Israel never new divine or holy kingship. The messianic psalms can only be understood against this background. The supernatural aspects of the anointed king in these psalms are transcendent characteristics. They transcend the king himself and point towards someone greater than he.

Although the prophet had to accompany and supervise the king, he could not act wilfully towards the king or anyone else. He could only act within the confines of the covenant stipulations. The prophet himself was controlled to such an extent that he could not even act according to his own will or intentions, but only in obedience to the command of the Lord; this often gave rise to serious inner conflict, as when Samuel had to institute the monarchy against his own judgement (8:7,9,22).

This history sheds light on the true nature of governmental authority, as well as the correct relationship between church and state. It issues a serious warning against government becoming an impersonal political machine. Sinful man is basically inclined to do exactly this. Daily repentance, requiring regular warning and constant vigil, is also needed in this aspect of life. People have to be called to personal responsibility to God and personal compassion towards all citizens. Every institution is inclined to becoming impersonal, an "establishment". Nevertheless, government and all authorities were instituted by God, and should be regarded in this light. Justice has to be done to the freedom and responsibility of both authorities and subjects. The church has to exercise its prophetic task in serious subjection to the word of God, as well as in humility and self-sacrifice.

4. Notes

1. Von Rad (1962:308,309): the monarchy in Israel is not myth, but factual realism. It originated in history, not at the beginning of history from above, as in the Babylonian understanding.
2. In Israel, the monarchy was regarded as a threat to fellowship with God as king (cf 1 Sam 8), and this was often the cause of great tension. David's conduct as king seemingly conquered this fear. He found favour with God, and as the failure of earthly kingship became more and more evident, he became a symbol of the messianic form of the expectation of salvation.
3. In the time of the kings, fellowship with God was concentrated in the relationship between God and king, except for the cultic places of worship. This was the reason for the priestly dignity of the king (Ps 110). He was a mediating figure between God and man, he could act as life-giving force (Lam 4:20), was gifted with special wisdom (2 Sam 14:17,20; 1 Chron 3:10), and he was also a judge, especially for the poor and oppressed (Ps 72).
4. Compare Zimmerli (1972:72-79 = 1978:86-93) for the unique nature of the monarchy in Israel, with its emphasis on the supreme kingship of Yahweh; the distinction between the first three kings, Saul, David and Solomon, as well as the connection of the house of David with the messianic expectations.
5. Compare Fohrer (1972:128-132; 206-231; 231-250) on the following: resistance to a monarchy and political system influenced by Canaanite views; the state and political conduct; social life in Israel.
6. Compare Childs (1986:177-189) for a theological interpretation of Israel's institutions: public institutions, class structure, as well as legal, military and family institutions.
7. Compare Dentan (1972:1160,1161) on God's dominion over Israel by means of the monarchy.

43. ISRAEL'S FIRST KING: TOO IMPERSONAL IN HIS RELIGION: SAUL (1 SAM 9 ET SEQ)

1. Saul Begins as a Well-equipped and Promising King

When the people of the Lord had been in mortal danger in Egypt, he had remembered them (Ex 2:25; 3:7,9). He also remembered them now. He called Samuel to anoint a king for them, a king who could free them of the

power of the Philistines. The Lord emphasised the fact that they were his people (9:16,17) and his inheritance (10:1). The man who was anointed as king was Saul, a man well-equipped for his calling. This was evident from his appearance, his anointing, and from the fact that the Lord changed his heart when he was first anointed.

Saul was a head taller than the rest of the people. Even Samuel, who was not in favour of a monarchy in Israel, was impressed by him. "There is no one like him among all the people", Samuel said (1 Sam 10:24). Saul had also distinguished himself as a brave man (10). With his anointing, Saul was equipped with gifts of his office in order to enable him to obey his calling. Nobody would be able to go unpunished if they rebelled against his authority as anointed of the Lord. Even David, who had the greatest reason to do so, was afraid of doing it. None of this, however, means that Israel's king was sacrosanct, like the kings of the neighbouring nations. Samuel's prophetic action against Saul proved the opposite, but also indicated the ideal method of acting against a king whenever he did wrong.

Just after being anointed, Saul met with a group of prophets. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power, and he prophesied with them (10:6). With this, the Lord indicated that the kingship was to be exercised under prophetic guidance, and not according to human plans. The Lord also indicated Saul as an equipped person. The Spirit of the Lord also came upon him when he marched against the Amorites (11). He was, therefore, a charismatic leader, equipped for military action by the Spirit (Jud 3:10). This resemblance to the judges further strengthened Saul's position in the eyes of the people. The fact that the Lord also changed his heart when he was anointed confirms that he paid special attention to Saul with a view to his work. But history repeated itself. The first king was exactly the same as the first man, created to be a king, in the Garden of Eden.

2. Saul Fails because of his Impersonal Approach to Religion

Right at the beginning of his reign, Saul was already tested to see whether he was willing to accept and put into practice the true, personal nature of religion, but he failed this test. Samuel explained to him in no uncertain terms that religion is about one's inner attitude and personal obedience to the Lord; obedience is better than sacrifice (15:22). It would soon become clear, however, that Saul neither understood nor practiced the personal nature of true religion. The Lord was grieved that he had made Saul king (15:11). This does not mean that the Lord felt he had made a mistake by appointing Saul. The Lord grieved over Saul's sin and the destruction of the special fellowship that had existed (15:11). In the same conversation Samuel stated that the Lord does not change his mind, for he is not a man that he would change his mind. He makes no mistakes and is not unreliable in what he does - he does not lie (15:29).

Saul's impersonal approach to religion caused him to act both in a slavish and a stubborn way. Involuntary slavery does not satisfy. Eventually it becomes reluctant slavery and changes into rebellion against the Spirit of God. Saul's heart became so negative that he presented an inverted image of what he was meant to be, and of the Spirit working in him. But the Spirit of the Lord continued to work in a wonderful and irresistible way. When the fruit of his work is not positive, it becomes negative. Scripture expresses it as follows: "Now the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (16:14; cf also Isa 6:9 et seq to Isa 5:20 et seq).

Saul did repent, but even in his repentance the personal relationship with the Lord was not primary. He was more concerned with the loss of his own honour than the injury done to God's honour or the loss of fellowship with him (15:30). Because Saul did not know a personal relationship with the Lord, he could not correctly understand repentance. In his eyes, meekness was weakness, and he wanted to be considered a strong man. To be a king and to obey were to him, as to all eastern despots, contradictory concepts (Kroeze). According to that view, a king was the only and independent legislator. Saul, therefore, did not wait for a prophet or the Lord.

3. Saul's Way - a Way of Death

Saul did not live by personal fellowship with the living God, but slavishly depended on a mediator. At Endor he acted in an even more mechanical way, and tried to use his mediator as a medium out of death (28)! At Endor, Saul's impersonal and slavish attitude came to a head. It is not clear what exactly happened at Endor. It is clear, however, that Saul's consultation of the witch of Endor was fatal. By consulting her, he cut the bond

of fellowship with God. In this way Saul brought about his own final downfall.

This history teaches that even a dead person will not be able to shed more light on anything than the light already shed by Scripture which we have in our possession (cf also the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Lk 16:19 et seq). Whoever wants to enquire of God's will, should consult him by searching Scripture in living prayer. God is the living God of living revelation.

The other nations had a nature religion. It was linked to the cycles of nature in which the seasons of life and death regularly follow each other. Life and death were one in the understanding of these people, and that is why they called up the dead. Israel did not have a nature religion, but a religion of revelation. According to this religion, there was a clear distinction between life and death. These two are direct opposites. The practices mentioned above were, therefore, strictly forbidden to Israel.

Saul's way ended as a way of death. He died as a loser, both military and morally. The Philistines won the battle, and Saul committed suicide. His suicide was not an isolated act of despair, but set the seal on his life. It was a life in which obedience to God and fellowship with him were practiced less and less.

With the Philistines' victory over Saul, the covenant people was threatened with downfall. The reign of the covenant people's first king ended so differently from what they expected of the kingship in war (8:20). The kingship of the other kings of Israel was also ironic. Saul was a "prototype" of the kings of Israel. They all wanted to inquire of the Lord, but without a true personal bond with him and faith in him. Their actual purpose was to confirm their own wilful ideas. With only a few exceptions, the sad refrain echoes time and again: "and he did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord". It is no wonder that the history of the monarchy in Israel ended with the death of the people in exile. In his faithfulness, however, the Lord had already provided another king in Saul's place.

4. Notes

1. Compare Bright (1953:33-35) on the rise of the Philistines and the consequent threat to Israel under Saul.

44. DAVID: A CHARISMATIC KING (1 SAM 16 ET SEQ; 2 SAM; 1 KI 1,2)

1. David: the Charismatic and Humble Rival of Saul

David did not become king through any human endeavours or merit, but through divine choice. The Lord passed by all his elder brothers, and chose him, the youngest, to become king (1 Sam 16). When he was anointed by Samuel, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power from that day on. With the judges, the power of the Spirit only came upon them from time to time, but he stayed with David continuously (1 Sam 16:13). This was linked to his life of intimate personal fellowship with the Lord.

David's initial history is presented in contrast with that of Saul. In her song of praise, Hannah had mentioned the paradoxical way in which the Lord exercises his kingdom dominion. It differs considerably from human expectations or calculations. In this way, the Lord creates continuation and new life in a broken and corrupt world. The same is evident in the initial history of David. He was still Saul's rival, his counterpart. He was anointed while Saul was still alive and the Lord was angry with him. It is mentioned in the same breath that the Spirit of the Lord came upon David but departed from Saul (1 Sam 16:13,14). The remainder of this part of history was characterised by constant tension. On the one hand there was the actual but as yet unofficial king, and on the other hand the official and yet mere formal king.

David was able to recognise the official character of the kingship. As a result he never tried to get rid of Saul in a revolutionary way, even when it was obvious that Saul had failed. He did not reject social order, but waited for the Lord to the end. The Lord used Saul as an example to David of a king who wanted to be neutral to God and the work of his Spirit. Despite this neutrality, he still maintained his dominion in a wonderful, irresistible and destructive way. This was to serve as a warning to David.

David did everything while trusting the Lord whose dominion includes all situations, both great and small. With this confidence David continued to tend his sheep and to defend them against predators. With the same confidence he defied and killed the Philistine, Goliath (1 Sam 17:34-37). David's confidence and faithfulness in small and insignificant things presaged his confidence and faithfulness in more important situations. His whole life was rooted in trust and responsibility; it was a life of victory through faith.

2. "The Lord was With David"

David was very successful, even at the court of king Saul. The secret of his success was: "The Lord was with him" (1 Sam 18:12,14,28). The Lord did to David what he had promised Moses at his calling as well as the people in the explanation he had given of the name Yahweh (Ex 3:12 et seq). David experienced the personal presence and fellowship of the Lord, who controls the deepest inclinations of man's heart and uses this control to realise his plan with believers. He ordained people's friendship with David, like that of Jonathan, Saul's son. The Lord also caused Jonathan to make a covenant with David and used this covenant to affirm David's claim to the throne in the face of his enemies (1 Sam 20:16).

David's conduct towards Saul was primarily determined by responsibility to God and not by personal or other interests. In this regard, David gave evidence of a profound understanding of the theocratic nature of the kingship in Israel to which he was also called. The king was subject to the Lord's commandments, and was personally responsible to the Lord. It was in this matter that Saul fell short. David, however, knew that the king could not be harmed at will, especially not by someone who was himself a candidate for the throne, like David.

The history of David, just like that of the patriarchs, was not one of human heroes or perfect models. On the contrary, it was the history of the way in which the Lord maintained his dominion over and fellowship with those he had chosen, despite their unworthiness. David, for instance, found himself in grave danger when Saul persecuted him, and was driven to desperate action. Saul's hatred of David had become so intense that he killed the priests and all the inhabitants of Nob because they had sheltered David (1 Sam 22:6 et seq). David employed ingenious tactics and skill and in the end found himself in Philistine territory where his own plans ensnared him more and more. Everything he did there, including the massacre he caused, spoke more of despair than confidence. However, in this difficult and confusing situation, the Lord would intervene and save him (1 Sam 29).

3. The Lord Causes the Faithful, Noble-minded and Diplomatic David to Become King

David was very noble concerning the memory of Saul. The messenger who claimed that he had killed Saul was himself killed. David composed a lament for Saul and his son Jonathan. He was indeed a man who wanted to be king in the light of God's word. He did not act of his own accord, but consulted the Lord concerning his succession to the throne (2 Sam 2). It seems as if the Philistines allowed his coronation without any objection. An Israel divided between north and south would suit them just fine. Their diplomacy was an enormous success. The commander of Saul's army, Abner, did not join forces with David, but instead crowned Saul's son Ish-Bosheth as king. The people of the covenant had failed in their calling to be united; civil war was the result. In this war Asahel, the brother of Joab who was commander of David's army, was killed by Abner.

The way to the kingship over all of Israel was opened up through the crimes of other people, as well as through David's faith and patience. The way of faith requires perseverance. David was willing to await the right moment, but there would first be a long struggle in which he became stronger and strengthened his position in all of Israel. Now Saul had had a concubine, Rizpah, with whom Abner slept in order to have a claim to the throne. However, his conduct only caused a breach between Ish-Bosheth and himself. When Abner approached David for negotiations, Joab killed him to avenge the death of his brother, Asahel.

David followed Abner's bier and sang a lament for him. By doing this, he clearly expressed his rejection of what Joab had done (2 Sam 3:33). David's conduct gained him even more support among Saul's followers. The same applies to his execution of the two tribesmen of Ish-Bosheth who had murdered him and brought his head to David (2 Sam 4). David thus proved himself to be a man who lived in love of God, confidence in the future and justice and love towards his fellow men. The Lord then made him the triumphant king of all of Israel. This was affirmed in a covenant between David and the elders of Israel (2 Sam 5:3).

Two of David's most important accomplishments were the conquest of Jerusalem and the subjection of the Philistines. With this last accomplishment he had warded off a mortal danger to the people of Israel and their continued existence. With the first, he had obtained for himself a perfect centre of government.

4. Notes

1. Compare Bright (1953:35-39) on the flourishing monarchy under David and Solomon.

45. JERUSALEM BECOMES THE CITY OF DAVID AND OF GOD (2 SAM 5 ETSEQ)

1. Jerusalem Becomes the City of David

Jerusalem had tremendous strategic, historic and military significance. When the Israelites had entered Canaan, they had conquered the city, but had failed to dislodge the Jebusites (Jud 1:8,21). They still lived in Jerusalem when David attacked the city, and thought that the lame and blind would be able to ward off his attack. David, however, did indeed take this invincible city, thereby gaining great military honour. This victory was a very important historic event.

Jerusalem was located in a very central position and was eminently suitable as the administrative centre of David's whole territory. It was neither in Judean territory, nor in that of the tribes which at first had not acknowledged David as their king. This neutrality saved David from considerable embarrassment concerning his place of residence. He could not allow any of the two groups to feel neglected, specifically as their mutual struggle had only just been ended.

Jerusalem was already a very old and illustrious city. The famous priest-king, Melchizedek, had lived there. In the early history of the people of Israel, Abraham had had a splendid meeting with him (Gen 14:18 et seq). David now turned this important city into his personal city and also called it the city of David (2 Sam 5:9). Jerusalem was not in the first instance the city of the people. It was David who reconciled the two groups within the people of Israel and brought about unity, not the city as such.

2. Jerusalem Becomes the Chosen City of God

For David's sake the Lord also chose Jerusalem as the place where he wanted his dwelling place to be (1 Ki 11:36; Ps 76:3; 78:68; 87:2; 132:13,14). In this way, Jerusalem received a very important place in revelation history, as well as history in general. Its importance was out of all proportion to its geographic, political and strategic value.

David wanted the Lord's dwelling place to be in Jerusalem, and therefore brought the ark of the covenant to the city. The ark had considerable religious significance. It was associated with the Lord's great historical work of salvation in which he had led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the desert and into the promised land (2 Sam 7:6). In the eyes of the people, both the city of David and the monarchy were securely anchored to their history and religion through the ark. When David brought the ark to Jerusalem, the Lord concerned himself with David in a very special way and confirmed his action, which strengthened his position as theocratic king in the eyes of his own people, as well as in the eyes of his enemies. Jerusalem became a political and religious centre; the city of David, as well as the city of God. Only in this can the significance of Jerusalem be found, not in the city as such. Its significance lies in God's promises to David - promises that go back to his saving work in history and that are directed towards the future.

In a way the Lord distinguished between David and the people. His love was centred more strongly in the person of David and his family, but specifically in him personally (2 Sam 7). It was for David's sake that the Lord showed mercy to Solomon (1 Ki 11:12) and Judah (1 Ki 15:4; 2 Ki 8:19). Later, during the exile, it would be for David's sake that the Lord would envisage true life and an eternal covenant for his people (Isa 55:3).

The Ark of the Covenant: Symbol of the Lord's Personal and Dynamic Presence Even David did not have a correct understanding of the function of the ark. When he went to bring the ark back to Jerusalem, he placed

too much emphasis on military and other human considerations. He had discussed the matter beforehand with the military leaders of Israel, as if it was a mere military matter (1 Chr 13:1). He also took with him some thirty thousand experienced soldiers (2 Sam 6:1). It is possible, of course, that the Philistine threat was not over yet, and that this kind of armament was therefore necessary. The rest of the chapter would indicate, however, that a too strong emphasis was placed on this and other human considerations.

When the ark was brought to Jerusalem, the oxen pulling the cart stumbled and Uzzah reached out to steady the ark. God, however, struck him down because of his irreverence, and he died. The Lord thus showed that he was still the holy God. There could be no familiarity with him. Before the ark had been taken away by the Philistines, the people of Israel had had a kind of magical view of it. They treated it as if some kind of mechanical link existed between the Lord and the ark. That is why they had asked that the ark be brought to the battle-field to help them in the battle. The people now tended towards the other extreme. They acted as if there was no close link between the Lord and the ark, and they treated it in a very ordinary way. The Lord, therefore, prevented an incorrect understanding of the ark from taking root in David's mind, before it had even reached the city. David and the people were thereby forced to consider carefully the true meaning of the ark.

Before David had brought the ark to Jerusalem, it had stood forgotten in Kiriath Jearim. David's act, however, could not be allowed to give rise to any incorrect understanding. There was not the slightest reason for thinking that it was only through David's bravery that the ark was now in Jerusalem or that he would have any control over it. Disobedience regarding the strict orders of the Lord, as to the way the ark should be handled, was severely punished.

With the death of Uzzah, the Lord made it quite clear that the ark was still his. The Lord is no static God; he is dynamic. He retained the initiative and the right of decree concerning the ark and its transfer to Jerusalem. At the same time the Lord also showed himself to be a gracious God. He blessed the house of Obed-Edom where David had left the ark after the tragic death of Uzzah. This blessing gave David the confidence he needed to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

3. David Acts as an Ordinary Member of the Covenant

When David again went to bring the ark to Jerusalem, he acted like a true theocratic king. He was strictly obedient to the Lord and was like one of the ordinary members of the people of the covenant. He went to get the ark while obeying all the prescriptions of the law. This time it was not transported on a cart, but was carried by the Levites. David showed his solidarity with the people by dancing in front of the ark. He maintained this humble position, even when his wife, Michal, the daughter of Saul, confronted him about this in her autocratic pride.

His solidarity with the people also sheds light on the fact that David acted as priest on this occasion. He blessed the people in the name of the Lord, wore a linen ephod and sacrificed offerings (2 Sam 6:14,17,18). This seems to have been a non-Israelite act, because in Israel it was forbidden to be both priest and king at the same time. The prophets were still very serious in their attempts to prevent concentration of power in one person. An earthly ruler was not allowed to have any influence in cultic or religious institutions. King Uzziah, for instance, was afflicted with leprosy because he had burned incense on the altar of the Lord (2 Chr 26). David's priestly conduct on this occasion was the more remarkable because of the Lord's concern that everything be done according to the prescriptions for such a holy situation (cf the death of Uzzah). It should be understood in the following way: in a certain sense, David acted as an ordinary member of the people. He did not intervene in an autocratic way in the domain of any other office, but was instead discharging the "office of the believer". David's conduct illustrates the fact that the various offices were not mechanically separated; the separation was rather quite flexible.

The situation, as well as the attitude and considerations of the acting person, also played a role. The clear distinction between the powers of the various offices has to be kept in mind even today, but not without recognition of the flexibility that also exists.

4. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1961:446) on the matter of David's success in combining the charismatic and institutional understanding of

religion, as well as reconciling both with the kingship. This included bringing the ark to Jerusalem, performing priestly duties, composing religious poetry and designing a temple.

46. THE LORD BUILDS DAVID A HOUSE, NOT THE OTHER WAY ROUND (2 SAM 7)

1. Human and Divine Considerations

David started an important process of political and religious centralization, by making Jerusalem the centre of his reign and of worship around the ark. Complete centralization would however only be possible with a temple in Jerusalem. David was faithful in his approach to the building of the temple. He gave evidence of faithful consideration for the ark of the Lord: "Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent" (2 Sam 7:2). He wanted to build a more fitting dwelling place for the ark of the Lord and showed himself to be a true theocratic king who knew himself to be dependent of the Lord in all things. Before he began construction of the temple, he first consulted a prophet of the Lord. Both his plan and his motivation seemed quite praiseworthy. The prophet responded without hesitation: "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you" (2 Sam 7:3).

But the Lord did not agree with his prophet. He made it clear that human consideration could never truly fathom God's decree or dominion. Even a prophet could not do it of his own accord. During that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan forbidding David to build the temple.

2. The Lord is Not Confined to a Building, but Controls History

The Lord reminded David that he had made Israel leave Egypt. He is the God who determines history; he is not a mere cultic God (cf Ex 20:2). He could, therefore, not be confined to a temple building. The Lord also emphasised his control of everyday events. It was he himself who had taken David from the pastures with his sheep and had made him king of Israel (2 Sam 7:8).

Israel had previously been a nomadic people with a gregarious existence. A tent had been a fitting symbol of God's presence. By David's time, however, Israel had become an agricultural people and had settled down. Their surrounding enemies had been decisively subjected, and they had rest from all their enemies (2 Sam 7:1). All of this contributed towards a feeling among the Israelites of being well and truly established. There was a grave danger that they would now also consider the Lord to be an established God. This was the Lord's reason for denying David the right to build him a temple.

The Lord did dwell among his people in a very real way. That is why he had previously adapted to their gregarious existence and had dwelled in a tent. However, his way of existence and presence among his people was not identical to that of his people. The Lord is the free and sovereign God who reigns over everything. Nobody could be allowed to think of him as being confined either to a tent or to a temple. He did not get rest through his people's way of existence or their victory over their enemies and the other nations. On the contrary, it was he who gave them rest.

3. The Lord does Not Want to Dwell in a Building, but in People

The Lord's presence was not aimed at a building, but at an individual, personal relationship. He was, therefore, interested more in the house he would build for David, than in the one David wanted to build for him (2 Sam 7:1). The house the Lord intended to build for David was not a temple, but a generation of kings. It was not a building, but a person or persons. The Lord would build David's house like this: David's offspring, his own son, would be established in his kingdom, The Lord would be a father to him, and he would be like a son to the Lord. He would be punished for his transgressions, but in grace. The Lord would not withdraw his covenant faithfulness from him (2 Sam 7:12-15).

Because the presence of the Lord was so personal, he was not to be associated with impersonal buildings. He was also not to be confined to buildings according to the ideas and conceptions of people. That is why the

temple could not be built by David, but only by his son, Solomon, because with him the Lord started to build the "house" of David. It would forever after be clear that the personal relationship of the Lord with the believer comes first. The temple would only have symbolic meaning and was intended to portray this personal relationship.

David was not allowed to build a temple, but Solomon was. This illustrates that the Old Testament does not merely provide timeless truths, but that it is of revelation-historical nature. It should, therefore, be applied with consideration of the variety of situations. As regards the building of the temple, it should also be kept in mind that the history of Israel had typological significance. Israel had to portray something of the true kingdom of God in their religious life. Solomon reigned in a time of peace and his kingdom was, in this regard, a better symbol of the kingdom of God. Solomon, a man of peace, would, therefore, build the temple, not David, who was above all a warrior (1 Chr 22:8,9).

4. A Promise with Messianic Overtones

The Lord would build David a house and give him a son who would live in a very intimate relationship with the Lord. In this promise were included elements that transcended ordinary historical life; these were messianic elements. The Lord's love would never be taken away from this son, but he and his throne would be established forever. The Hebrew word translated as "forever" does not always have the absolute meaning of the English "forever". It sometimes indicates an indeterminate time, like the English "always". The context, however, seems to indicate that the word, as it is used here, does have a special meaning. It is used three times (2 Sam 7:13-16). In his prayer of thanks David also emphasised that his house would be established "forever" (2 Sam 7:24,25,29). God's name would then be great "forever" (2 Sam 7:26). This last expression indicates the special meaning of "forever" in this promise.

David thanked God for this promise. This indicates a very intimate and personal relationship with the Lord. David called himself the Lord's servant no less than ten times (2 Sam 7:19-21,25-29), and said that the Lord had done this great thing for the sake of his word and according to his will (2 Sam 7:21). Because of this promise to David, Israel was unique among the nations (2 Sam 7:23 et seq). Five times they are called "your people" or something similar (2 Sam 7:23,24). There was a mutual relationship between God and Israel, expressed for instance in the covenant formula: "they are your people - you are their God" (cf 2 Sam 7:24).

The Lord's purpose with his special relationship with David and the salvation of Israel was to make a great name for himself. People had to say: "The Lord Almighty is God over Israel" (2 Sam 7:23,26). The Lord's relationship with his people centred around David and his house (2 Sam 7:26). Often in the history of Israel the Lord would say that he showed mercy to his people for the sake of David (1 Ki 15:4; 2 Ki 8:19). The messianic promises in the Old Testament were linked specifically to David.

5. Notes

1. Von Rad (1962:310,311): Yahweh's establishment and guarantee of the Davidic throne came with the prophecy through Nathan (2Sam7). David's plan to build a temple was rejected by Yahweh. The central motif here is: "You will not build me a house, but I will build you one" (later called the *hasedee david*, Ps 21: 8(7); 89:25,29,34 (24,28,33), Isa 55:3). It concerns a house for David, the establishment of his authority as king, as well as the father-son relationship between God and the king. It is called "an eternal covenant" (*berit 'olam*). This relationship was continually interpreted anew, and made relevant to the present time.

2. Von Rad (1962:319-323): the royal psalms concern the coronation of the king. The basic event at the coronation was the adoption of the descendant of David as a child of Yahweh. This relationship was not interpreted mythologically, but in a historical and legal sense. The king of Zion was regarded as the mandatory of Yahweh himself. Because of the relative youth of the monarchy in Israel, the people had no fitting expressions of their own with which to express the attributes of the king. As a result, they borrowed the courtly style of the ancient East.

3. The king had a military task, and was also responsible for maintaining justice. He was regarded as "our very life breath" (Lam 4:20). As an anointed person, he had a need for intercession. The Spirit of Yahweh was with the anointed, and he was regarded as a charismatic person.

4. Von Rad (1962:344-346): after 587 B.C., Yahweh expected Israel to return to him (1 Sam 7:3; 1 Ki 8:33,35; 2 Ki 17:13; 23:25; Dt 30:10; 4:25-31; cf 1 Ki 8:46 et seq). The judgement of 587 B.C was not the end of Israel; only refusal to repent would bring their end. The way of return is clearly spiritual, and requires the heart of man. It is not a matter of the cult, and the primary way of repentance is through prayer.

47. DAVID: SINNER, BUT ALSO SPIRITUAL WARRIOR (2 SAM 11 ET SEQ; 1 KI 1,2)

1. David Commits Adultery and Repents

After the Lord's promise to David (2 Sam 7), a description follows of his victories over the Philistines, Moab, the king of Zobah, the Arameans, Amalek and Edom. The Lord gave David victory wherever he went (2 Sam 8:14). His reign was characterised by justice being done to all people, and by his nobility (2 Sam 8:14; 9). Even so, David stumbled and committed adultery with the wife of one of his subjects. This led to his indirect murder of the man.

According to the standards of eastern despots of the time, this was not out of the ordinary. The God of Israel, however, had different standards of justice that applied to all members of the covenant, irrespective of persons. The Lord was the legislator and ruler. The prophet Nathan, therefore, called David to account. He did this in a way that was unthinkable among the other nations where the word of the king was undisputed law.

When David was confronted by Nathan, he immediately and sincerely repented; there was no hostility or rebellion towards Nathan, nor did he try to escape blame - he only confessed his sin and repented. He showed that the personal relationship with God was the most important thing and controlling element in his life, despite his serious sin. The only thing he was able to say was: "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13). Psalm 51 describes David's confession in a striking way. Because of his intimate personal relationship with the Lord, David received immediate forgiveness.

2. Irrevocable Consequences of his Sin

The Lord forgave David, but that did not mean that he did not punish him, or that his sin would have no consequences. The consequences and influence of the sinful act spread wide. David had killed with the sword, the sword would not depart from his house; he had taken the wife of another man, his own wife would be given to another (2 Sam 12:10,11). His two eldest sons acted in a way similar to his own actions; they were immoral, and their immorality led to death (2 Sam 13 et seq). In the end, Absalom rebelled against his father. This was a serious blow to David and disabled him to a considerable extent with regard to his exercise of authority over the people. It caused dangerous discord in his kingdom and caused him embarrassment in his relationship with Joab (2 Sam 18:10-14; 19:13; 20:4,9 et seq).

The victory over Absalom was a bitter one for David. He was badly shaken by the death of Absalom (2 Sam 18:33), because he felt a certain responsibility for his son's conduct. His sense of guilt over his adultery with Bathsheba remained with him as long as he lived.

3. David's Song of Praise and Prophecy

Despite his sin, David had an intimate relationship with the Lord. That explains the profound gratitude with which he praised the Lord for all the victories he had given him over his enemies, including his victory over Saul (2 Sam 22). This song of praise shows similarities with that of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10). It shows that Hannah's expectations concerning a future king were realised in David.

David's intimate relationship with the Lord became even more intimate as time went by. The Spirit did not only come over him from time to time, as in the case of the judges and of Saul, but remained with him. At the end of his life the Spirit even spoke within him (2 Sam 23:1-7). Where he had previously listened to the prophetic word, he now uttered it himself. Prophet and king were thus united in one person. However, this only applied to the end of his life, and then in a situation where he transcended himself. He became more than what he was in actual fact. In this way, through the Spirit, the Lord taught him the nature of a true ruler: a righteous man, a ruler in the fear of the Lord, to the well-being of the people.

4. Census: Human Failure and Life-giving Divine Dominion

The Bible tells of another great sin of David: in self-sufficiency and ambition, he held a census. Military leaders took the census, not ordinary administrative officials, because David wanted to gloat over his military power. He was not alone in this, however; the people showed solidarity with him. The Lord then used this sin of David

to punish his people.

2 Samuel 24:1 says that the Lord incited David against the people and ordered him to take a census. 1 Chronicles 21 says that it was Satan who incited him. These two statements are not contradictory, but only describe David's actions from two different perspectives. Samuel indicates that in the end everything is controlled by God's absolute dominion, even the sinful deeds of people. Chronicles, on the other hand, indicates that God cannot be held responsible for the sin of man, but only an evil person. Both books, however, make it quite clear that it was still David's and the people's responsibility. The king and the people suffered the consequences of what they did (cf also Gen 3).

As with all kings, and in the case of David's sin with Bathsheba, a prophet now came to the king to call him to account (2 Sam 24:11 et seq). Even when it came to punishment, David called upon God. He did not choose between the three alternatives presented to him (famine, plague or fleeing from his enemies), but only asked not to fall into the hands of men but rather into the hands of the living God.

God sent the angel of the Lord to strike the people with a deadly plague. When the angel wanted to destroy Jerusalem, however, the Lord was grieved and prevented it. The author of Samuel ended his account of David's history with this incident. This seems to say that, but for the grace of God, Jerusalem would have been destroyed. David's reign would then not have brought life and fruit like the reign of a righteous king, but rather death and destruction. The history of the people of God and of the house of David is one of God's absolute grace, of creating life out of death.

5. David's End: Weakness and Strength

David's last commands indicate to what extent he was ensnared by his previous sins and prevented from allowing righteousness to prevail (1 Ki 2). He could not take action against Joab because of the latter's murders, because he had been his accomplice in the history of

Bathsheba. His hands were morally tied. He could not let righteousness prevail in the case of Shimei either, because his feeling of responsibility for Absalom's conduct was too great.

Despite this, David ended his life as a champion of dominion in righteousness. On his deathbed he managed to transcend himself, as well as his moral entrapment through sin. He demanded that justice be done and that the guilty be punished.

David's history and end express David's inability to rule in a truly righteous way; it also conveys, however, his refusal to be satisfied with himself. He was reaching out above himself, and in this gave evidence of messianic elements.

David died as a man reconciled to the Lord, and before he died he bound the son who would succeed him to the service of the Lord. This son lived in a very intimate relationship with the Lord. His succession of David was a fulfilment of the great promise the Lord had made to David (1 Ki 2:1-4). He was also nobody else than the son of Bathsheba. God had forgiven.

6. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:315,316) on the totally secular nature of the sphere of this history. Understanding of the divine guidance in history is manifested in the knowledge that Yahweh is in control of everything that happens. The special field where this control is evident, is the heart of man; the impulses and actions of the heart are subjected to Yahweh's plan with history.

2. Compare Bright (1953:39-44) on the rise and flourishing of the kingship during David's reign, as well as the danger of the state dominating religion.

48. SOLOMON: PRACTICAL WISDOM WITH AND WITHOUT LIVING FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD (1 KI 1-11; 2 CHR 1-9)

1. Practical Wisdom in Dependence on God

After his accession to the throne, Solomon proved to be a man who had an understanding of matters and people, as well as the ability to act decisively. His treatment of Adonijah, Abiathar, Joab and Shimei was an example of this (1 Ki 2:13 et seq). His life was devoted to God with whom he enjoyed intimate fellowship, and he practised his religion in a concrete and practical way. He knew himself to be deeply dependent on God to be able to rule over his people in true servitude. When the Lord gave him the chance to choose whatever he wanted to, he did not choose to further his own interests through wealth or a long life. Neither did he choose for a good relationship between himself and the Lord. He rather chose something that would enable him to do his ordinary and everyday work well.

He understood his work to be a divine calling (1 Ki 3:5 et seq). The Lord promised him honour, a long life, wealth and unrivalled greatness. These things were not, however, automatically guaranteed; Solomon had to exercise his wisdom in a living way by walking in the ways of the Lord and obeying his commands (1 Ki 3:14).

Solomon received practical wisdom. This was proved by the way in which he decided a certain legal matter by the love of a mother (1 Ki 3:16 et seq). A typical characteristic of eastern wisdom was that it was concerned with problems of everyday life and that it founds solutions to these problems in natural life itself (cf also the book of Proverbs). This kind of wisdom, therefore, had a generally human approach to matters. Wisdom in Israel was much the same as among the other nations. The reason for this is that God created and sustains everything. His special revelation is, therefore, not contradictory to natural life.

The history of Solomon, however, also teaches that there is another side to the matter. Should anyone desire to have true wisdom, he must make a definite decision to devote himself to God (cf also Prov 1:7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge..."). True wisdom is not an isolated possession. It is the result of a personal relationship with God. Without this relationship, there can be no true wisdom. Wisdom is not merely possession of knowledge of life, but the ability to fit this knowledge into the total framework or structure.

2. Solomon Questioned

The author of the book of Kings linked Solomon's choice of wisdom to his marriage with the daughter of Pharaoh, king of Egypt (1 Ki 3:1). By this he seems to have asked the question: what would be the deciding factor in Solomon's life? Would he exercise his wisdom with this general relationship as point of departure? Or would he approach both this relationship and his wisdom from the perspective of a personal relationship with God? Solomon's kingdom was politically, socially, economically and culturally a kingdom of peace with close international ties. These things would, however, soon become the driving force of his life.

3. Building the Temple: Perpetuation of the Lord's Covenant

Just like the wisdom in Israel, its cult also showed similarities with those of other nations. The temple which Solomon built resembled the temples of other nations in many respects, and was also erected with the help of Hiram, king of Tyre. Hiram supplied Solomon with building material and craftsmen. One of the most striking similarities between the various temples, was the division into three parts. The arrangement of the Most Holy Place, however, gave evidence of a very different view of God and worship. Statues of the gods of the other nations were usually placed in the Most Holy Place of their temples, while the ark of the covenant was placed in the Most Holy Place of Israel's temple. It was the seat of the Lord, and it was empty. The Lord may not be portrayed.

Solomon's address at the dedication of the temple describes the Lord as an incomprehensible God who dwells in seclusion and darkness (1 Ki 8:12 et seq; cf also Isa 45:15). Despite this, he revealed himself to his people, in and through his word especially (1 Ki 8:12). The temple was his dwelling (1 Ki 8:13); he wanted to have fellowship with people (1 Ki 8:16). He was the God who had led his people from Egypt, a dynamic God, a God who determines history and who saves (1 Ki 8:16). He was not confined to the temple or the cult; even the highest heaven cannot contain him (1 Ki 8:27). That is the reason for the measure of distinction between the Lord and his name; it was his name that dwelled in the temple (1 Ki 8:16). With this the aspect of the Lord's revelation was emphasised; the name was not emancipated from the Lord to be something existing on its own.

The people had to view the temple as the symbol of the covenant relationship between themselves and the Lord. They had to see it in relation to the covenant made at the time of the exodus, as well as in relation to the covenant with David (1 Ki 8:21,23,51; 8:16 et seq; cf 2 Sam 7). In the Lord's answer to Solomon's address in the temple, he perpetuated this covenant with his people. The temple was to spread the glory of the Lord by justice being done to the people and by the joyous and committed service to the one and only God by the people (1 Ki 8:59,60).

4. Solomon's Failure: Wisdom Without Living Fellowship with the Lord

Despite the wonderful beginning of his reign, Solomon did fail to a certain extent. His failure was the result of his wealth and his diplomatic relations, embodied in marriages to foreign princesses. He had to impose heavy taxes to make ends meet and even had to use his people for forced labour. His marriages to foreign princesses required tolerance of their religious feelings and practices. This was the cause of foreign religious influences in Israel. The princesses also had personal influence on Solomon. He loved them and they led him into idolatry, so that his heart was no longer totally committed to the Lord his God like that of his father David (1 Ki 11:1-4).

Solomon did not share in the intimate fellowship his father David had had with the Lord. He viewed wisdom too much as something independent, something he had once received from the Lord as a lasting possession and which he could thereafter use more or less independently. However, even wisdom and peace that did not result from living, personal fellowship with the Lord, were worthless. It caused God's living, personal counsel to be forced to the background and to be subjected to a mechanical cult. Neutral dynastic rules and institutions increasingly took the place of God's personal will. Political issues determined Kingdom issues.

In his address at the dedication of the temple, Solomon had beautifully emphasised the transcendence of God. Even so, God's presence was viewed in an increasingly static way at the royal court and was limited to the temple complex, which included the royal palace (1 Ki 3:1). In this way Solomon, the builder of the temple, failed because he had linked God's presence and dominion more to the temple than to his own heart and life.

The Lord regarded Solomon's conduct as breaking the covenant and punished it by stripping the kingship from him. He did moderate his punishment, however. David's dynasty was preserved in one of the tribes of the torn apart people, namely Judah. This was because of the Lord's elective grace shown to David and his choice of Jerusalem for David's sake (1 Ki 11:12,13,32,34,36). Here too the Lord brought about progress in the midst of downfall.

5. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1961:447-450) on Solomon's ideal of the absolutism of the Egyptian Pharaoh or the Phoenician king. The building of the temple within the walls of the palace compound, illustrates his attempt at unilaterally linking the kingship with the sacramental and cultic groups. This reveals the idea of superhuman power and a semi-divine creature, which is typically Canaanite.
2. According to the classical prophets, the kings failed because of their treaties with the great powers of their times, as well as their deceitful political manoeuvres. Hosea often used images related to the kings (3:4; 8:4 et seq; 10:1 et seq). As in the worship of idols, the personal relationship with God was exchanged for an impersonal, magical force.
3. Compare Fohrer (1972:251-260) on man and technique in the Old Testament.

49. SCHISM: TWO SIMILAR AND YET DIFFERENT KINGDOMS (1 KI 12 ET SEQ; 2 KI; 2 CHR 10 ET SEQ).

1. The Lord Maintains his Dominion and Choice Regardless of Human Schism and Failure

The people had the idealistic expectation that the kingship would deliver them from their enemies and would unify them as a people (1 Ki 8:5,20). They were badly disillusioned, however. The kings caused the people of Israel to be torn in two, to be divided within itself and eventually also caused its downfall. Through his authoritarian conduct, Rehoboam was directly responsible for the irreparable schism. In this he also typified

the others. There were very few exceptions to the rule. The unity of the kingdom, which had taken hold of the imagination in David's time, was soon lost. It was exactly the same as man's dominion in the Garden of Eden.

The Lord was not surprised by these events. He controls history, and had previously predicted both to Solomon and to Jeroboam that it would happen (1 Ki 11:11,26 et seq). It was indeed God's punishment for the people's apostasy, idolatry and disobedience to God's commandments (1 Ki 11:31-33). Both people and king ignored the warning and continued in their apostasy, but the Lord maintained his dominion over the people of the covenant. The prophets spoke quite forcefully against the apostasy. They exposed the formalism and emphasised service of the heart.

The Lord remained involved with his people because he had chosen David and Jerusalem (1 Ki 11:32,34,36). He did this for the sake of his name, because he had established his name in Jerusalem (1 Ki 11:36). For a people who believed, there was hope, but that also required heartfelt repentance and perseverance in faith in the Lord.

2. Similarities and Differences between the Two Groups

The people of the covenant was torn in two: Juda, which included the small tribe of Benjamin, on the one hand, and the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes, usually called Israel, and sometimes Ephraim (because Ephraim was the strongest tribe), on the other hand. The histories of Judah and Israel now continued in parallel lines, and were mostly characterised by mutual hostility. The following words are characteristic of the relationship that usually existed between the two kingdoms: "There was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam" (1 Ki 14:30; cf also 1 Ki 15:6,7,16).

Despite the mutual hostility between the two groups, there were also remarkable similarities, especially in the negative sense. Of both kingdoms it is repeatedly said that their kings did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord (1 Ki 15:3,26; 16:26,30; 22:53; 2 Ki 3:2; 8:18; 13:2,11; etc). Both groups also worshipped on the heights, in the spirit of the unbelievers (14:23; 15:14; 22:44; 2 Ki 12:3; 14:4; 15:4,35; 16:4; 18:4; 1 Ki 12:32; 13:2,32,33; 2 Ki 17:9 et seq).

The evaluation of the kings of the two lines also differ. The kings of Israel are usually compared to their ancestor, Jeroboam. Jeroboam's own sin is mentioned, as well as the way in which he had made Israel sin (1 Ki 15:34; 16:7,26; 22:53; etc). Jeroboam is, therefore, portrayed as model sinner and model king of Israel. The Judean kings are compared to David as "positive" model. It is usually said of them that they did not do what was right like their forefather David had done (1 Ki 15:3; 2 Ki 14:3; 16:2). Of others, like Hezekiah and Josiah, it is said that they did what was right, like their forefather David had done (2 Ki 18:3; 22:2).

In the evaluation of the Israelite kings the emphasis was always on human sin and the continuation of divine dominion despite this sin. In the evaluation of the Judean kings the emphasis was on divine choice. For the sake of David and the Lord's covenant with him the Lord favoured them. He did this even when they deserved the exact opposite (1 Ki 11:32; 15:3,4).

The reference to the Judean kings makes it clear that they, and not the Israelite kings, were the continuation of the original line of the true people of the covenant. The Judean kings are repeatedly related to David, the ideal king of the undivided kingdom. They are never related to Rehoboam, the first king of the divided kingdom. The Israelite kings, on the contrary, are related to Jeroboam, the first king of the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes. They are, therefore, portrayed as the continuation of a split. Israel remained a split-off part, without any organic links with the line of David and the true old Israel.

3. Temptation by King and Prophet

The history of the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes begins with a disobedient king and a disobedient prophet, both of them typifying their fellow officials. This particular king and prophet are described at the beginning of this particular part of the history of Israel, as a lasting warning to the people. They both acted in the same situation, differed from each other in their action and approach to the situation, but resembled each other in their disobedience. Jeroboam arrogantly intervened with the holy things of the Lord, and because of that was reprimanded by the prophet. This prophet, however, allowed himself to be misled and did not comply fully

with the Lord's command. He had to die as a result of his disobedience (1 Ki 13).

With these events the Lord showed that he required unconditional obedience, both of the king and of the prophet. A prophet has to be controlled very strictly, or else he himself would fail in the struggle against apostasy. He must obey and preach God's direct revelation only. He may not follow any human being's words, no matter how pious they seem to be. Human words should be tested, even though they be the words of an old prophet. Neither the prophetic office nor age can be blindly obeyed. The Lord demands unconditional obedience to his prophetic word, but never demands blind obedience to authority as such or to people in authority.

Israel did not heed these warnings. They were not capable of withstanding either prophetic deception or the false religion into which Jeroboam was leading them.

4. Worship of Calves in Israel

Jeroboam did not intend to serve other gods, but wanted to make a visual portrayal of the Lord by means of a symbol. However, this was contrary to the second commandment. The calf he used as symbol was also typical of the baalist fertility cult. Jeroboam did not understand that God's personal presence included the fact that he could not be confined in any way. He thus confined God far too easily to things and places, and also identified him with these. Jeroboam was guilty of formalism and took it to its logical conclusion, namely idolatry.

Because Jeroboam had no intimate personal relationship with the Lord, he used religion to further his own political interests. He erected idols in the north of his kingdom, at Dan, and in the south, at Bethel, on the route to Jerusalem. In this way he intended to undermine the religious centrality of Jerusalem. Jeroboam's attitude was characteristic of the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes; he was the spiritual father of this Kingdom. Like he had sinned, the kings after him also sinned (1 Ki 15:34 et seq).

The lawlessness of the Kingdom of the Ten tribes towards the Lord resulted in lawlessness towards the royal families as well. There was no continuous dynasty like in Israel, but power frequently changed hands. There were frequent palace revolutions; kings were murdered and even whole royal families wiped out.

5. Notes

1. Compare Bright(1953:45-51) on the matter of resistance to a state according to Solomon's model.

50. ELIJAH: MORTAL COMBAT AGAINST THE BAAL CULT (1 KI 16-18; 2 KI 2)

1. The History of the Kings and the Prophets Intertwined

The history of the kings is intertwined with that of the prophets. Right at the beginning of the history of the kings, after the division of the kingdom, the action of the man of God over against Jeroboam is described. The rest of the history described in the book of Kings is also dominated by the prophets. Elijah is especially dominant (1 Ki 17-19,21; 2 Ki 1). King Ahab was completely in his shadow. Elisha, who would continue Elijah's work, is also a very important figure. His history is intertwined with the histories of various kings (2 Ki 2,4,5,6,8,9,13). The prophet Isaiah also comes to the fore, even though not much is said about him (2 Ki 19,20). Various other prophets also acted in the time of the kings, but their actions were so important that it is described in separate books. In the books of Kings they are hardly mentioned, however, because these books are intended to focus on the kings, not on the prophets.

Elijah and Elisha both receive emphasis in the history of the kings, and neither of them are discussed anywhere else. This illustrates the fact that the kings cannot be considered without the prophets.

2. A Time of Crisis; Miracles

King Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. In Sidon, worship of Baal was the

official religion (1 Ki 16:30 et seq). Ahab "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him". Not only did he maintain Jeroboam's worship of the calves, together with all the Canaanite influences that went with it, but he also started to actively worship Baal. He knelt down before Baal, built him a temple, erected an altar in it, and even made an Asherah pole.

It would seem as if Ahab never really intended to reject the service of the Lord, but that he was of the opinion that there was also space for Baal worship within the framework of Israel's religion. The Lord would, however, show very clearly, through the prophet Elijah, that he was the one and only God and that he alone was to be served.

Jezebel was a competent and extremely overbearing person with a fanatic zeal for her own religion. She wanted to have it instituted as official religion in Israel. She acted in such a forceful way that Israel was plunged in a serious religious crisis.

Because of this crisis, miracles form a very important part of this history. It was just like in other times of crisis, when the Lord had proved his miraculous dominion in order to sustain his people and his revelation. This had been the case with the birth of Isaac, the exodus from Egypt, and the entry into Canaan. The Lord brought about preservation of life and even raised the dead. He ordered ravens to take Elijah food, caused the dead to be revived by Elijah and Elisha, and took Elijah up to heaven.

The prominent position of the life-giving action of the Lord in the history of Elijah proves the prominence of the life-giving actions of the Lord in all of the Old Testament revelation of God. It is indeed true that Elijah has a very special position in revelation history. He is indicated together with Moses, as representative of the law and the prophets; both of them also appeared together with Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration (Mai 4:4,5; Mt 17).

3. Elijah, Servant of the Only and Life-giving God

As one called by the Lord, Elijah joined battle with the Baal worship of Ahab and Jezebel. Through Elia the Lord made it known that there would be a severe drought and that it would only rain again at his command. With this he proved himself to be the only one to give rain and drought. He proved that the claim of the Baal worshippers (that the Baals were responsible for rain, fertility and all growth in nature) was false.

The Lord also proved that he, unlike the Baals, was more than a nature deity. Not only did he give both rain and drought, but he also miraculously sustained Elijah by ordering ravens to provide him with food during his stay in the Kerith Ravine. He also provided an unending supply of flower and oil for the widow at Zarephath. It was believed that the Baals created new life in nature by causing the dry seasons to be followed by rainy ones. The Lord did this and much more: he created life and even raised the dead - the son of the widow at Zarephath was raised from death through Elijah (1 Ki 17).

With this last act the Lord showed that he is the only and living God and that he is, therefore, also a universal God, the God of all people. Not only Israel had to serve him, but all people. Zarephath was in Sidon. The widow of Zarephath was, therefore, one of Jezebel's compatriots - and the Sidonians worshipped Baal! At the same time when Elijah was fighting the foreign religion, the Lord was preparing worshippers of himself among the Sidonians. This indicated that there could be no syncretism between the worship of the Lord and the Baals, and also that the true religion could not be confined to Israel. Israel had to reach out with its religion, but while doing this the people were to remain faithful to the Lord. This reaching out had to be done in compassion for people in need, like Elijah's compassion for the widow of Zarephath. Because Elijah believed in the Lord as the only and life-giving God, he confronted Ahab with extraordinary courage and rebuked him for his apostasy. With equal courage he confronted the Baal prophets (1 Ki 18:18,19). On Mount Carmel he called on the people to make a radical choice, either for the Lord or for Baal; they could no longer waver between two opinions (1 Ki 18:21; cf also 1 Ki 18:39). Elijah prayed to the Lord and confessed him as the God with absolute power (1 Ki 18:36,37).

He has authority over nature – he would give rain. He has authority over history; he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel - the God who has always been working in history and who maintains a personal relationship with his people. He is not an impersonal nature deity like the gods of the Canaanites. He has authority over

man's inner being - it is he who returns his peoples' hearts to himself (cf also Mic 7:18-20; Lam 5:20).

This struggle between the service of God or the Baals is about a radical opposition and choice: The Lord or Baal, life or death. That is the reason why the Baal prophets had to die (cf also Dt 7:2; 13:13 et seq).

Elijah's end was like his ministry: he ascended to heaven in a storm. Elisha regarded his departure to be like the loss of chariots and horsemen of Israel (2 Ki 2:11,12). Elijah was not taken to heaven to safeguard him from the danger of the struggle, but because he had fought the struggle and had gained victory. His ascent to heaven was the affirmation of God's triumph in the struggle against Baal worship. His ascent proved the Lord's dominion over life and death: he can even set aside death. In this regard the idols had nothing to offer their worshippers.

The Bible thus gives witness of a God who controls life in every aspect and in its fullness. It speaks of personal covenant fellowship with the Lord, fellowship that is indestructible to a true believer. This remains true, despite mortally dangerous attacks launched at the life of faith and despite the cruel reality of death in this broken human existence (cf also Gen 5:24; Ps 49:16; 73:24). For those who are totally committed to serving the Lord, there are both power and vision for the struggle, as/well as a view towards the future.

4. Notes

1. Compare Bright (1953:31-57) on the crisis, the revolution and its consequences in the Northern Kingdom.

51. ELIJAH AT HOREB: GOD ALSO WORKS AND PROVIDES UNOBTRUSIVELY (1 KI 19 ET SEQ; 2 KI 1-8)

1. Elijah Becomes Discouraged and, like Moses, is Visited by the Lord

Even a powerful figure like Elijah was in himself not equal to the struggle. He was only a servant of the Lord, who also became discouraged and had to be lifted from the depths of despair by the Lord.

Elijah fled from Jezebel because of her threat to kill him like he had killed the Baal prophets. During his flight, an angel of the Lord encouraged and supported him (1 Ki 19:5-7). In his despair, Elijah complained that he was the only one who was still fighting for the covenant of the Lord. The people had left the covenant, destroyed the altars and killed the prophets, and now they wanted to kill him as well (1 Ki 19:10). It is ironic that he still called God "The LORD God Almighty". His trust in God's omnipotence, however, had left him.

Elijah went to Mount Horeb in search of the Lord, because it was at Horeb that the Lord had made the covenant with his people, the same covenant that they had broken. At Horeb Elijah experienced the same kind of encounter with God that Moses, God's other great servant, had experienced. In revelation history, Elijah is just as prominent a figure as Moses (Mai 4:4-6; Mt 17). Just like Moses, Elijah was strengthened by the Lord in order to be able to continue for forty days and nights without food or water (1 Ki 19:8; cf also Ex 24:18; 34:28). Just like Moses, Elijah had this encounter with God after an extraordinary spiritual struggle for the people of God who had broken the covenant. Like Moses, Elijah had a personal encounter with God, but he could only see him in passing and not in his true essence.

With this the Lord revealed himself to be the God who remains faithful to his covenant and maintains it despite the fundamental onslaught against it. The covenant relationship between the Lord and his people had been so fundamentally endangered that he repeated some of the original events with Moses, in order to restore the covenant. Both the Lord's dominion and his covenant are about his personal fellowship with believers. That explains why the personal encounter Moses had had with the Lord was repeated with Elijah.

2. The Gentle Whisper of the Wind: the Lord also Works Unobtrusively and Independent of the Prophet

With his appearance to Elijah the Lord showed himself to be a God who works not only in a forceful and external way, but also in an unobtrusive way. He did not appear in the phenomena that usually accompany a

theophany (the earthquake and the fire), but in the whisper of the wind (1 Ki 19:11,12). With this he showed Elijah that he exercises his dominion not only through working spectacular miracles like on Mount Carmel. He also works silently and unobtrusively in peoples' hearts and lives. That is why he still had seven thousand faithful who would not worship Baal. Elijah's work was of absolutely fundamental significance in revelation history. Still, the Lord was not dependent on him for the continuation of this history.

Elijah was not allowed to think that God's work would be destroyed once he himself became unable to continue working; neither did he need to become desperate about that for which he had been working, because God's work would continue irrevocably. With this attitude, Elijah would have been able to act and witness forcefully, even if it would cause his death. This does not mean that the Lord considered the prophet to be an impersonal instrument and did not comfort him. On the contrary, the prophet received further orders to carry out and was assured of the Lord's protection.

A deep revelation-historical idea is contained in the fact that God caused seven thousand to remain in Israel who did not bow down to Baal. The notion of a remnant of the people of Israel is also clearly evident with prophets like Isaiah and Amos. It teaches that God's work of salvation amounts to rescue through downfall, to life-giving through death. Seven thousand is a round number and signifies fullness, the full number of God's true believers. It is a large number as such, but when compared to the whole population it is quite small. It indicates only those saved from a big catastrophe or major apostasy. This idea can be found in all of Scripture: the believers are nothing but a small remnant, the fruit of God's saving and life-giving grace. They are, nevertheless, a full number. Every believer should remember this, especially when he becomes discouraged and feels alone in his struggle.

3. The Lord also Punishes Sin Violently

With this history the Lord proved that he remains free in what he does. He punished sin violently. Within the seemingly hopeless turn of events, he continued his dominion. In this regard, Elijah had three orders to carry out. He had to anoint Hazael king over Aram, Jehu king over Israel, and Elisha as prophet in his own place. The Lord would use them as agents of his punishment (1 Ki 19:15-17). He also showed himself to be a consuming fire for those who do not honour him. This was clearly indicated when the messenger of king Ahaziah, whom the latter had sent to Elijah, was consumed by fire (2 Ki 1).

The Lord ordered Elijah to announce the violent end of the house of Ahab (1 Ki 21:18). This happened after Naboth had been killed at Jezebel's command, because he had refused to give his land to Ahab; he had (rightly) viewed it as the inalienable property of his family (Lev 25:23-28; Num 26:7 et seq). This history shows how a king who did not - like all his subjects - obey the Lord's commandments, lost his freedom. He increasingly sold himself to sin and became ever more entangled in his actions (1 Ki 21:7,20). What is more, the Lord did not allow injustice against the helpless to go unpunished.

4. Elisha: the Rebuilding of the Remnant

After Elijah had already been taken away, the Lord continued to violently punish the sins of his people. Elisha, for example, cursed the youths who had jeered him by calling him a "baldhead". This had fatal consequences for them and served as a powerful witness against the semi-pagan spirit of the time. Bethel was the city where the worship of calves - that had mocked the Lord - under Jeroboam had been very popular. The name "baldhead" may have referred to a certain kind of hairstyle related to Elisha's prophetic function. The name thus expressed contempt for his prophetic work.

Elisha performed many miracles of various kinds, like, for instance, his political, domestic and everyday ones. He even raised a dead person. His ministry also gave clear evidence of the fact that the Lord wanted to be served universally. Elisha worked the healing, for instance, of the Syrian general, Naaman, who was suffering from an incurable skin disease (2 Ki 5). Like Elijah, Elisha was a man with a fierce spirit. Because of the ministry of the word he continued to have a life-giving influence even after his death. When someone was thrown into his grave, he became alive again (2 Ki 13:14 et seq). Elisha's God was not a God of the dead, but of the living!

All Elisha's miracles, except for the one at Bethel, were saving ones. Unlike Elijah, no utterances of his against

the sin of his time were written down. His task was primarily to comfort and edify the remaining "seven thousand". The Lord provided for his people.

5. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:189) with regard to 1 Kings 19:11 – God is not confined to a specific place.
2. Compare Eichrodt (1967:54) on the fact that the expression "man of the Spirit" does not refer to a transposition to the divine sphere, but rather indicates the person's special task and dependence on God.

52. JEROBOAM II AND HIS SUCCESSORS: THE GOLDEN AGE AND DOWNFALL OF THE KINGDOM OF THE TEN TRIBES (2 KI 9-15)

1. Jehu: Executor of the House of Ahab's Punishment

Jehu was an important figure, because he was the executor of the house of Ahab's punishment. He was one of Israel's generals and was anointed king over Israel by a prophet at Elisha's command. Israel's kings would henceforth again be the anointed of the Lord, unlike during the time of the dynasty of Omri. The Lord was still involved with the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes and gave it a last chance.

Jehu's action differed from that of David, who awaited the Lord for action against Saul after he had been anointed. Jehu took immediate and violent action. He carried out a coup d'etat in Samaria, and then killed king Joram who was in Jezreel, recovering from his wounds. King Ahaziah of Judah was also killed. Jehu then went on to kill Jezebel, eradicate the house of Ahab and kill all the prophets of Baal.

Jehu seemed to be extremely zealous for the cause of the Lord, but he had no depth of faith nor any intimate fellowship with God. He was more concerned with the eradication of the house of Ahab than with serving the Lord. He did succeed in eradicating Baal worship, but Jeroboam's worship of the calves still continued. "Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the Lord, the God of Israel, with all his heart" (2 Ki 10:31). During his reign, therefore, the Lord started to reduce the size of Israel and allowed Hazael of Syria to conquer part of Israel's territory (2 Ki 10:32,33).

2. Jeroboam II: Prosperity and Apostasy

Jeroboam II was one of the great figures of the dynasty of Jehu and of his time. He ruled for forty one years and gained terrific victories. The borders of his kingdom were the same as in the days of David and Solomon (2 Ki 14:25; 28; 1 Ki 8:65; 2 Sam 8:3-8). During his reign Israel also experienced a period of extraordinary economic prosperity. As regards religion, however, formalism was the order of the day, and socially speaking injustice was rampant. Immorality was also very common.

The prophet Amos prophesied strongly against injustice, while Hosea uncovered religious unfaithfulness in order to call Israel to repentance. Jonah intended to show the fallen people, who still believed that only they were entitled to enjoy God's grace, their own self-satisfaction.

3. Spiritual Weakness, as well as Political and National Downfall

Israel was much larger and stronger than Judah, but was not as spiritually integrated as Judah. The sin of Jeroboam I was characteristic of the whole people. They continued in their sin against the Lord who had saved them from their slavery in Egypt, and worshipped idols. In this way they transgressed the first commandment and thus dug their own grave. Only the Lord acts in history and determines it. Only he saves and protects his people and strengthens them.

The religious and moral decay in Israel led to the fact that its last years of existence were characterised by regicide. In the end Israel fell as a result of internal strife, the fraternal struggle with Judah, the struggle against Syria and, lastly, the appearance of the much feared Assyrians. Tiglath-Pileser III already occupied northern Galilee and the territory to the east of the river Jordan. A few years later Shalmaneser V attacked Samaria.

This was the result of the opportunistic politics of king Hoshea, typical of the kings of Israel, and his refusal to pay tribute. Samaria was besieged for three years, and this was accompanied by terrible suffering.

Then the unimaginable happened: Israel was exiled by the cruel Assyrians (722 BC). They disappeared in Assyria. They had cut the inner tie with the Lord early in their history as a people, and were, therefore, not rescued by the Lord, unlike the people of Judah who were miraculously rescued despite everything that had happened. The author of the book of Kings states the fundamental reasons for their downfall: their aversion to the true religion and their breaking of the covenant the Lord had made with them at the time of the exodus from Egypt (2 Ki 17:7-23). In this way Israel issued a serious warning to their fraternal people, Judah. Israel's history is also a warning to every other people claiming to serve God, but who does not live intimately with him, who does not radically break with sin and who does not follow God's word as the only guideline for life.

4. The Samaritans: Mixed Remnant of Israel

The Assyrian policy of deportment was aimed at breaking the national feeling of the subjected nations. They resettled groups of people from foreign nations in Samaria (2 Ki 17:24). In time, this new population, together with the remaining Israelites, formed the Samaritans.

The new population group also started to worship the Lord when they were resettled in Samaria, because they believed that every city had its own deity. At the time this was the general view among the other nations. They did not have a monotheistic religion like the people of the covenant, and thus did not confess the Lord as the only God and Ruler over all people and all places. At first the Samaritan religion was syncretistic - they mixed the service of the Lord with the service of other gods. Later on, as in the time of Jesus, it seems to have been different. In the end, when Jesus came, the Samaritans also received a place in the people of God. The Lord had not completely deserted the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes, but brought new life in Samaria through national death.

5. Notes

1. Compare Bright (1953:57-60,71-78) on the flourishing of the Northern Kingdom, the threat of the Assyrians, and the eventual downfall of the Northern Kingdom.

53. REHOBOAM AND THE LINE OF JUDEAN KINGS: DIVINE GRACE (1 KI 14 ET SEQ; 2 KI 8 ET SEQ)

1. Rehoboam, Example of Human Unfaithfulness and the Gracious Intervention of God

The royal house of Judah was much more stable than that of Israel and formed a continuous line. Even so, the kings of Judah resembled the kings of their fraternal people in many respects. Rehoboam, the first in the Judean line of kings, acted in an autocratic, irresponsible and foolish way. The result was that God used Jeroboam as instrument of punishment against Judah (1 Ki 11:26 et seq). Despite this the Lord did not take his hand from the Judean royal house, neither did he justify Jeroboam regarding the considerations and objectives that motivated his actions.

Rehoboam and the people worshipped on the heights in the spirit of the unbelieving nations, erected sacred pillars of stone and even practiced temple prostitution (1 Ki 14:22 et seq). The history of this people is one of human unfaithfulness and divine patience.

Many Judean kings received excellent religious testimonials, and yet this line of kings is also characterised by the refrain "and he did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord". It was only the gracious intervention of the Lord in this line of kings that enabled it to produce a few kings of outstanding religious quality. This quality was not an inherent characteristic of all Judean kings.

2. Ahaz: Unconditional Faith in the Lord is Asking Too Much

Just like Israel, Judah also had its kings who distinguished themselves by their godlessness. One of these kings was Ahaz. Unlike Israel, he had a pro-Assyrian policy and was not to be convinced of the danger of such a policy. King Pekah of Israel and king Rezin of Aram tried to persuade Ahaz to join an anti-Assyrian coalition (2 Ki 16:5). It would seem as if they also inflicted grave harm on him (2 Chr 28:5-8,16-18).

The prophet Isaiah tried in vain to dissuade Ahaz from asking the help of Assyria in this situation, and to persuade him to trust in the Lord alone. He encouraged the king and even gave him a sign as proof of the Lord's protection against the attacks (Isa 7). A young woman would conceive and have a son, whom she would call Immanuel, Isaiah said. Even before this child would be able to distinguish right from wrong, the lands of these two hostile kings would be deserted, while the child would have enough to eat. It is not clear who this young woman was, but the message is quite clear: the Lord provides for his people who believe in him and in his saving presence. The helpless child of the helpless woman, with the confession "God is with us" was proof of this.

Ahaz, however, paid no attention to this sign. He did not believe in any such presence of the Lord in the daily political run of events. The presence of the Lord thus became a judgement of him and his house, instead of the comfort it was intended to be.

This time was one of great crisis for Judah. However, God stays with his people, who really believe in him and await him, in the midst of the most terrifying crises and in the darkest situations. This would become especially clear in Jesus Christ (Mt 1:23). The refusal of Ahaz to place his trust in the Lord alone cost him dear. He became the political vassal of Assyria, his supposed ally. He also lost the tie with God. That is why he also became a follower of other religions (2 Chr 28:1-4). The cult of the nature deity Rimmon of Damascus impressed him so much that he built him an altar and acted as high priest himself. In this he followed the example of his grandfather Uzziah.

Ahaz also worshipped the Baals on the heights and underneath green trees and even sacrificed his sons in the fire. These were practices expressly forbidden by the Lord (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Dt 12:31; 18:10).

3. Kings of Reformation: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah

There were also kings of Judah who received the wonderful testimonial that they did "what was right in the eyes of the Lord", kings like Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah (1 Ki 15:11; 22:43; 2 Ki 18:3; 22:2). They carried out reforms and abolished idol worship together with the accompanying unholy practices, like temple prostitution (1 Ki 15:9 et seq; 22:41 et seq; 2 Ki 18 et seq; 2 Ki 20 et seq).

However, even these kings are not portrayed as perfect people, but rather as people who made mistakes and even had to be reprimanded. Asa and Jehoshaphat, for instance, did abolish the worship of idols, but they allowed worship on the heights to continue (1 Ki 15:14; 22:44). This worship on the high places seems to have been rooted too deeply in the hearts of the people of Israel and Judah. It was also a matter of great subtlety in which the attitude of the worshipper was more important than outward acts or practices. The people pretended to be doing nothing but worshipping the Lord on these high places, while in actual fact they often attributed extraordinary, even magical significance to these places.

The common mistake of these kings was their involvement in international politics and political treaties. This proves that even the pious kings were not sufficiently motivated by faith in the Lord when it came to their political activities. Asa, for instance, was rebuked by the prophet, because he had relied on the king of Aram (2 Chr 16:7), while Josiah was rebuked because of the pact he had made with the unbelieving king of Israel (2 Chr 20:37). Hezekiah was reprimanded for having colluded with the Babylonian Merodach-Baladan who had revolted against Assyria (2 Ki 20:16 et seq). Even Josiah's struggle against Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, for which he paid with his life (2 Ki 23:29,30) seems not to have been according to the will of God.

Hezekiah was a great reformer. He is also well known for his keen interest in art and literature. According to the headings in Proverbs 25-29 he even collected some of Solomon's proverbs. He was king in the time of the prophet Isaiah's ministry.

Josiah is regarded as the greatest reformer among the kings of Judah. He was responsible, among other things,

for the purification and repair of the temple. During this process, the Book of the Law was found, and this distressed him greatly. Josiah's time was characterised by apostasy, and the Book of the Law precisely proclaimed judgement on the people because of their apostasy (2 Ki 22:10 et seq). It is not clear whether this book was the so-called Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22-23:33), or whether it was another part like the book of Deuteronomy. Nevertheless, Josiah carried out radical reforms on the basis of this book and committed his people to keep the covenant. In this way the Lord's covenant with his people was renewed (2 Ki 23:3).

This part of the history of the people of the covenant teaches that believers should always be involved in a struggle against worldly temptation in religion. Continuous reforms should be carried out, not in self-satisfaction, but in a spirit of serious introspection and deep dependence on the Lord.

4. Notes

1. Compare Bright (1953:78-83,98-108,112-116) on the reformations, but also the downfall, of Judah.

54. NATIONAL DOWNFALL (2 KI 23 ET SEQ; LAM)

1. The Lord's Anger against Jerusalem

The reforms and renewal of the covenant under Josiah did not prevent the Lord from venting his wrath against Jerusalem. The reforms would not bring about fundamental and lasting change among the people, because within themselves they were too attached to sin. The wrath of the Lord had already been incurred irrevocably. For Josiah's sake the Lord would not vent his rage during his reign, but he would remove Judah from his sight. He would reject Jerusalem, his chosen city, and also the house of which he had said that he would make it the dwelling place of his name (2 Ki 23:25-27).

The prophet Jeremiah was active at this time. He was confronted with an unrepenting people. As a result of Josiah's reforms the people were under the impression that everything was in order. Jeremiah indicated that they were actually practicing formalism. Their collective attitude and their social order had to be broken down to be replaced by an attitude and order based on true faith in God.

In 597 BC the first signs of impending disaster appeared in Judah: a part of the population was exiled, together with king Jehoiachin. Among them was also the prophet Ezekiel. Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, was made king in Jerusalem. The following years constituted a time of uncertainty and rebellion. Finally Jerusalem was laid siege to, and the siege lasted for about two years. During this time, Jerusalem experienced terrible misery, famine and the plague. In 586 BC the city was destroyed and its remaining inhabitants exiled.

2. Disaster, but Hope as Well

The book of Kings ends with a description of this tragic turn of events. None of what happened was coincidental, however; it was all part of the Lord's punishing activity (2 Ki 23:25-27). It is after all the Lord who is in control of everything. He is a just God who cannot allow his ordinances to be disregarded. He allows no formalism, nor any kind of mechanic relationship with him; that is not the way of his will and covenant. He rejected both the city and the house he had chosen, that had eventually become unfaithful to him. The book of Kings mentions only the fact of the exile and the eventual pardon of Jehoiachin in Babylon, but does not provide any information regarding the people's situation in exile. The book of Chronicles makes no mention of it either, but immediately continues with the proclamation of the Persian king, Cyrus, that allowed the Jews to return to their land.

The history of the exile thus remains a closed book, at least as regards the group of historical books beginning with Samuel and ending with Esther. In the history of the people of the covenant this period, therefore, equals a period of death. The prophet Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones provides a perfect sketch of the situation as symbol of the death of the people (Eze 37). The earlier fate of the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes clearly indicated the terrible implications of exile: national death and disappearance. In their endings, the books of Kings and Chronicles thus reach across national death to life beyond exile. Their vision is towards the future, towards the

way of the Lord with his people. The Lord is the God who has a covenant relationship with his people - he is the God of life.

The author of the book of Kings also held on to the fact that the Lord is faithful to his covenant. That explains why his book does not end on the negative note of the death and downfall of a people. It rather ends with Jehoiachin being released from prison in Babylon (2 Ki 25:27 et seq). It seems as if the author thereby expressed his confidence that the Lord would be faithful to his covenant with David, according to which there would always be a son of David on the throne of Israel. The author was just as careful, and yet hopeful, with this as the prophet Amos was when he said: perhaps there is hope (cf Am 5:15) - even though the hope and the rescue would be like life from death.

3. Incomparable Misery and Hope for the Fallen People: Lamentations

The book of Lamentations interprets the people's experience of the fall of Jerusalem as well as their disappointment regarding their expectations of the kingship. It shows how they dealt with these matters under prophetic influence. According to the usual order, the book of Lamentations follows that of the prophet Jeremiah. The endings of the books of Jeremiah and Kings are identical. The book of Lamentations - as regards both content and position - could, therefore, have followed either of the two.

The book of Lamentations was written - as indicated by its title - in the form of a lament. It is similar to the laments sung at funerals, and it is, therefore, characteristic of the atmosphere of downfall and death. The book of Lamentations describes the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of its inhabitants as the Day of the Lord, the terrible day of judgement (cf Lam 1:12; 2:21,22; also Am 5:18). The roles are totally reversed, the poet laments (Lam 1:2; cf Num 23:9; Dt 33:28). The relationship of favour the people had had with the Lord was turned into the exact opposite (Lam 1:5; 2:5; 3:45; 4:11; 5:18). Jerusalem was like someone to whom no song of comfort was sung during a time of catastrophe and death (Lam 1:2,7,9,16,17,21). The one who used to comfort, now punished!

The people was deeply guilty and received an incomparable punishment, because the Lord is a holy God (Lam 1:5,20; 2:14; 3:39; 4:6,13; 5:7,21). The Lord remained faithful to his covenant, however; the songs continue to sing of the relationship of deep fellowship of the Lord with his people (Lam 1:20 et seq; 2:20 et seq; 3:55 et seq; 4:22; 5:19 et seq). The poet was hoping for salvation that would be like God giving life through downfall and death (Lam 5:17-22). The book of Lamentations also indicates that there was one whose suffering was greater than that of Jerusalem (Lam 3:1; cf 2:13). This person was a fellow sufferer and interceded in prayer for the people and for Jerusalem (Lam 3:48). He himself was actually brought to life out of death (Lam 3:18,54). There was still hope, even in the face of death (Lam 3:21 et seq). This person was the poet himself. However, his description transcended himself at the same time and pointed to someone else. After all, it was only Jesus who could really suffer for his people and pass through death for them. The book of Lamentations seems to be asking for someone like him.

The book ends with the full acknowledgement that the Lord is indeed absolutely sovereign; there is no suggestion that he was to forgive his people in a mechanical way simply because of his faithfulness to his covenant, or because of the fact that he is a merciful God. The matter was completely left in his hands. At the same time the poet also steadfastly held on to the covenant fellowship with the Lord, and ended meekly but in strong faith:

"Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return;
renew our days as of old
unless you have utterly rejected us
and are angry with us beyond measure." (Lam 5:21-22)

4. Notes

1. Compare Helberg (1984) on the place of disillusionment and hope.
2. Compare Childs (1986:102,103) on judgement, as well as hope, especially in Lamentations 3.

55. NATIONAL RESURRECTION: RETURN AND RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE (EZRA)

1. Cyrus, the Lord's Instrument, Becomes Ruler of the World

The powerful world empire that had exiled Judah went the way of all flesh and was replaced by a new one - the Persian Empire. The prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah concerning Cyrus were fulfilled: the new ruler of the world who had broken the power of Babylon, was an instrument in the hand of the Lord (Isa 41:1 et seq; 41:21 et seq; 44:24 et seq; 45:9 et seq; 48:1 et seq). He had a new policy and allowed the subject nations to return to their respective countries and treated them with goodwill. This became the means by which the people of the covenant was freed. Only a year after Cyrus came to power in Babylon he made a proclamation that allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple. It was the Lord who had made him issue the proclamation (Ezra 1:1 et seq). Cyrus even donated the temple objects, taken from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, to the Jews (Ezra 1:7 et seq).

Cyrus did not truly know God in faith (Isa 45:4), and yet the Lord enacted his dominion and his plan through Cyrus. Cyrus did, however, acknowledge the Lord's dominion over himself and all other kingdoms: "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" (Ezra 1:2). This confession of Cyrus should, however, not be overemphasised, as if he had become a true worshipper of the Lord. He made similar confessions concerning the gods of other nations, like Marduk of Babylonia. It was part of his political diplomacy. The emphasis in this history is not so much on what Cyrus did as on what the Lord did through him. It is significant that Deutero-Isaiah calls Cyrus the anointed one of the Lord (Isa 45:1), but that he is nowhere called the servant of the Lord like Israel (Judah). Only Israel was the true servant of the Lord who not only carried out the will of the Lord, but also lived in a personal covenant relationship with him.

2. The Lord has Fellowship with his People and Rules the World

The history of the return of the people of the covenant from exile is primarily concerned with the Lord's fellowship with his people. The religious motif was the most important one to the author of the book of Ezra. He emphasised the feast celebrated in honour of the Lord and the house built for him (3:1 et seq; 1:2 et seq). This history is, therefore, first of all about the Lord's fellowship with his people and his presence among them. It was like the great event of the exodus from Egypt (Ex 5:1; 10:24; 24:31).

As in the case of the exodus from Egypt, something else, apart from the Lord's fellowship with his people, is also emphasised. The events clearly indicate that the Lord was not a mere cultic God who was confined to the cult. On the contrary, he was the God who had absolute dominion over history; his dominion extended over all kingdoms and all people, also over the heart and spirit of Pharaoh and Cyrus.

Unlike the history of Pharaoh, the Lord did not, in this case, exercise his dominion by hardening the heart of Cyrus, but by making him favourable to the cause of the Jews. The time was drawing near when the Lord would cause his covenant to be acknowledged and accepted throughout the world.

3. A People is Raised from Death

The exile actually amounted to the death of the people. The exiles were people without land, temple or their own government. The Lord raised this people from death through his word and Spirit (Eze 37). When the time for return from exile came, there was so little left of the old national vitality that God had to revive his people's spirits in order to make them return to their land (Ezra 1:5). The people who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon was thus a people raised from death.

Those who returned began with great courage and energy, but their joy was soon tinged with sorrow. One of the first things they did was to build an altar for the Lord, to offer sacrifices to him in celebration and to lay the foundation for the temple of the Lord (Ezra 3). The festive joy was, however, tinged with sorrow, the sorrow of those who still remembered and longed for the splendour of the previous temple. It was as if only a little of the new life was showing yet through the atmosphere of death and downfall. The life and joy were breaking through, however.

4. Resistance

Those who returned from exile were henceforth called Jews, being the descendants of Judah. They soon met with hostility from the Samaritans. The Samaritans had originated through intermingling between the remaining Israelites and new deported groups (cf chapter 51). By this time they had established land and agricultural interests in the country, and considered the returning Jews to be trespassers. The Jews greatly feared the Samaritans, which explains the haste with which they built the altar and sought the presence of the Lord (Ezra 3:3).

Through diplomacy and violence the Samaritans prevented the Jews from rebuilding their temple. They wanted to participate in the rebuilding and claimed that they, like the Jews, were seeking the Lord (Ezra 4:2). In actual fact they were trying to secure their own interest first, especially since the returning Jews had the support of Cyrus. The political and spiritual leaders of the returning people, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, did not accept the offered help. They saw right through the Samaritans' plan and regarded them as the enemy (Ezra 4:1). They also found the syncretistic religion of the Samaritans unacceptable. As a result, the Samaritans terrorised the Jews as they worked on the temple. They also successfully acquired advisors against the Jews in order to undermine their work by means of the authorities.

5. Disappointment and Despair

The first years after the Jews' return were characterised by a feeling of disappointment and despair. Only a few Jews made use of Cyrus' concession to return to their land, and their existence was one of hostility and danger. They also had to face drought (Hag 1:9- 11). The spiritual level of the people was quite low, and selfishness was at the order of the day in agriculture, in the keeping of the Sabbath, and in the sacrifices (Hag 1:2-4; Neh 13:15-18; Mai 1:6-14). The people thought that serving the Lord was not to their advantage (Mai 3:14).

The history of the return from exile, like that of the exodus, shows that the Lord rescued his people in a miraculous way, but also that their path was not strewn with roses. The rescue was only the Lord's work, but he also required great effort and perseverance from those whom he rescued. It was only through the life-giving power of his word and Spirit that the people obeyed his will. They would only complete the rebuilding of the temple with renewed effort twenty years after the foundation had first been laid. This was under influence of the powerful prophetic ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. They encouraged and reprimanded the people in a powerful way (Ezra 5:1 et seq; 6:14; Hag 1:2 et seq; Zee 4:7 et seq; 8:9 et seq). At that time Darius was king over Persia and the Jews again received permission to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5,6). Despite the succession of kings, policies and events, the work of the Lord continued.

6. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:347-352) on the contribution of the author of Chronicles, as well as the Levite temple-singers, to the interpretation of history after the exile. Von Rad, however, views this description of history far too much as the result of spiritual exhaustion.

56. EZRA AND NEHEMIAH: MILITARY AND POLITICAL BUILDING AS WELL AS RELIGIOUS REFORM (EZRA; NEHEMIAH)

1. Ezra, Champion of Obedience to the Law

Three quarters of a century after the completion of the temple Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. At his own request he was sent to Jerusalem by the Persian king Artaxerxes to restore the service of the Lord. At the beginning of his reign, Artaxerxes had not favoured the Jews in this regard, possibly because of the many problems he had to deal with in his kingdom (Ezra 4:8). However, the Lord, the absolute ruler over people, had put it in the heart of Artaxerxes to grant Ezra everything he had requested (Ezra 7:6,27). In the same way the Lord had also proved himself with Pharaoh and Cyrus.

Ezra was well-equipped for his task. He was from the high priestly generation of Aaron in the line of Eleazar (Ezra 7:5). He was also a scribe, well versed in the law of Moses (Ezra 7:6). He acted in a powerful way and

had a lasting influence on the keeping and study of the law. His influence was so powerful that he is usually called the father of the scribes. During the Feast of the Tabernacles he read the law to the people and had it sealed by the Levites. He also brought the people to make a covenant with the Lord and thereby forced them to keep the law. This included that marriages with people of the other nations were forbidden, as well as trade on the Sabbath. The people also had to keep the temple and sacrificial ministry (Neh 8:1 et seq; 10).

The zeal of Ezra and Nehemiah for the law differed, however, from that of the later Scribes and Pharisees in the time of Jesus. The mistake of the latter was not their zeal for the law, but rather their legalism or lifeless study of the law. They did not regard the keeping of the law as an expression of personal fellowship with God.

2. The Returned Exiles Primarily a Religious Community

Of primary importance in the existence of the people of the covenant were not the kingship and political power, but rather the word, the law and the cult. It was the same with Ezra as earlier on with the leaders of the returning exiles, Jeshua and Zerubbabel. Ezra was primarily interested in the restoration of the cult and the religious institutions of the Jews, not their political institutions.

The Lord saved his people and made the authorities sympathetic toward them, but he did not give them independence under their own king. The Lord's dominion over his people was not essentially linked to a king and could exist without one. This had also been the situation before the institution of the monarchy.

This does not mean, however, that the national existence of the people of the covenant had become unimportant or that it had to be given up. On the contrary, it was a matter of grave importance to both Ezra and Nehemiah. Even the desire to have a king did not vanish (Hag 2:21-23).

3. Nehemiah: Military and Political Leader, as well as Religious Reformer

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem thirteen years after Ezra. As with Ezra, both his arrival and his success are ascribed to the hand of God (Neh 2:8). Nehemiah was even appointed governor (Neh 5:14; 8:10). He concerned himself especially with the rebuilding of the city walls, and as a result experienced the extreme hostility of the Samaritan procurator, Sanballat, and others. Nehemiah met with military resistance, as well as attempts to trap him, but despite all of this he successfully completed the restoration (Neh 3:7).

Nehemiah was also strongly opposed to social injustice, such as exploitation of the poor by their fellow Jews (Neh 5). Together with Ezra he encouraged the people to renew the covenant and keep the law (Neh 10:1 et seq). After twelve years in Jerusalem he returned to the Persian court. He did, however, visit Jerusalem again and took action against mixed marriages (Neh 13).

4. Right and Wrong Relations with the Nations

The people of the covenant confessed the Lord as the universal and sovereign God. A people with such a confession could not have their vision limited to their own national borders or claim the Lord only for themselves. This would only fit belief in tribal gods. During the exile of the people of the covenant they were exposed to the other nations, and, as a result, the monotheistic aspect of their religion received even more emphasis than before. It was related especially to the nations: the Lord was God, He ruled all the nations and even envisaged salvation for them.

Throughout history, from the calling of Abraham to Esther, the existence and call of the people of the covenant had been closely related to their relations with the other nations. Israel's call stood or fell with right relations with the nations. They had to serve the nations, but still had to preserve their identity as people of the covenant. This also implied a certain enmity with the world which did not want to acknowledge God.

Even so, the people of the covenant was always unable to maintain the right relationship and insight. They were always tossed to and fro between two extremes. On the one hand there was their self-sufficient and selfish exclusivity, and on the other hand their national and religious assimilation with other nations.

Under the leadership of people like Jeshua and Zerubbabel the people was at first negative toward other groups

that were strangers to the true nature of the covenant. However, intermarriage with other nations soon became common. Ezra was dumbfounded at this breach of faith and confessed the people's guilt to the Lord (Neh 9:6-15). The matter was so serious to him that he took drastic measures: the foreign women were sent away! Despite these measures the people continued on their sinful way. When Nehemiah returned for the second time, children from such marriages could no longer speak the language of Judah. This even moved Nehemiah to act violently (Neh 13:25,26; cf also Dt 7:3).

Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah approached language, nationhood or calling as people of the covenant in an abstract, theoretical way, but rather in a very practical way. They judged that these things were inextricably linked to one another in their practical situation: intermarriage meant assimilation and the downfall of the people of the covenant. Their approach did not, however, include that they claimed the Lord only for their own people. They also accepted people who were seeking the Lord in true personal faith (Ezr 6:19-22).

This history teaches that the kingdom of God should have priority and should be sought first. When this is done, the group or people, as well as the individual, will naturally be done justice. As soon as something else becomes priority, it is absolutised, always to the detriment of other things and the kingdom of God. God requires that one surrender oneself to him, serve him in total commitment and strictly obey his law.

5. Notes

1. Eichrodt (1967:168,169; 254-256): other than a view of faith that takes God's creative action seriously, a one-sided, individualistic view of faith might have salvation from nationhood as its objective. Faith is concerned with salvation of the nation, as well as the nations, through a new creative act of God.

The congregation in exile is not the exclusive form of existence of the people of God in history; it is merely the crossing to a new form of national existence, a prediction of impending fulfilment. The new temple in Jerusalem was only allowed as symbol of the restoration of divine grace. It emphasised once again that revelation is divine choice, within the historical reality of space and time.

The rejection of messianic dreams in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh 6) contained an acknowledgement that the state should be rejected until God himself creates the new Israel. Shaping life according to the norm of the law was now accepted as the task given by God. The law was regarded as the formative principle of history, uniting past and present.

2. Compare Eichrodt (1967:310) on the heightened transcendence and inaccessibility of God in the post-exilic community. In later Judaism, love for God received its characteristic connection with the law. The emphasis on obedience to the law was so strong, that even the sacrificial ministry lost its identity as free gift of grace. The idea of fellowship with God was increasingly lost. Compare also Vriezen (1966:391).

57. ESTHER: GOD'S ABSOLUTE DOMINION AND HIS COVENANT FAITHFULNESS (ESTHER)

1. Divine Faithfulness to the Remaining Exiles

The history of Esther took place during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes or Ahasverus (485-464 BC), the successor of Darius. Xerxes was the father of Artaxerxes, during whose reign Ezra and Nehemiah ministered in Jerusalem. His dominion was extended to Egypt, and he even planned a campaign against Greece. The feast which led to the rejection of Queen Vashti was probably related to this.

It seems as if Esther and her family were among the Jews who had, for unknown reasons, decided not to return with Jeshua and Zerubbabel. They remained behind in Persia and did not escape the influence of their surroundings. Esther was brought into the king's harem and was in more than one respect confronted with Jewish laws. Mordecai had forbidden her to reveal her nationality (Est 2:10). Their attitude, therefore, differed from that of the heroic Danel (Dan 1).

However, these people were not completely without courage and faith. Mordecai's refusal to kneel down and honour Haman proved this (Est 3:2). Hainan's words to the king also illustrate the matter: "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws" (Est 3:8). Like everywhere else in the Old Testament the author did not primarily intend to present these people as examples to be followed. He rather wanted to

show how the Lord provided for his people, even for those who had remained in exile. He remains faithful in all circumstances.

God Rescues his People from the Heart of Death

Haman recommended that the king issue a decree according to which the Jews in Persia were to be annihilated. This decree was irrevocable. God still ruled, however. He caused the best human plan to destroy his covenant people to fail. Even when the downfall of his people was inevitable according to human standards, he gave them life. This was a similar situation to the one Ezekiel had seen regarding the people in Babylonian exile (Eze 37). The Lord rescued his people from the heart of death.

The Lord alone saved his people, but he also required great effort and perseverance of them. This was previously shown in the history of the return from exile under leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, as well as Ezra and Nehemiah. It is also made clear in this case: the people of the covenant only received permission to defend themselves. They were only saved because they actually did so.

At this event the tables were turned: instead of the Jews being annihilated, their enemies were killed (Est 9:1). The same idea can also be found elsewhere in the Old Testament and is best expressed in the eschatological attack of the nations on Jerusalem (cf Zee 14). According to this idea history will progress to the stage where God's people has seemingly been engulfed by death, but then there will be miraculous salvation and victory for them. The Lord again saved his people through downfall and death.

2. Daily Events, Kingdoms and the Future Belong to God

The name of God is not mentioned in any way in the book of Esther. It is also not directly mentioned that he acted. Only a factual description of events is given. Through this silence about God, however, the book presents a wonderful testimony of the wonderful way in which God rules. The Lord controls the history of the people of the covenant, of nations and of individuals to the finest details, and through all of this he carries out his plan for his people. It is essentially the same as with the Persian king, Cyrus: God carries out his plan and exercises his dominion despite the fact that he is not recognised or known or confessed by name. He is absolutely sovereign over everything and everyone.

The attempt to annihilate the people of God failed, and the people who had sought the lives of these people were themselves killed. Esther, a daughter from the tribe of Benjamin, was made queen of Persia, and her cousin, Mordecai, was second in rank to King Xerxes. In this way the book shows that God was not limited to Jerusalem. His action after the return of the people from exile was also not limited to the promised land. He exercised his authority over the whole Persian empire as well as this empire's conduct towards his people.

The book does not end with independence for the people of the covenant, but it does indicate that God ruled them, in a wonderful way, through other nations and that he also ruled other nations through his own people. His plans are exalted and unfathomable. He can, therefore, be trusted and everything can be left to him. He rules both life and death.

The historical books of the Old Testament end with the book of Esther, and indicate that the Lord remained faithful to his covenant with his people. They also show that all kingdoms belong to God. These books end with the people of the covenant as a small, weak people in the context of world rulers and hostile world powers, but also with a powerful vision of faith. Believers are a small, powerless group in the world, and there is always some hostile power planning to destroy them. In themselves they are a helpless prey. God rules, however. He protects those who know themselves to be deeply dependent on him and trust him completely. He gives them victory against all odds; he saves them as if through downfall and death. His true believers live in confidence for the presence and unshakeable hope for the future, for their hope and confidence is in the living and life-giving God.

3. Notes

1. Compare Von Rad (1962:92) on a timeless view of the relationship with Yahweh, as a result of which solidification occurred in the saving history.

IV THE POETIC BOOKS: TO FEAR THE LORD (JOB -SONG OF SONGS)

58. MAN'S ANSWER TO GOD'S REVELATION: "THE FEAR OF THE LORD"

The previous sections dealt with God's revelation in Scripture and in history. The poetic books present the human answer to this revelation; this answer is subject to God's full dominion, and is therefore an answer given in the fear of the Lord. These books teach that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Pr1:7 etc; Ecc 12:13). There is no possibility of attaining knowledge or wisdom by oneself. Wisdom is only sought because it awaits man and invites him to come to it (Scripture portrays wisdom as a woman; Pr 2:4; 3:13). God has all the initiative. The "wisdom" mentioned here corresponds only in part to our own concept of wisdom. It has to do with true, practical knowledge of life, especially as derived from nature and practical life as such.

These books also teach that it is impossible to fathom the true meaning of things and of life through one's mind only. One has to fear the Lord, that is, completely surrender one's life to him and lose it, in order to regain it from God. All of life is gripped and shaken to its foundations, and God is approached in awe. There is, therefore, a certain measure of tension built into the concept "fear of the Lord": an existential surrender and loss of self, in order to gain true life; fear that is at the same time confidence; surrender, as well as enthusiasm and boundless trust in God's presence. One should, therefore, view things with a born-again mind and heart, and acknowledge God's sovereignty and right of decree in everything. All surrounding things would otherwise remain a closed book, and God's way with man would remain a frustrating mystery. True wisdom is given by God himself, and amounts to recognition of one's own absolute inner corruption (Ps 51:7,8; 90:8,11,12; cf also the discussion in the Introduction).

Some translations render "to fear the Lord" as "to serve the Lord". Service is then used in its deepest and most comprehensive meaning, and includes being in awe of God and surrendering to him. This meaning is clearly expressed especially in the book of Deuteronomy (cf 10:12-13; 13:5).

1. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:270) regarding the absolute threat to human existence against which there is no defence. He also mentions that the religious feeling of fear is not the same as panic or fawning anxiety, but that it is closer to awe, obedience, surrender and enthusiasm.
2. Vriezen (1966:169-171) is of the opinion that fear of the Lord in man's life amounts to the right relationship of respect with the holy God, and man's heart, mind and conduct being governed by this respect. The experience of fellowship with the Holy Spirit still includes recognition of the distance between man and God, expressed as confession of guilt (Isa6), fear (Gen28:17; Ex20:18etseq) or awe (Ps8; Isa28etseq).
3. Vriezen (1966:110) says that the messages of the psalmists did not arise out of their own hearts, but were born of the Spirit. This can be seen in the continuous judgement on the sins of even the most exemplary of people, and in the aversion to false heroism and all demonic things, that is, all things placed on a par with God. Compare also Childs (1979:513) on the question of how the psalms, as words of men to God, can be regarded as God's word to men. Compare also Terrien (1978:358-359) on God's initiative regarding wisdom, and the fact that any theory of salvation by works is totally irrelevant.
4. Westermann (1978:180,181) indicates that, in all contemplation of God, he never becomes a mere object. God is always the Person over and against man. Contemplation of God is linked to and made possible by the fact that God is addressed.
5. Compare Kaiser (1978:165,166,169) on the criteria for distinguishing wisdom psalms, and on the meaning of the concept "fear of the Lord" in Deuteronomy. "This fear was not a worked-up feeling of some numinous awe, but it was the result of hearing, learning, and responding to God's word (4:10;8:6). In Deuteronomy, the fear of the Lord went hand in hand with "keeping his commands", "walking after him", "serving him"...."(10:12-13;13:5).

59. JOB: THE ESSENCE OF RELIGION IS TO SERVE GOD FOR HIS OWN SAKE

1. According to Satan and Job's Friends, Religion is a Matter of Merit

Job's life was radically different from what one would expect concerning such a pious man. He was struck by

one tragedy after the other. The book of Job recounts the disputes between Job and his friends, as well as Job and God, regarding these tragedies. In the background is the big dispute between God and Satan. The fundamental question is: what is the essence of religion - is it a matter of merit? Satan claimed that Job did not serve the Lord for the sake of the Lord himself, but for the advantages he himself would gain. God then changed Job's prosperity into terrible and continuing suffering, in order to disprove Satan's claims, and to reveal the true nature of religion.

Job's friends also considered religion to be a matter of merit. They only approached it from a perspective different from that of Satan, and argued that a lack of prosperity is an indication that God had not been served in the right way. Job's suffering was, therefore, proof that he had committed a serious sin, they said, and he needed to repent! This attitude of Job's friends represents a typically human approach. On the surface their argument seems quite justified, because they attempted to provide moral justification for God's actions. Their mistake, however, was that they did not accept the will of the living God as the only standard. They did not ask what God had decided regarding Job's life, but argued on the basis of the mere regularity of an absolutised "moral law". That explains their callousness and cruelty, and their estrangement from reality in the application of their religious principles. They are, therefore, a warning to us.

2. God is All-powerful, but Present at the Same Time

Job rightly maintained his innocence in the face of his friends' accusations. However, he claimed that God made him suffer without reason, and even said, quite wrongly, that it was unfair. He was looking for an arbitrator between himself and God (9:14-20,33). God eventually answered Job from a storm, and proved that he was absolutely sovereign and all-powerful, and could do whatever he pleased (38-42). Job had to acknowledge and accept this unconditionally (42:1-6). God thus did answer Job, although he did not say what he had wanted to hear, that is, why he had to suffer so much despite his innocence. On the contrary, God proved that he is the absolutely sovereign ruler, unfathomable in his majesty and all-powerful in his conduct. He neither needs to justify his actions to human beings, nor does he do it. This is exactly what religion or worship is: recognition of and respect for God's absolute sovereignty.

But this is not all that the book teaches. It does not leave one with an impersonal view of God's sovereignty, but also says something about God's fellowship with man. Even the structure of the book is meaningful. The solution is not to be found in human dialogue (42:8), nor in human monologue (29-31:Job, and 32-37:Elihu), but in dialogue between man and God - a dialogue in which God speaks and man answers prayerfully. The solution should not be sought in other people (through dialogue) or within oneself (through isolated contemplation); in order to find a solution, man should escape himself. He should contemplate God's world order so that he might come to the realisation that both God and his conduct are above human understanding. The solution is not merely in truth about God (obtained from people), in truth of God (received through mediation), or even in truth or new knowledge given by God himself. God did not give Job an intellectual answer or solution to his problems. The solution was in God's revelation of himself, given in personal fellowship with man. He revealed to Job that he is the absolutely sovereign God who is worthy of man's worship and who draws people into personal fellowship with him. God did not merely give the answer or a solution - he was the answer and solution, through his presence.

Job had recognised God's sovereignty right from the beginning. His problem was related to what he was given in that sovereignty. He found peace in the acknowledgement that even that should be left to God's absolute sovereignty. However, he only found this peace once he was in God's personal presence. "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (42:5). In this way Job came to repent of what he had said about God.

God also revealed himself as a God who goes to man, who wants best for him and maintains an indestructible bond and fellowship with him. The essence of religion is, therefore, to worship God as this absolutely sovereign, but at the same time also personal and faithful, God. True religion is to worship God for the sake of God himself.

3. God Blesses in Sovereign Grace and Requires Intercession

In the light of the above it is clear why Job had to pray for his friends. He held on to God himself - even though he had distorted his relationship with the world. His friends had objectified God's (moral) law to such an extent

that they were actually holding on to a depersonalised law.

It is also clear why he had to bring a burnt offering for their sake, and do intercession for them. The solution to man's life is not to be found in a balance between obedience and disobedience, that is, a legalistic-moralistic balance. It is to be found elsewhere and is reached along another way: through reconciliation (sacrifice) - not something done by man, but rather something regardless of man, through substitution. The way to the Person of God must be opened through something personal, through personal intercession.

Job was healed and received twice as much as he had before (42:10). This shows that God blesses the faithful. Job's Mends, however, had made this a mechanical matter, divorced from God's personal will. That which Job received here, was not on the basis of merit. God had clearly shown him that he had no claim to anything. Just like Job's suffering cannot be understood by human logic or any kind of laws, so also his prosperity. It was a gift of God's sovereign grace.

Job's possessions were twice as much as before, but he had exactly the same number of children (42:13). Children or people are not mere impersonal things, like possessions or livestock, and are consequently also not replaceable. A human being is an irreplaceable personal being, and because of the personal bond with God, cannot be lost either (cf also 19:25-27; 2 Sam 12:23). Even Job's dead children continued to exist.

The book of Job, therefore, contains a wonderful combination of two important ideas: on the one hand, the absolute, all-powerful sovereignty of God, whose ways cannot be known and who does not need to justify himself to anyone; on the other hand, the personal fellowship of God, who goes to man, wants what is best for him, and places him in unbreakable fellowship with his God. The book of Job is about worshipping this sovereign and personal God.

4. Notes

1. Terrien (1978:373) rightly states that Job's confession is of a special nature. He was not to be blamed for upsetting any moral order in society, nor was he guilty of breaking any moral codes. He transgressed his limits as a creature, because he judged the nature of his Creator.
2. Compare Childs (1979:526-544, especially 543) on the matter of the literary unity of the book and the necessity of listening to the book as a whole.
3. Compare Kroeze (1965:470; 1978), who rightly emphasises the Sovereignty of God in the book of Job. He does not, however, do justice to the other aspect of God's appearance to Job and his fellowship with him.
4. According to Westermann (1978:96), the greatest theological problem in the post-exilic period was not the question of God's saving action but rather that of his blessing action, as in Psalm 73 and the book of Job. It was the result of the destruction of the monarchy and the cult, which endangered existence as such.

60. THE PSALMS: ANSWERING TO THE WORD OF GOD WITH HEART AND LIFE

1. Interpretation of Human Emotions

David played an important role in the organisation of the cult, and was the poet who wrote some of the psalms. The heading "of David", found with many psalms, does not necessarily indicate that he himself wrote them, but is often only an attempt at associating a particular psalm with David. From the time when they were written, the psalms always expressed the frame of mind of believers before God, in the worship service.

The psalms cover various subjects, and express a number of emotions and moods with which man approaches God. There are penitential psalms (6,38,51,102,130,143), laments (3,7,13,31, 42,54-57,61 etc), royal and messianic psalms (2,45,72,110, as well as 18,20,21 etc, and 47,93,96-100 etc), hymns, or songs of praise (33,65,95,103,107,145,150), psalms of nature (29,104), songs of ascents (120-134), songs of thanksgiving (9,18,23,30,32,67,107 etc), psalms of blessings and curses (28, 68, 134 etc) and psalms on the law (19,119). The psalms cover life in all of its many aspects, and express the depth and fullness of emotions in religion. The laments and songs of praise are by far the most numerous; this is indicative of the fact that sorrow and joy

are such important emotions in human life.

However, the psalms are not mere expression of emotions, but are answers to the word or law of God. This is clearly evident in Psalm 1, which is a kind of introduction to the whole book of Psalms. This psalm strongly emphasises meditation on the law and a life in accordance with its precepts. True meditation on the word is a matter of the mind as well as the heart, of emotional warmth as well as careful consideration. No matter how personal or ordinary a particular psalm may be, it is always concerned with God's all-encompassing dominion, and a life in accordance with this dominion. The psalms, therefore, do not give evidence of any mystical union between man and God, in which the identities of God and man are merged.

2. An Intimate Relationship with God

The psalms give evidence of a very intimate and personal relationship between the poets and God. The poets often call God "my Lord" or "my God" (3:8; 5:2; 7:2,4; 13:4; 22:2,3 etc). Because of this personal approach to religion, there is also a profound consciousness of sin in the psalms, even though it is not always explicitly expressed (51).

The poets of the psalms emphasise God's dominion, as well as his involvement in the life of every person. This is also the case with the royal and messianic psalms. Man was created as a royal being, and the psalms are about regaining and perpetuating this kingship, which is exercised under God's dominion and in fellowship with him.

3. Acknowledgement of God's Royal Dominion

The psalms speak of God's dominion, both directly and indirectly (cf the royal psalms, for instance). Psalm 1 already gives evidence of the main theme of the whole collection: God's dominion over the two ways of man - the way of the righteous and the way of the godless (1:6). God's dominion concerns continuous meditation on his word or law, as well as living in obedience to it (1:2; 119:55,56).

Even the psalms containing curses, in which the poets wish for disaster to befall their enemies, should be understood against the background of God's absolute dominion. The poets considered it unthinkable that someone could resist the just and living God, without thereby inviting disaster. These psalms are, therefore, concerned with preserving God's justice and with his personal fellowship. Outside of personal fellowship with the living God there is no life, only destruction. These psalms do not express personal feelings of vindictiveness, and may also not be used in such a way today (cf 139:21; 1 Cor 16:22).

4. The Great Mystery of Life

God's dominion includes his support of and fellowship with the righteous, as well as destruction of the godless (Ps 1:6). However, the psalms make it clear that this is not a simple matter: the whole book struggles with the apparent contradiction between what is taught in Psalm 1 and the hard reality of life. The believer often experiences the hardship which is supposed to befall only the godless, while it only goes well with the godless themselves (cf Ps 102:4; Ps 73). Psalm 2 speaks of terrible rebellion against the Lord and the anointed king, who protects the interests of his people. From Psalm 3 onwards, the struggle of believers is sketched: the king has to flee from Absalom (3); great anxiety and prayer (4,5); fear of death, of breaking the bond with God (6); David waking the Lord, because of the evil deeds of the godless (7).

This mystery is like a theme of the whole collection of psalms. The poets also often complain that the godless are endangering their lives, and that they are trying to estrange them from God. The godless rejoice, because they think that the righteous have been forgotten or deserted by God. The poets of the psalms, however, continue to trust in the Lord. They experience the living and real presence of God, as well as the fact of his wonderful and incomprehensible involvement with those who pray to him.

The poets of the psalms have a particular struggle with death. To them, death is not something natural; it is destruction of life, just like illness and adversity. It is also the result of God's anger (90:7). When the poets praise God's royal dominion, they also praise the fact that he delivers people from death (cf 23:4). Even so, the way of faith is, in a certain sense, a way of death, because believers are persecuted and killed for God's sake

(44:8,9,23,24). Death is contrary to God's absolute dominion and his covenant loyalty; it is also contrary to the purpose of man's life - to praise God (6:5,6; 30:10,13). The poets, therefore, reach out to a continuation of life, despite death. They do not completely understand this, but they find the solution in God himself. To them, he himself is life; the personal bond with him is unbreakable: "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory." (73:23,24; cf also 16:10,11; 49:16).

The psalms strongly emphasise God's involvement with the poor and helpless (9:19; 12:6; 35:10; 37:14; 40:18; 69:3 etc). They are not poor merely in the material sense, neither helpless merely in the spiritual sense. They are the people in whose lives something of the mystery mentioned above can be seen. They feel themselves to be deeply dependent on God, seek refuge with him and live according to his commandments.

The poets of the psalms were often confronted by their enemies (3:8; 6:11; 7:6; 8:3; 9:4; 13:3 etc). This emphasises the fact that believers live in enmity with the sinful world. This hostility also exists within one's own small circle, as well as in one's own heart.

5. Transcendent Characteristics of the Psalms

The descriptions and expectations of the psalms often have strongly transcendent characteristics. This concerns death, but also life and other general matters. God is a transcendent God, but he is also a God who works in history. The here and now is not everything; life also has another dimension, namely the eschatological.

6. Praise

Despite the apparent contradiction of life, the poets do not doubt God's sovereign control of nature, history and the life of man. As a result, they never stop to praise the Lord. Most of the psalms contain an element of praise. Each of the five subdivisions (1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150) ends with praise, and the whole book is concluded with a call for everything that has breath to praise the Lord.

7. Interpretation of the Various Kinds of Psalms

Different kinds of psalms often have certain standard formal characteristics. Sometimes it seems incomprehensible that a poet could praise the Lord for salvation, only to continue unexpectedly by complaining that his prayers go unanswered. This becomes clearer when one keeps in mind the nature of a song of thanksgiving. It usually begins with a word of thanksgiving, and then describes the depths of despair the poet experienced before he was saved. The poets of the psalms followed the standard literary practice of their times, but also adjusted it according to their own needs. Their laments, therefore, contain not only laments, but also trusting prayers to God, even though this trust is not always explicitly stated.

The royal psalms follow the courtly style of the Semitic world, but this style is given a new content. According to the surrounding nations, their kings had certain divine characteristics, and, as a result, they could achieve more than ordinary people. The poets of the psalms sometimes described their king in terms of the descriptions of the other nations, but they always remained clear on the fact that their king is an ordinary human being. That which transcends ordinary reality was regarded as something which concerns eschatological reality (Ps 2, 72, 110). In the interpretation of the royal psalms, it should be kept in mind that they primarily concern the ordinary king. They should, for instance, not be applied directly to Christ.

8. Notes

1. Compare Vriezen (1966:440-442) on human emotions, and the closely related nature of man, according to the Old Testament. Compare also Eichrodt (1967:147): the living body and its various parts were regarded so strongly as organs and mediums of personal life, that the total person could express himself and be understood in any part. *Nephesh* and *ruach* always represent the total life of a person, viewed from a specific perspective. Some translations of the Bible, therefore, simply render the terms for body parts in Ps 16 with "I", "me" or "he", etc. Compare also Helberg, 1986:22-23.

2. Compare further Eichrodt's discussion (1967:149) of the close involvement of the body (flesh) with regard to sin, salvation and worship. True worship claims not only the soul, but also the body.

3. Compare Eichrodt (1967:134-147) on the functions of the various body parts: *nephesh* indicates life, unlike and more so than *ruach**

life in connection with the body. *Basar* (flesh) indicates the living human being (146-147). *Ruach* is the higher level of man's inner life (131-134). The heart is viewed in a more comprehensive way than we are used to, and is the organ of feeling, thought and will. The heart is specifically related to responsibility. Israel's lifeless worship is summarised by the statement that their hearts are far from God (142-145). Kidneys express the deepest, most unfathomable experiences of man (145). Breath is probably a parallel of *ruach*. The head is totally absent from the group of psychological terms (146).

4. Von Rad (1962:153) summarises the facts in a concise way. He indicates that the Hebrews did not distinguish between the intellectual and vital functions of the body (*basar*). For this reason, *nephesh* should, as far as possible, not be translated with soul.

5. Unlike *sarx* in the New Testament, *basar* (flesh) in the Old Testament never has the connotation of being sinful (Helberg, 1959:23-28).

6. Compare Vriezen (1966:441-444) and Eichrodt (1967:496-529) on immortality. Of *sheol* (grave), Eichrodt (1967:210-216) says that that which survives is not a mere part of the living human being, but rather a shadowy image of the total human being.

7. According to Hermann Gunkel, most of the psalms were written specifically for the cult. According to Mowinckel, most of the psalms were intended for festivals celebrating Yahweh's ascent of the throne, while Von Rad and Weiser relate them to covenant festivals. All of these views, however, are merely speculative (cf Burger, 1987:20,21).

8. Compare Terrien (1978:304,305) on the difference between biblical doctrine and a mystical union obtained in a sexual or sublimated form. When the poets of the psalms use comparisons to emphasise the immediacy of the fellowship, they also refer to its relativity, according to the context.

9. Compare Terrien (1978:337) on the confession of faith sung as a doxology. He goes too far, however, in claiming that a confession of faith should not be regarded as a didactic or legal document. Westermann (1978:147-150) pleads for recognition of the fact that the lament, just like the doxology, had its place in Israel's confession of faith (Dt26:7), in the form of a prayer to God for deliverance.

10. Compare Childs (1979:517,518) on the strongly eschatological nature of the psalms. The psalms reach out to the future, and express a strong longing for it to come. Compare Childs (1979:523), with reference to Calvin, on the meaning of the psalms not only for the past, but also for the present.

Compare Childs (1986:199-203) for theological reflections on Old Testament anthropology.

61. MESSIANIC PSALMS

1. Messianic Expectations

The name "messiah" is derived from the Hebrew word *mashiach*, which means "anointed one". The Greek word for this is *christos*. It indicated someone with an important function in Israel, like a king or a priest. The concept of messianic expectations has a more general meaning, and indicates an important future redeemer, whether a priest or a king. The messianic expectations were, however, usually strongly linked with David and his dynasty.

The mistake is often made to look for messianic passages in the Old Testament, as if they were isolated from the rest of the Old Testament. A different meaning than they would have had for their own particular times is also often ascribed to these passages. They are, therefore, regarded as primarily describing the future Christ. In reality, the focus should be on the time and circumstances of the Old Testament author himself. The whole revelation-historical context and perspective of such passages should also be kept in mind. Messianic passages do not teach anything else than the rest of the Old Testament, just like the New Testament does not teach anything else than the Old Testament. Both teach essentially the same message: God is with us. This unity of Old and New Testaments, as well as within the Old Testament itself, should be held on to. Messianic passages should not be selected and studied as if the remainder of the Old Testament were of lesser importance.

The whole of the Old Testament teaches, both directly and indirectly, that there is more to reality than only the here and now. There is also something transcendent, in which we will always share. All of the Old Testament is supported by an eschatological expectation, although it is in some places more evident than in others. The whole of the Old Testament teaches that God is going to come to his people in a wonderful way. In this way, the Old Testament eventually has its organic focus in the coming of God in Jesus Christ.

What follows, is a short discussion of a few messianic psalms.

2. Psalm 2: The Lord Continues his Worldwide Dominion over Revolutionary Nations through his

Anointed Servant

This psalm is about a coronation festival in Jerusalem. The king recounts the divine revelation he received when the Lord appointed him as king, at the same time also adopting him as his own son. In this way, the king was placed in a special relationship with the Lord. The adoption was done with this official declaration: "You are my son; today I have become your Father", or, translated more literally, "today I have fathered you". This announcement was based on the Lord's solemn promise to David that his (David's) royal descendants would enjoy a special relationship with the Lord, that of Father and son (2 Sam 7:14).

According to the heathen nations, their kings were really sons of the gods, and, therefore, divine themselves. In Israel, the king was only the adopted son of God, just like the rest of the people (Ex 4:22).

The king should look up to the Lord, says the psalm, for then God will give him the whole world, together with all its nations, as his own, and the king will exercise terrible and destructive power over the nations. The nations reject the authority of the Lord, and rebel against him and the king. The Lord, however, who is the creator and ruler of heaven and earth, scoffs at them. In his anger, he terrifies them, and confirms that this king is his chosen anointed, and that he will rule the world from the Lord's chosen place, Zion. This king now addresses the kings of the nations with the mandate God has given him, and claims honour for God.

The psalm is about the ordinary king of Israel, but also transcends ordinary reality in some of its descriptions. It has certain eschatological aspects, with reference to the Lord's promise to David, mentioned above, which also has messianic aspects and indicates the redeemer king of the future. This is totally fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:25 et seq; 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5; Rev 2:27; 17:15).

Psalm 22: Whoever Continues to Believe in God in Total Desolation, Will be Saved

The Lord is king all over the world, says the poet, and saves whoever continues to trust in him, from total desolation. The poet himself seems to have been critically ill, as well as persecuted. His greatest sorrow is that his God has forsaken him, and does not answer his continuing cries for help. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", he calls. The Lord is the God who is praised by his people for his covenant faithfulness and salvation through the ages. The poet is ridiculed for his trust in God, who has tenderly looked after him, like his own child, from his birth. He pleads the Lord not to stay so far away. He is cruelly persecuted by his enemies, and his body cannot tolerate the strain much longer. The Lord leaves him like someone who is already dead. His enemies have tied him up, stripped him naked and have taken all his possessions. Only the Lord can still save him.

It truly happens! The poet then praises God in the congregation, and calls upon them to do the same. God saves the helpless who trusts only in him. For this reason, he is praised all over the world, by all nations, as ruler. All the rich will acknowledge him as king, for all people are mortal and transient, and will kneel before him.

In his description of his suffering and persecution, the poet says more than what is merely personal and individual. His experience portrays something of the great suffering and misery of all of mankind. In Jesus, the desolation of the believer and the mystery of his suffering is fully brought to light. The Son of God also calls out: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46).

Psalm 110: Our Exalted King-Priest Triumphantly Exercises his Worldwide Dominion

In this psalm, the poet recounts something the Lord has said to him; it is a revelation the king of the people of the covenant has received from God. The Hebrew word translated as "says" (110:1), is a typically prophetic expression for divine revelation. It is not used anywhere else in the book of Psalms.

The king receives a place at the right hand of God. His people will be willing, enthusiastic and equipped to march against the enemy in the holy war. A glorious victory over the nations and worldwide dominion for him is announced. He will always be a priest in the order of Melchizedek. This means that he will be priest as well as king, both at the same time. The Lord has confirmed this with an irrevocable oath.

Such a combination of offices, like that of priest and king, was not allowed in Israel; as a result of human selfishness, it would give rise to domination, instead of servitude. Other nations did have king-priests. They decided on everything in people's lives - political, social and religious matters. In the Old Testament, however,

the offices were given to promote and stimulate the "office of the believer", not to dominate. The kings were just as much subject to the law and the covenant stipulations as the rest of the people.

The special dominion and victory promised to the king completely transcends that of any human king. In its full meaning, this description has to bear on someone else. It is definitely related to the messianic promise God made to David in 2 Samuel 7.

This psalm is quoted many times in the New Testament, and is each time made to bear on Christ (Mt 22:41-46; 26:64; Ac 2:34 et seq; Ro 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Heb 8:1; 1Pet 3:22).

3. Notes

1. Compare Helberg (1986) on the translation of the messianic passages.
2. The New Testament quotes from the Old Testament in the light of the fulfilment that has already come through Christ. It sometimes says more than the corresponding passages in the Old Testament itself, which explains why the quotations in the New Testament are not always identical to the particular passages in the Old Testament.
3. In Psalm 110:1, the word is not "my Lord" (*adonai*), but only "my lord" (*adorn*).

62. PROVERBS: PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF LIFE

1. A General Character

The book of Proverbs is primarily about practical knowledge of life, similar to the wisdom literature of the surrounding nations. Unlike the rest of the Old Testament, the book does not refer to specifically Israelite ideas, institutions or historical events. Even so, the influence of the covenant is noticeable in that the proverbs are presented to the ordinary members of the covenant, and not only to the members of the royal court. According to the Old Testament, every person is created in the image of God, and consequently, everyone, including the king, is involved equally in the covenant. True wisdom in life is available to anyone, and is presented to everyone.

2. The Fear of the Lord

It is also explicitly stated that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (1:7). There is no mention of an autonomous, or independent, human knowledge, or laws of nature, or anything similar. General truths of nature and society only gain true perspective once it is approached in the fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord does not indicate terror, but rather childlike fear, respectful worship, total existential submission. Life is not about the truth one is able to find in nature, or in life as such. The unbeliever is just as able to do that as the believer. In the current context, we are more concerned with the most profound basis of all truth, with acknowledgement of him who is the source of truth. This is essentially the same as it was in the Garden of Eden: knowledge cannot and should not be obtained or used independently of God, but only in living gratefulness to him. Gratitude is a basic element of being human in the image of God. Acknowledgement of this fact causes Christian scientific work to be essentially different from neutral scientific work. It does not arrive at different truths than neutral science, nor does it deny that neutral science is able to discover truths about nature or human life. The Christian scientific endeavour is concerned with recognition of the Source of truth, with making the fear of the Lord the starting point of science, thereby viewing everything within another framework.

3. Wisdom is not Merely an Objective Matter

According to Proverbs, wisdom is not merely an objective matter of possession, of something one just has, but rather something in which the living personal relationship with God has an essential meaning: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight" (Prov 3:5,6). "The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it" (Prov 10:22).

4. An Unchangeable, Universally Valid but not Impersonal Law

The book of Proverbs emphasises the fact that there is an unchangeable, universally valid moral law, transgression of which will have its natural, logical consequences. However, it is not an impersonal law, independent of God, and it does not work in a mechanical way. The book of Proverbs maintains a wonderful balance, as can be seen in 5:21-23: "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly." Beforehand, however, God's dynamic action is indicated: "For a man's ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all his paths." God's sovereignty and personal action are clearly indicated here.

5. Primarily Intended to Educate the Youth in the Basic Foundations of Life

The book of Proverbs is primarily intended to educate the youth in the basic foundations of life, namely acknowledgement of God's dominion, and the right relationship with God and his fellowman. In a quite concrete way, reference is made to the young man's interest in the opposite sex. Wisdom is, therefore, portrayed as a young woman or girl, in contrast with the unchaste woman and folly (1:20 et seq; 2:16 et seq; 8,9). Wisdom and sex are not, however, intertwined, as was the case among the neighbouring nations. According to the views of the other nations, one could gain wisdom by associating with the mystery of the divine power of procreation and life. This was done by means of temple prostitution.

The poet of Proverbs, however, regards sex quite soberly as something human, not divine, intended to express the exclusive love between two people (Prov 5:15-20). Marriage, therefore, is a union enshrined in a covenant, to be regarded as a covenant of God (Prov2:17).

6. Notes

1. Compare Loader (1987) for trends in the study of wisdom.
2. Brueggemann (1972) emphasises confidence in human abilities. This can, however, hardly be reconciled with the statement in Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

63. ECCLESIASTES: EVERYTHING IS MEANINGLESS - WHEN HUMAN UNDERSTANDING IS THE PRIMARY MEASURE

The book of Ecclesiastes is presented as: "The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1), but this does not necessarily mean that Solomon was the author. Solomon is not explicitly named, and the author was a teacher of wisdom (12:9). The heading rather intends to describe Solomon as the father of wisdom (cf the discussion on Proverbs).

The time of the book's origin is uncertain, and its contents are descriptive of a common human problem.

1. A Mere Under-the-sun Approach does not Satisfy

The Teacher presents his theme quite explicitly and with strong emphasis. Few other books in the Bible present their themes as clearly as this one. It begins with a statement that is repeated 22 times in its 12 chapters, like a long, sorrowful refrain: "everything is meaningless". Its contents seem to be so pessimistic that the place of the book in the canon was long disputed. Even so, there is an important further qualification of the theme, namely: "under the sun". "What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun?" (1:3). This is immediately related to the theme in 1:2, and is often repeated in the remainder of the book. It actually means: in man's understanding of things. Man's view and understanding is limited. He cannot view everything in all dimensions, but only from the perspective of his own earthly viewpoint, part of the cyclical progress of nature. He is caught in this eternal cycle (1:4 et seq), and cannot transcend it. In the end he also disappears into it: everyone dies, without exception (2:14,16 et seq).

2. God's Dominion is Incalculable

The Teacher does not doubt the existence or dominion of God, but he does have difficulty with the incalculability of this dominion. He acknowledges that God is the absolute ruler over everyone and everything (2:26; 3:10 et seq; 5:18; 6:2; 7:13 et seq; 8:2; 11:9 et seq; 12:13,14). What makes him desperate, however, is that God's actions and his ways with man are so unfathomable and incalculable, to the extent that it appears to be quite arbitrary. The same fate overtakes both the wise man and the fool (2:15 et seq; 9:1 et seq; 9:11 et seq).

The book of Ecclesiastes should be understood as resistance against the objectification of wisdom and knowledge to an independent key, with which answers to the questions of life can be obtained. It is, therefore, resistance against a viewpoint that wisdom as such would enable one to find answers to the questions of life, and to have easy knowledge of God's will and of his way with the world. The ambiguity of life should not be argued away, but should rather be accepted. One should not reflect on wisdom as such, but on God (9:1 et seq).

3. One Should Focus on God Himself

This is a reaffirmation of what the poets of Proverbs also said about wisdom: "to fear the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (cf 5:6; 7:18). It is also stated explicitly at the end of the book, by way of summary: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (12:13). Objective, autonomous wisdom does not give answers to questions; one should focus on God himself. In him personally one will find answers. These are the clearest implications of the teachings of the Teacher, even though he never clearly says it. He keeps to negative statements, in order to emphasise even more the feeling of meaninglessness which is the end of all autonomous wisdom.

4. Man Only Has an Indication of the Whole

In himself, man only has a slight indication of the totality of things under God. God has given him a sense of indeterminate time (3:11). The English translation, "He has also set eternity in the hearts of men", could be interpreted to be indicative of man's transience. However, the Hebrew word *olam* usually means indeterminate time, or something like totality. Man has only a slight indication of this, and he is unable to determine the full meaning of things through his own observations (8:17; 12:12).

Neither wisdom, nor pleasure, nor wealth can satisfy, even if it were that of the great king of Israel (1:12 et seq). It is chasing after wind, and can only bring sorrow (1:17,18; 2:126). Of course, this applies to things as seen "under the sun", that is of things as such, as viewed from the limited perspective of man.

The book of Proverbs referred to ordinary, everyday wisdom, even that of unbelievers, but set it in the framework of fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7). The Teacher of Ecclesiastes demonstrates the consequences of mere secular or neutral wisdom. In the psalms, there is a continuous struggle with the apparent contradiction between the realities of life and faith, namely the hardship of the righteous, over against the prosperity of the unbeliever. The Teacher also touches on the problem, but also goes deeper, namely to the problem of the seeming meaninglessness of a prosperous life.

5. There Is Pleasure

There is pleasure for man with God (2:24; 3:13; 5:17,18; 8:15; 9:7,9; 11:9 et seq), but God himself retains all the initiative in giving it or taking it away. The book of Ecclesiastes even contains one of the most beautiful calls to young people to enjoy their youth - 11:9 et seq: "Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgement". God himself, however, gives or withholds joy in all of these situations, according to his own will. Man's attempts at gaining it himself, or having control of it, are futile. For this reason it is meaningless (2:24 et seq; 3:13; 5:17,18).

6. The Problem of Life and Death

The Teacher also tackles the problem of life and death. He cannot find peace with the idea of death (2:15 et seq; 6:12; 9:3-6,10; 12:7,8). The dead will never again share in anything that happens on earth. The Hebrew word for the English "meaningless", which occurs so often, is *hebel*. In direct translation, it means "breath", or anything that is as transient as a single breath. The name of Abel was derived from the same root. It is possible

that the Teacher chose this word on purpose, in order to make an explicit reference to Abel. Man is just as transient, his existence and his fate just as tragic and incalculable as that of Abel. The Teacher also ends in this way, before he presents his solution to the problem; he ends with man's death. In conclusion, he repeats his theme of the beginning, this time with reference to death: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!" (12:7,8).

The Teacher cannot find peace in the idea that mankind continues to exist merely in the succession of generations. It is precisely the eternal cycle of generations that he finds so tiring (1:4 et seq). The fact that the individual will die, is for him the crown on the meaninglessness of everything under the sun. And yet, death is not the end of everything: at death, the dust will return to the earth where it came from, and the spirit will return to God who gave it (12:7; cf also Gen 2:7). A mere under-the- sun perspective on life finds no consolation in this. The Teacher follows this with his sad refrain; "Everything is meaningless" (12:8). To an objectified, emancipated wisdom, nothing makes sense in the end, not even the fact that the spirit returns to God, because man's existence under the sun, that which would have been his centre, is then lost. The return of the spirit to God can only be a source of consolation when fellowship with God is the most important matter. In the Old Testament, the question is never merely that of life and death, or of life after death, but of God's sovereignty, his dominion, which he exercises in personal covenant fellowship with man. This explains why so little is said on the matter of continuing life after death.

7. The Conclusion: Fellowship of Faith with God

The conclusion to which the Teacher brings us, without actually spelling it out, is: there must be full acknowledgement of God's holiness, which cannot be grasped or explained with the knowledge of man. However, God is not so transcendent that he stands outside of earthly or human existence. He is completely involved with it, but his actions and his way with man cannot be contained in a human formula or scheme. He remains the living, personal God; reasoning does not have the last word regarding him, but rather living fellowship of faith. This includes obedience to his commandments. Only through this fellowship of faith with God will man's struggle finally end in peace, that struggle to really become an individual person, and not to disappear in the masses of the generations <1:4), or even in the masses of mere living beings (3:21) or death. Then the believer can find peace in the presence of God, and leave the rest to him.

For this reason, the book of Ecclesiastes can end with the call: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

8. Notes

1. Compare Loader (1987:45-56) for different interpretations of Ecclesiastes.

Unlike my own interpretation of the meaning or "message" of Ecclesiastes, Loader says that for the Teacher, like his contemporaries, God is a power far removed from man and the earth (1987:53#4.17; cf also 55#4.24).

64. SONG OF SONGS: THE EXCLUSIVE UNION OF LOVE

Songs of Songs has the title "Solomon's Song of Songs", but this does not mean that Solomon was the author of the book. Just like Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs is also attributed to Solomon. In the case of Ecclesiastes, it was intended to indicate that he, who was most of all a man of wealth and wisdom, would acknowledge, even prove, that these things as such do not satisfy. In the case of Song of Songs, the claim is that Solomon, who was a man of many women, would acknowledge that true love can only exist towards one person, because love is personal and exclusive. It is also irresistible and unbreakable. In those times, the bridegroom was also often called a king.

1. The Exclusive Union of Love, both Physical and Spiritual

The English title of Song of Songs is a direct translation of the Hebrew, and indicates that this song is the most wonderful of all. In a wonderful way, it sings of the love between a man and a woman, and of the enjoyment

of this love, right up to the physical and spiritual union of sexual intercourse.

The naturally irresistible passion of husband and wife for each other is portrayed in clear, vivid images. It starts with the bride's longing for an erotic kiss by the bridegroom (1:2; "love" in this passage is to be understood as erotic love). This is followed by mutual praise of the beauty of both bride and bridegroom in vivid, non-erotic images primarily derived from nature. In 2:3-5, the bride expresses her passion for her bridegroom, a passion that should be stimulated further by apples and raisins (2:5), regarded as sexual stimulants in those days. This is intended to be followed by sexual intercourse (2:6), that should not be disturbed (2:7). It is then the bridegroom's turn to praise the beauty of his bride in rich images (2:10 et seq). The bride states the personal and exclusive nature of their love relationship ("My lover is mine and I am his..", 2:16). A variety of descriptions of the love and desire of bridegroom and bride for each other then follows.

In the last chapter, love is again portrayed as something personal and exclusive, directed towards only one person; it is also irresistible, unquenchable and not for sale. It is a gift of the Lord: "the very flame of the Lord" (9:6,7).

2. Image of the Love between God and Believers

Over against the various approaches to Song of Songs, the correct one is to view it as it presents itself, namely as a description of the personal expression of love between husband and wife, regarded as a gift of God.

From this point one could argue further, and make an inference regarding the relationship between God (Christ) and his people. The point of comparison is then the absolute mutual love and surrender to each other, but not the sexual relationship as such. According to his created nature, man is primarily in a personal and individual relationship with God (Gen 1,2), not in his capacity as member of a people, that is, as an impersonal part of a collective whole. Man is the image of God (Gen 1:26 et seq). For this reason, the special personal love of husband and wife for each other is also an image of the love between God and believers. The relationship of man (as image of God) with God, is closely related to the relationship between husband and wife (Gen 1:27). Even so, sexuality is not an essential part of being the image of God; it is much rather a gift, the fruit of divine blessing (Gen 1:28), just like that of the animals (Gen 1:22) - they who are not the image of God.

3. Sexual Pleasure and Personal Love

Religion stimulates personal enjoyment. The Old Testament believer's faith never stood in the way of his pleasure. His religion allowed him full enjoyment (cf also Eccl 11:9 et seq). In this regard, he did not have to take a back seat to anyone. Sexuality, however, was not regarded as an isolated matter. There is no mention of the gratification of impersonal passion, as was the case with the temple prostitution of the Canaanites. It is inseparably linked with and integrated in the love that is totally personal and exclusive.

Love directed at the person. The desire of the bride and bridegroom is always directed at the other person as person. It is personal love which culminates in sexual intercourse, not desire for the sexual act as such. The bride and bridegroom enjoy each other, not merely each other's sex. Sexual intercourse is an expression of the deepest, most intimate and indestructible personal union: "My lover is mine and I am his..." (2:16). Sexual intercourse is the deepest physical and spiritual communication there is, but it remains expressive of it, and not formative of it. In Genesis 2:23 the man first bursts into song because of the union that already exists between him and the woman; only after that is there any mention of being united and becoming one flesh (Gen 2:24). The union and communication between man and woman should, therefore, never begin with sexual intercourse. Intercourse can and should only set the seal to that union which is already there.

Both for the bride and her groom, the matter doesn't end with sexual intercourse (8:1-4), but with the personal union of their lives. "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (8:6). A seal was sometimes tied around the neck with a string, and, therefore, hung close to the heart. It could also be worn like a ring on the finger, as symbol of unbreakable truth. This union is inseparable: "Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away" (8:7). (Cf also 8:5 - the bridegroom seems to say that the bride is herself the product of sexual union, she whom he loves so deeply. For this reason, he also longs for sexual union with his beloved. In this instance, he is more concerned with the sexual act as such. His desire has a personal basis and motivation, and the fruit of his desire is also a person.)

4. Under God's Dominion

No emancipated love. The love that is praised here, is not emancipated love, apart from God, but is a gift from him and is under his dominion - it is "the very flame of the Lord" (8:6). He created man and woman in such a way that they are one flesh (Gen 2:22 et seq), and that they consciously receive their unity from God and also exercise it. At that occasion, the man burst into song: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

Even in this irresistible love, which is as strong as death (8:6) and like an unquenchable fire (8:7), man is not a passive, impersonal slave, but a free, rational and moral person, who is under the dominion of the Lord.

Demythologisation of sex. The surrounding nations related sex to the gods. From the union between god and goddess, they believed, annual fertility in nature and among humans originated. The Canaanites also made young men and women have holy sexual intercourse in their temples, in order to activate this divine power of procreation.

Song of Songs, on the other hand, like the rest of the Old Testament, emphasises that this love and sexuality is purely personal, and, therefore, restricted to human relationships. It is not divine, although it is a gift of God to man (cf also what was said above on the image of God and sexuality). This demythologisation of sex also means that fertility in nature, and the continuation of life which is the result of it, is separated from human sexuality, and left completely to God's initiative and dominion. He is the sovereign ruler.

5. Love, Life and Death

The power of love is compared to death! Song of Songs compares the irresistibility of love with that of death, but in a different way than the surrounding nations. In mythological views, the god who died in the dry season, was restored to life in the rainy season by the goddess of love. There is no mention of this in Song of Songs. Love in this book is something between two people, and the Lord rules it in his sovereign way (8:6).

Even so, there is an element of tragedy in the fact that the power of love between husband and wife is compared to that of death. The hard reality of life is also paradoxical: the desire of love brings not only joy, but also sorrow (3:1 et seq; 5:6 et seq). Death will eventually also end the union between these two people! This idea is reminiscent of the beginning of the history of mankind. The man and the woman brought death over themselves as the inevitable punishment for their sin against God (Gen 3:19). Sorrow is also linked with the woman's sexuality (Gen 3:16). In this way, Song of Songs is not merely idyllic, but also true to life.

Joy reigns supreme - because of God's miraculous power. The tragedy mentioned above did not cause the loved ones to become despondent or pessimistic. The dominant emotion is the joy of the experience of love. This is exactly the same as after the announcement of punishment in Genesis

3. The dominant emotion at that time was joy because of the new life of which Eve was the mother (Gen 3:20).

The loved ones can be absorbed in their love because it is a gift, "the very flame of the Lord", that cannot be quenched by great waters or rivers (8:6,7). The Lord is, therefore, a God of miraculous power. Just like in the rest of the Old Testament, the matter of life and death as such is not emphasised, but rather God's miraculous power; the rest is surrendered to him. In the end, the most profound solution and peace is to be found in the personal relationship with God. It enables us to enjoy life, and everything it presents, to the full.

6. Notes

1. Burden (1987:74-78) distinguishes the following kinds of interpretation of Song of Songs: allegoric-typological, literary, cultic-mythological, dramatic, structural and literal interpretations.

2. Compare Kroeze (1953) on the fact that Song of Songs is a song of love.

V THE PROPHETIC BOOKS: THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS (ISAIAH - MALACHI)

65. THE PROPHETS: THE LORD'S ACTIONS ARE SOVEREIGN AND PERSONAL

1. The Lord is the Absolute Ruler over Everyone and Everything, Including the Prophet

With regard to the time of writing and content, the prophetic teaching is quite diverse. At the same time, however, it also forms a unity, because it is the word of and about the only God, the God who transcends time and space.

The prophets teach that only the Lord is the almighty creator. Nature is totally subject to him, and serves him. He uses nature for, among other things, punishment of his people or the nations. He punishes through drought, thunder, earthquakes and locusts. He also determines history, and the fate of the nations or the hearts of their rulers, like that of Cyrus.

The Lord's absolute dominion was proclaimed not only by the words of the prophets, but also by his absolute superiority over the prophets themselves. They were called by him with an irresistible calling, and they were totally dependent on him in what they preached (Am 3:8; Jer 20:7-9; Eze 3:14,22). What they brought were not their own thoughts; strong tension usually existed between themselves and the messages they proclaimed. The word they brought was dynamic and the word of God. It was not a mere product of human thought, as with the false prophets. The word of the Lord "came" to the prophets (Jer 1:2 et seq). Because of the prophets' total dependence on the Lord, they were often called servants of the Lord. Even so, they were not passive slaves or automatic recorders of the divine message, but retained their own personalities. This explains why they alternated direct and indirect speech when conveying the divine message.

The main difference between true and false prophets was that the true prophets were conscious of the distinction between their own thoughts and the revelation of God. They were, therefore, conscious of the divine superiority over their own thoughts. The false prophets, however, prophesied from their own hearts or thoughts, according to the accusations of the true prophets.

The true and false prophets were not clearly defined groups, as is still the case today. In the Old Testament, the false prophets are not called by a special name (although there are some exceptions to this rule). They are simply called "prophets" or "prophet".

The false prophets were not always "evil" or "degenerate" people. They were often quite honourable people, who only had the best of intentions with their religion and their people, and only wanted to serve. The only problem was that their messages were not the result of personal fellowship with God and of his dominion. False prophecy is much more "human" and much closer to home than we often tend to think.

2. The Dominion of the Lord is Personal and Relevant, and He Rejects Political, Social and Religious Formalism

The prophets strongly emphasised the personal relationship between God and man, and sternly rejected all kinds of formalism. This applied to all institutions, areas and relations: government institutions, concrete, everyday life, as well as social, moral and cultic life.

The authorities are agents of God's authority, but never a substitute for it. They are just as much subject to God's word and law as anyone else, and should find the light of God's word for their governing task in living fellowship with him. The people, on the other hand, cannot escape their responsibility, by hiding behind the authorities. They remain responsible together with the authorities - both individually and jointly. In this spirit, the prophetic judgements were announced to the king and the people. It focused on God's will for the concrete, living, everyday reality, and personally confronted the people with God.

The prophets struggled especially with making government a service of authorities, that is to say, of personally responsible rulers. The human tendency is to replace this service with an impersonal political machine. The

prophets, therefore, rejected institutions that functioned in an impersonal way, with impersonal regulations, burdens, claims and relations. Man as an individual person with personal needs takes the back seat in such a situation. In this way, the governing body becomes an impersonal, sacrosanct entity, not answerable to anyone: "the state".

According to the judgement of the prophets, the people mechanised the covenant and the divine election. In actual fact, the covenant entails a living and personal bond with the Lord, which goes together with surrender to him and a life according to his will and commandments in all aspects of life. The people, however, changed this into an external service, without their hearts being in any way involved. The divine election was increasingly regarded as an irrevocable event of the past, something that, as such, guaranteed a privileged position to the people. This attitude led to false confidence and a lack of responsibility. In reality, the prophets said, God's election is an election to responsibility and servitude.

The prophets primarily preached against formalism in the cult. They strongly condemned these kinds of offerings, festivals and prayers, and did not hesitate to address the priests and prophets involved in this.

3. Political and Social Life Approached from the Perspective of the Covenant

Political and social life received a lot of attention in the prophetic preaching. The prophets were, however, not political figures or statesmen, except in extraordinary cases, like that of Daniel. Their contribution was also not based primarily on political knowledge or understanding, but was of a religious nature. They did not have a national or international perspective as such, but rather a covenant perspective. According to this perspective, the people first had to trust in the Lord and obey his covenant, and not place their trust in treaties with other nations. Trust in such treaties amounted to unfaithfulness to God's covenant. Unfaithfulness to the covenant resulted in moral decay, as well as a lack of love towards their fellow men.

The prophets, especially Isaiah and Amos, sharply criticised sin in social life, particularly immorality, luxury, corruption, and oppression of the poor. These sins were the result of the lack of a true relationship with God. The Lord is a God who saves, and he does this in sheer grace. He has compassion for the poor, the needy and the helpless, and he protects them. Those who are proud, however, awaken his wrath and receive his punishment.

Because the prophets regarded the causes of social wrongs to be of a religious nature, the cure was also fundamentally religious. It required a change of heart, or repentance. That explains why they never focused on the oppressed or the masses, urging them to revolt, in order to throw off the yoke of oppression. The prophets rather focused on the authorities and the guilty parties. They were reminded that they were dealing with the living God; he is the just God and sovereign ruler; he demands responsibility, repentance and a change in the situation.

4. Notes

1. With regard to the prophets, compare also Zimmerli (1972:159-205 = 1978:183-238; also Von Rad, 1965:129-315; Kaiser, 1978:182-261; Du Toit, 1969:159-190; Eybers, 1977; Burden & Prinsloo, 1987:83336; Verhoef, 1993).

2. Childs: (1986:123,125): The Old Testament is not interested in the historical origins of prophecy, but it is intensely interested in the origins of the prophet's own history with God. It is for this reason that the prophetic calling, or commission, is so important. The Old Testament emphasises the content of the word, and does not deal with the psychological or metaphysical aspects of the "word-events". Despite a significant filtering of divine revelation through the various prophetic personalities (cf Amos and Hosea), the Bible itself never awarded an autonomous meaning to this psychological dimension.

3. Compare Eichrodt (1961:309-391) for a penetrating discussion of the phenomenon of prophets. Classical prophecy was a dynamic power, activated by a new awareness of the reality of God. Israel's religion was condemned in so far as it was merely the product of nationalism and the national culture. This was not about a moral or religious idea, but about God himself and his pending visit to his people (1961:387389). With compelling seriousness and overwhelming power, this reality forced the prophets to speak; it allowed no theoretical debate, but only testimony of an immediate certainty (1961:344). Terrien (1978:236) says: "Like the patriarchs, Moses, and the judges, the great prophets were the bearers of an unexpected and generally disruptive call. They did not initiate: they responded." Closely related to the above is the fact that the prophets, unlike the priests and kings, did not have hereditary succession (cf Zimmerli, 1972:85=1978:100).

4. Compare Von Rad on the following: the roots of prophecy (1965:6-14); the oral tradition of prophecy (1965:33- 49); the calling of

the prophet, and reception of revelation (1965:50-69); the coercive nature of the prophetic task, but also the personal freedom of the prophet (1965:70-79). Compare also Fohrer (1972:71-73): the meaning of the prophetic calling is to relinquish the typically human attitude of existence, and to be given a new one.

5. Compare Vriezen (1966:417-419) for individual, and at the same time broader social responsibility according to the prophets.

6. Compare Fohrer (1972:225,226) on the serving nature of the state, in order to create the space and ordered relations within which the essence of human life can be deployed and enacted, both in terms of man's relationship with God and God's dominion on earth in human life.

7. Compare Vriezen (1966:403-406) and Helberg (1990:56-58) on Israel as a natural, but primarily spiritual, society. Their principal theocentric focus helped the people to escape from a narrow, ethno-nationalistic paradigm (cf Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Deutero-Isaiah and Zechariah).

8. Eichrodt (1961:51,52,364): at the time when the classical prophets sharply criticised the popular religion of Israel, the covenant idea receded into the background. This was the result of the prophets' resistance to any sign of externalised religious practice, as well as of mechanical routine in religious thought. They never quoted the Decalogue as a trustworthy book of threats or punishment. They rather emphasised the personal aspect of the relationship with God: honesty, love, submission. They were concerned with the submission of the total man.

66. THE PROPHETS: THE LORD'S DOMINION IS LIFE-GIVING

1. The Lord Rules Universally and in a Missionary Way

Right in the beginning, when Abraham was called, the Lord promised that in him all the generations or nations of the earth would be blessed. In the prophets, especially in Isaiah, the nations become increasingly prominent as participants in the salvation (Isa 2:1-4; 11:10; 19:24,25; 42:6; 49:6; etc). Salvation is not given directly to the nations, but through intercession of the Lord's Servant, Israel (Judah). Even Israel itself could not be the true servant of the Lord; someone from Israel, however, would be that servant. In order to understand this, revelation history should be kept in mind.

Through his sin in the Garden of Eden, man turned his back on the living God, and surrendered himself to death. This was repeated at the building of the city and tower of Babel. Out of this situation of death, God called Abraham, who had no children, and in a life-giving way, caused a people to be born from him. This people was an instrument and model of salvation, and demonstrated by its existence and history that salvation is equal to resurrection from death. The nations would only learn from history what they had done by turning their backs on the living God. They had chosen death, and had also invited the wrath of God upon themselves. The unity which had been their objective, would never be attained. Even the unity of the world empire in which the people of the covenant found themselves during the time of the prophets was no true unity; it was unity through coercion, and meant oppression for the majority of nations.

The Lord proved his power over the nations and in history through his way with the people of the covenant. This applies not only to the birth of the people from the childless Abraham, but also to the whole history of the people up to their exile, as well as their eventual return from exile. The Lord also demonstrated his supreme power over the great king Cyrus. Without him even being aware of it, the Lord used him as his anointed, to enact the divine plan and to save his people from exile (Isa 45). Because of this, the nations would acknowledge that the Lord rules all the nations. The Lord also showed that he saved his people by first punishing them, and then saving them.

He allowed his people to die, as it were; then he resurrected them from death. In this way, he showed the nations that the way of salvation is that of repentance. It is the way of the death of the old life and the resurrection of the new. The nations neither wanted to do this, nor could they. Israel had to intercede for them. Even Israel did not want to and could not do this on their own, and had to receive salvation through mediation of the true servant, who suffered for Israel and the nations, died and rose from death. For this reason, there could only be mention of missionary work in the true sense of the word after the Servant, Jesus Christ, had come. Without him, missionary work was still impossible.

The book of Jonah is regarded as the true missionary book of the Old Testament, because Jonah was the only person who was actually sent to preach the word of God to unbelievers. This book teaches that the mediator

of the word must first die and be resurrected from death before the word can be preached to other nations. Jonah stayed in the fish for three days and three nights; this amounts to death. That he also escaped from the fish is equal to resurrection from death. The book ends by showing what it was that Jonah and his people had to shed through death; it was selfishness. In Jonah's case, death and resurrection were incomplete and shadowy. This was also the case in the whole history of Israel. It would only become real and complete in him who was greater than Jonah (Mt 12:40).

2. Suspenseful Dominion: Judgement and Salvation

The ministry of the prophets had a paradoxical character. They preached the Lord's sovereign dominion over all things, especially over his covenant people. However, their ministry also tells of the sin of the people: apostasy, idolatry, formalism, social injustice, etc. For this reason, the prophets had to announce the Lord's terrible judgement of his people. But because the Lord is a merciful and gracious God, the prophets could also announce salvation. The people, however, always regarded their salvation as a matter of course, and then had to hear the prophets' announcement of terrible judgement again.

The prophetic ministry, therefore, had an element of suspense to it. On the one hand, the prophets announced a terrible and inescapable judgement; on the other hand, they promised wonderful salvation. These two elements are like two parallel lines that never meet. Judgement and salvation sometimes abruptly stand next to each other (cf Hos 2:12,13). Some prophets emphasise that only a small remnant will be saved (cf Isa 1:8). The reason for their salvation is not given: it is only through God's grace and his covenant faithfulness.

Because of the differing situations of the earlier, later and exilic prophets, repentance, doom and salvation receive emphasis in the respective periods. Despite this, the whole still has an element of unity to it, and teaches that history is on its way to the Day of the Lord. This expression is a technical term which occurs about thirty times in the Old Testament, but only in the prophets and in Lamentations (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi). The Day of the Lord is the time of the Lord's eschatological judgement for the benefit of his people, but also his judgement of his people! (Cf Amos 5:18 et seq). The prophets always proclaim this day as being near, in the sense that God himself is near. The rumble of his unique coming in history already has an effect on all events.

The prophets' expectation of the nearness of the Day of the Lord is, therefore, not a merely naive view blocked by their understanding of their own times. On the contrary, it has an extraordinary depth perspective. The prophet's own time is regarded within the unity and context of all of history, and is given an actual-eschatological meaning. Contrary to this, eschatological material is today all too often applied to contemporary events, without any consideration of the complex historical view of prophetic material. Prophetic material is treated as if it is exhausted by contemporary events, and as if the end (in the chronological sense) is very near.

3. Something Radically New, But Out of the Old

According to the prophets, the history of the people of the covenant will irrevocably end in downfall. Despite this, the Lord maintains his covenant in a wonderful way, and gives life to his people through downfall and death (Eze 37). He even provides a substitute for this. This will be someone put to death by the people, but also for the people, someone who will also regain life. He will be the true Servant, taking the place of the failed servant, Israel (Isa 53).

The prophets strongly called on the people for radical change in all areas of life: political, social, religious and personal. They often mentioned new things the Lord would do. The Lord proclaimed new things (Isa 42:10): he would give a new heart (Eze 18:31), a new name (Isa 62:2), a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), even a new heaven and a new earth that could not be compared with the old (Isa 65:17). These new things, however, always retain their link with the old ones, as well as with a change of heart and life. The way that man should follow is indicated by the Servant of Isaiah 53.

This way is the way of self-denial in the service of the Lord and of one's fellow man. It means to die in oneself, in one's selfishness and sin, and to be resurrected to a new life of repentance, under the absolute dominion of God, and in fellowship with him. This is only possible by sharing in the Servant who did what no other man or servant could do by himself, not even Israel, nor any of the most outstanding of her prophets.

4. Notes

1. Kaiser (1978:183-185): the promise proclaimed by the prophets was a true promise, and not a mere forecast. Forecasting was not even a main characteristic of the prophetic ministry. The main content of the prophetic ministry was righteousness and justice, and they proclaimed the law, as well as the promise, in order to move the people to repentance and a life of obedience to the will and plan of God. According to Kaiser, this proclamation was both national and cosmopolitan, because all tribes, peoples and nations were united by faith into one single programme. Kaiser still sees some unfulfilled promises for the people of Israel, now that the Christian dispensation has arrived. He is not serious enough regarding fulfilment in Christ.
2. Eichrodt (1961:385): the prophets' radical criticism of the status quo excludes any optimistic belief in progress. There is no hope that human resistance will eventually be overcome. It is also totally impossible that God would justify the existing situation in the world. The prophets make no attempt at the odium. On the contrary, they trust in God, who has the power not only to destroy things, but also to recreate them. History will eventually be broken down and will disappear into a new dispensation (cf eschatology).
3. According to Von Rad (1962:127,128), the view of the prophets fell outside of redemptive history as it had been understood by Israel up to that point. According to the prophets, the old was finished; Yahweh would bring something totally new: a new exodus, a new covenant, a new Moses. Von Rad makes too radical a difference, actually a breach, between the prophets and the remainder of the Old Testament. He does not sufficiently take into account the nature of God's life-giving work, which is evident throughout all the books of the Old Testament.
4. Westermann (1978:110,111) indicates that Israel received her existence as a people through God's saving work. When Israel turned away from this God, she lost the foundation of her existence as a people. Since the announced downfall was God's intervention in the history of his people, it was founded in the whole of God's work and plan, who wanted to rescue Israel as his people from the threat to her existence.
5. Zimmerli (1972:161 = 1978:185): the expression "the Day of the Lord" is not defined by an element of further description. It is the day on which the nearness of Yahweh is the most decisive factor, the day of coming face to face with Yahweh himself (Am 5:17). No matter how absolute the announcement of judgement by the prophets, it is not the final word on this subject. The judgement is not a catastrophe of fate, but the confrontation with the personal, living God. It is he himself who announces it. Behind everything is the determinative I - "I, I shall..." (cf Hos 11 and Am 3,9; Zimmerli, 1972:161,165).

67. THE PROPHETS: THE LORD ACTS THROUGH HIS WORD AND IN HISTORY

1. The Word is Effective, Even if it Follows a Way of Suffering

The prophets were powerful figures with special influence because of the word they proclaimed. They were convinced that this word was not their own, but that of the Lord. The following formulae are characteristic of the prophetic ministry: "This is what the Lord says" (cf Jer 2:5, etc; Eze 2:4; 3:27; etc), or "The word of the Lord that came to...H (cf Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1, etc). A specific revelation often ends with the words: "...the Lord said". They were also convinced that what they said, would happen. For this reason, they often used the perfect tense of a verb when speaking of things that would only happen in the future. This is the so-called "prophetic perfect", which expresses the certainty of future events.

The word the prophets brought was not a mere sound, but was effective - it often brought things into being and caused events to occur, and did not return to the Lord empty (Isa 55:10,11). It did not, however, function as an independent, magical power, but was always under full control of God himself. Sinful man always resists this word, but it continues working nevertheless. Sinful man is wise in his own eyes: he calls evil good, and good he calls evil; he turns darkness into light, and light into darkness (Isa 5:20,21). In man's sinfulness, he turns God's word around, and reacts to it in precisely the opposite way as that which was intended. The people of Israel were hardened by Isaiah's ministry, and they became unrepentant; the Lord, therefore, brought about their downfall (Isa 6:9,10). Because of their lack of true repentance on account of the prophetic word, they entered national death, that of the exile (cf Eze 37). Instead of bringing life, the word now brought death! (Isa 40:6- 8).

The word showed itself in a wonderful way to be a word of suffering. It entered the person who proclaimed it, and caused him to suffer, as for instance with Jeremiah (Jer 20). Isaiah mentions a preacher of the word as a suffering servant. He himself is also the word (Isa 49,53). This servant is the people, but he is also the prophet, and even someone greater than the prophet. Isaiah sees him suffering and dying. With this, the people of the covenant dies, and together with the people, the word of the covenant promises. However, Isaiah also sees that

the servant lives again. In the same way, the word remains alive and gives life to the people that is fallen unto death.

2. The Suffering of the People of the Covenant a Means to a Greater End

During the exile, the prophets had to support the people in their disappointment, dejection and despair with great strength and patience: "Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel: My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?" (Isa 40:27). Slowly but surely the prophetic ministry pulled the people from the depths of their despair, and reminded them of the pre-exilic preaching. In this way, the despised preaching that had called them to repentance became the source of new hope for the future.

The Lord himself gave new meaning to the exile for the repentant people. It was punishment of their unrepentant attitude towards the Lord and the continuing prophetic call for repentance before the exile (Isa 40:2), but in his grace, the Lord also gave new meaning to it. It was a means of bringing the light of the word to the nations. The contact with the nations during the exile made this possible. In this way, the Lord fulfilled his plan with the calling of Abraham and of the people of the covenant (Gen 12:3). The word created salvation through the suffering and death of the people. This would be made possible by the true suffering Servant, who would die in the place of the people of the covenant and others, and who would also live again (Isa 53).

3. The Lord Controls History

The prophets did not merely teach timeless truths; their ministry was firmly rooted in the realities of life. They viewed the faithfulness and apostasy of the people within an historical framework. The Lord punished them through history, among other things. He made use of the rise, prosperity and downfall of world powers or other nations to punish or save his people.

The Lord did not merely deal with his people in a situation of the here and now. He always related his actions to his saving work of the past, like the exodus from Egypt, and also focused his revelation on the future. He spans all history and leads it to a specific end.

Although the prophets strongly emphasised historical events and history as such, their ministry and books were not intended as historiography. Their books are not even arranged in a consistent chronological order in the Bible. There is also no other obvious reason for their present order in the Bible. This book will, therefore, also not follow a chronological order in the discussion of the various prophets. Although every prophet will be discussed in his historical context, the order of the Bible (specifically of the Greek canon) will be followed. (Because of the different lengths of the discussions of the various prophets, some will be grouped together in a different order, merely for the sake of better balance in the composition of the book.)

4. Eschatological Expectations

From the earliest times, the Old Testament always had an eschatological orientation. This has to do with the fact that there is unity in history, and that history is moving towards an end. The prophets normally focused on the present, on sin, repentance and the judgement of God in present events. The later prophets increasingly focused on the future. This is related to the increasing clarity in the Old Testament of the need for an absolutely new situation, for renewal of man, earth and history.

In the time of the prophets, the eschatological expectations also increased dramatically. This included a deeper element: salvation would only come through terrible judgement. This would happen on the Day of the Lord, and it would also involve the people of the covenant. This day was expected by the prophets in the form of an ordinary, concrete and historical day, but there is also a suggestion of supra-historical elements in their expectations. They were primarily concerned with the fact that the Lord would maintain his dominion and his fellowship with man. For this reason, they emphasised the Lord's coming to his people. This expectation is more central to the prophetic teaching than the messianic expectation.

The seriousness and depth of the sin of the people of the covenant necessitated a radical change. A new, eschatological period would come, the last days or *eschaton*. It is described in widely differing images, containing both concrete historical and supra-historical elements. Common elements in these descriptions are

that history will end in worldwide strife and judgement (Isa 24:18 et seq; Eze 38,39; Dan 2,7; Joel; Obadiah; Zep 1,3; Zee 13; Mai 3:17; 4:1 et seq). A time of peace will also come (Isa 2:11; Zee 9).

These expectations were based on unshakeable faith in the Lord's absolute sovereignty and his unchangeable covenant faithfulness.

5. Apocalyptic Expectations

The apocalyptic element originated as an intensification, and at the same time transformation, of Israel's historical faith in the triumph of God's dominion: historical events are not isolated, but are related to the great cosmic struggle which will soon be ended by God.

Apocalypics is an element of the eschatological material, but it is less historical, and more stereotypical and mysterious. It is especially prevalent in the book of Daniel, and originated in cheerless times in Israel's history. Apocalypics teach that the world is so corrupt and broken, that only God can save it. This can only happen through a radical reversal of everything. In times of persecution, one should patiently await the Lord. Both present and future events are already part of his plan. This does not mean, however, that man is a victim or passive slave of powers that use him as a mechanical tool. He can have a personal relationship with God, and remains a moral, rational and responsible being. That is why Daniel prayed for the sins of his people (Dan 9).

Life is first of all enshrined in the Lord and in fellowship with him. The Lord is the living God who saves and creates life out of death. There will be a changed, renewed world, as well as personal resurrection from death (Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2). Destruction of the world powers is at hand. This teaching does not intend to stimulate people to make all kinds of calculations, but is intended to call the persecuted to perseverance in faith.

6. Messianic Prophecies

The messianic prophecies are about Israel's expectations of a saving person in general, whether an anointed king, prophet, priest or even another, unanointed person. These expectations were based on the certainty that Israel's failure did not indicate the Lord's failure. On the contrary, he would bring about salvation in a wonderful way - even without any mention of a personal messiah. The Lord is in control of history, and will fulfil his purpose with it. The messiah will come from the people, and will be one of the people; at the same time, however, he will be supra-historical.

The messianic promises were strongly linked to the royal house of David, because of the Lord's covenant with him (2 Sam 7). Examples of this are the following: the Immanuel sign (Isa 7:14); the newborn wonderful king (Isa 9:1 et seq); the shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1 et seq); the ruler with origins from of old, who will be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:1 et seq); the Branch with the name: the Lord our Righteousness (Jer 23:6); the fallen tent of David that will be repaired (Am 9:11); the shoot from the cedar of Israel (Eze 17:22-24); the one shepherd of the one flock under a covenant of peace (Eze 34:11 et seq); Zerubbabel, the signet ring of the Lord (Hag 2:21-24); the humble victor-king (Zee 9:9 et seq).

The saviour is also portrayed as a despised and abused servant, one with his people in suffering and loss of glory (Isa 42,49,50, 53). He is also portrayed as the Son of man from heaven (Dan 7:13 et seq), and with other images (cf Dan 2; Zee 3:8-10; 6:9-15; Mai3:1).

7. Notes

1. The prophetic formula: "the word of the Lord came to..." could be more literally translated as: "the word of the Lord happened to...". The Hebrew word for "happen/occur" is the same as that for "to be"; this indicates the dynamic character of the concept "to be" in the Old Testament, as in the name "I am who I am" (Ex3:14).

2. Young (1978:79) indicates that the concept of revelation has lost its meaning as communication of information from God to man, information which man would not have been able to obtain on his own. It would seem as if this word currently merely indicates an enrichment of man's knowledge that came to him in some way or another in the course of his natural development.

3. Compare Vriezen (1966:238-240) on the dynamic, but not magical, meaning of the revelation word, on the "prophetic perfect", as well as unfulfilled prophecies.

4. The revelation to the prophets was not bound to specific external ways, so that the truth of their message could not be determined on external grounds, but only on the content of the word. The determinative factor was whether their word corresponded to God's will, and whether it was born of his Spirit (cf Vriezen, 1966:241).

5. Compare Vriezen (1966:249-255,278) on the prophet as mediator of revelation: *nabi* (speaker); he was a messenger, a free man, called by Yahweh, forced by him to proclaim his word. He was a guardian of the people, a teacher with pupils or students around him. He preached both judgement and salvation, and the content of his message was centered around God, who transcends both nationality and cult, who is holy and merciful and just. Compare also Vriezen (1966:267-272;292-296) on the attitude of the prophets towards the temple and the cult.

6. Compare Vriezen (1966:477) on the fact that the word "Messiah" (anointed) never occurs in the Old Testament in relation to the figure of the saviour!

7. Compare Vriezen (1966:479,480) on the fact that fellowship with God is the Central idea in the people's expectations of the future (Jer 31:31 et seq; Eze 36:26 et seq; 48:35; Isa 52:7 et seq; Zee 2:4 et seq - 2:8 et seq; Joel 2:28 et seq - 3:1 et seq). Compare also Vriezen (1966:493-499) on different kinds of eschatology in the Old Testament; on eschatology as fruit of the fact that man had to learn to trust in God as the only firm basis of life when in great need; on the fact that at the centre of the Old Testament expectation of salvation is the *parousia*, the drawing near of Yahweh, and not the messiah; also: that eschatological thought was not focused on a supernatural world, because the kingdom of God remained an earthly phenomenon in the Old Testament. In Israel's realistic thought, there was no division between the material and the spiritual. Eschatology, therefore, does not abolish nationality, but enlarges it to universality. Through eschatology, history becomes meaningful and purposeful, because it is executed in a meaningful coherence: in the perfect fellowship of man with God, so that he will come as king; or: so that he will rule in all men. In this way, both the ancient Eastern and Western views of history were abolished; in ancient times, history was regarded as an eternal sequence of cyclical periods, like the annual cycles of nature. The believer sees a future for this world, because he faithfully awaits the coming of God; he can already live from the power of fulfilment, in the world of freedom, of being a child of God, because God is king and he will make his dominion perfect.

8. Von Rad (1965:119-125) links the eschatology, especially the Day of the Lord, too strongly to the holy war under Yahweh's command. According to him (1965:301-308), the apocalyptic element could not have originated in prophecy, because it has too little interest in the history of Israel and too much in the last generation of Israel (those who were convinced that they were about to enter the last days). It has a much stronger intellectual basis, and originated in the wisdom literature. However, this view of Von Rad is too one-sided (cf Westermann, 1978:132). Zimmerli (1972:204 = 1978:235) says that the apocalyptic element, with its proclamation of the crisis in the events between the world and God, as well as the purposeful course of history to the end determined by God, did not originate in the wisdom literature, which rather attempted to summarise the set ordinances of life in a kind of "knowledge of life".

9. See Zimmerli (1972:200-202 = 1978:227-230) for a concise discussion of apocalypics in the Old Testament. Compare also Burden (1987:214-216) and Le Roux (1987:325) on apocalypics as a sociological phenomenon, with reference to Hanson. According to this view, the apocalyptic phenomenon was based on a struggle between hierocrats, under leadership of the Zadokites who had the power in their hands, and the visionaries. These visionaries were embittered, post-exilic dissidents and disillusioned Levites who were stripped of their rights. They had no power, and resented the existing order under the Zadokites. They taught that Yahweh himself would intervene, that he would overthrow the existing structures, and that he would create new things. There is, however, still an ongoing debate on the origins of apocalypics.

10. Only a few of the prophets (like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Haggai) explicitly mention the Spirit of God. When they do mention him, the Spirit is always related to the word of God. Compare Eichrodt (1967:46-68) for the Spirit as the origin of life. Every living thing depends on God breathing his breath of life over the created order; when the life-giving spirit that comes from God is withdrawn, death comes. The spirit is always clearly higher than man, a divine power or force in his mortal body, subject only to the dominion of God (1967:47,48). Polytheistic, pantheistic and mystical worldviews are all excluded here. No way is opened to a direct mystical contact with God. God is a personal and powerful ruler. The Spirit works closely together with the word of God, and is related to the spiritual and personal work of the covenant God, with his call to obligation and decision. It is for this reason that the prophets were not drawn into the world of sorcery and miracles (1967:53,54,65).

68. I ISAIAH: "THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL" - PUNISHMENT AND COVENANT FELLOWSHIP

1. A Fearful Time of Coalitions

Isaiah prophesied for about forty years. This was during the fearful years of the Judean kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1:1), when the cruel and feared Assyrians came to be a world power. The Kingdom of the Ten Tribes suffered a terrible fate: exile to the country of the oppressors. Judah was also threatened with the same fate. The fearful nations of the Middle East made treaties in order to keep the Assyrians at bay (8:5-8). Isaiah sharply criticised the contribution of the people of the covenant to this coalition, because trust in God's covenant was not evident in their conduct.

2. "The Holy One of Israel"

The notion of the Lord as "the Holy One of Israel" (1:4) determines the whole book. This is especially clear in the description of the lawsuit between the Lord and his people, with which the book begins, as well as in the description of Isaiah's commission (Isa 6). In this name, as well as in the two descriptions, two characteristics of God are indicated. On the one hand, there is great tension between these characteristics, while on the other hand, they also form a wonderful unity.

On the one hand, God is the Holy One: totally different from man and greater than man, especially man as a sinful and depraved being. On the other hand, God enters into intimate fellowship with man; he relates so closely to his people that he is not only the Holy One, but even the Holy One "of Israel". As Holy One, he is also the Incomparable and Incomprehensible One, who cannot be compared to anyone or anything (cf 40:12 et seq). Even so, he can be known through his relationship with his covenant people, Israel. God is the Holy One, who cannot let sin go unpunished, and indeed punishes his people in his flaming wrath. At the same time, he also reveals special compassion with his people, even in the midst of his judgement.

Isaiah begins with the Lord's lawsuit against his people. The people had failed totally, and had become equal to Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9,10). They were, therefore, totally deprived, and deserved the same fate as that of Sodom and Gomorrah. The history of the people of the covenant thus came to an end. The Lord hated everything about the people, even their prayers (1:11-15). All contact between the Lord and his people had been broken! Their punishment was severe. Even so, he also revealed tender compassion with his people in their great suffering (1:5 et seq). He would even do the impossible for them: their sins were like fast colours, but he would bleach them white (1:18). The Lord would bring about salvation through downfall, life out of death (cf also 40:6-8; Eze 37). However, he also demanded repentance (1:16,17).

At his commission, Isaiah had a vision of the Lord in the temple, surrounded by his impressive and mysterious heavenly court. In deep humility, he praised his holiness and royal splendour (6:2,3). Isaiah himself only saw the Lord in the form of his robe (6:1). Mortal man is not allowed to see the holy God from face to face. God's holiness also caused Isaiah to be acutely conscious of his sinfulness and depravity (6:5); the Lord, however, brings about reconciliation for the repentant sinner (6:6,7). Because of the Lord's holiness, he caused the people's hearts to become even harder through his word, thereby preparing them for his terrible judgement. The small remnant of the people who had escaped the destruction of war, would once again be judged. In the end, however, a small remnant would be saved by God. They would be like new life sprouting from a felled tree (6:11,12).

Isaiah proclaimed the Lord as "the Holy One of Israel", and this entailed the following: the Lord is the inaccessible, punishing and destructive God, but he is also the merciful God who has unbreakable personal fellowship with his covenant people. He demands repentance and justice, faith and hope.

3. The Lord Hates Formalism in Religion, and his Word Hardens the Heart of the Unrepentant

The name "the Holy One of Israel" expresses the idea of a personal relationship between the Lord and his people. This includes that the Lord claims his people personally, and that he is not satisfied with impersonal actions and ceremonies. Man, however, is naturally inclined to formalism. This characterised the people of the covenant's whole religion and life. Isaiah sharply criticised this: the Lord hated their worship services and festivals - they were a burden to him (1:14).

The prophet even received a terrifying command: he had to cause hardness of heart, unrepentance and downfall among his people through his ministry (6:9 et seq). The word proclaimed by the prophet would have this effect, because the people were so corrupt that they changed all good into its exact opposite (5:20). They also did this with the word of God, to their own detriment and downfall.

4. The Lord Punishes Human Pride, but Saves the Wretched, a Faithful Remnant

It is fitting for man to be humble towards the holy God, but he is by nature a proud being. This was Isaiah's emphatic message. The Lord would, therefore, humble the pride of man (1:2 et seq; 2:9,11,12-17; 5:15,16). The Day of the Lord, the day of judgement, was intended exactly for this purpose (2:9 et seq). The Lord would

take the side of the humble, the needy and the wretched, and help them (1:5 et seq; 1:18,25). Isaiah emphasised this so strongly, that salvation and justice often seem to be exactly the same thing to him. This is also the reason for his exceptionally strong emphasis on faith and trust (7:9; 8:12,13; 28:16; 30:15), as well as the expectation that a small remnant would eventually be saved (1:8,9; 1:25; 6:13; 11:1; etc). The holy God demanded that the people repent, and that they live in justice, compassion and helpfulness (1:16,17).

Isaiah's strong emphasis on comfort and salvation was accompanied by strong messianic preaching: the Immanuel sign (7); the birth, name and dominion of the saviour-king (9:16); the branch from the stump of Jesse (11:1-10); the king who would rule in justice when, unlike the present Israel, those who see would no longer be blind, and those who hear would no longer be deaf (32:1 et seq).

5. The Lord is Transcendent, but He Reveals Himself in History and Brings About Universal Salvation

As with the other prophets, Isaiah's preaching was rooted in concrete, practical life and in history. Isaiah was commissioned and saw his vision in the year of king Uzziah's death (6:1), that is, when the Assyrians first made their ominous appearance. Kings came and went, but the Lord sat on his exalted throne. He was the firm ruler of the people of the covenant, and remained unaffected by the characteristic flux of life and history on earth.

History also has a transcendent element, because the Holy One of Israel, who reveals himself in history, is a transcendent God. The so-called Isaiah-apocalypse (Isa 24-27) portrays God's final triumph in the eschatological judgement of the world.

The Lord is the "Holy One of Israel", but despite this, he also brings about salvation for the nations (2:1-4). Egypt will serve the Lord together with Assyria, and both will be on the same level as the people of the covenant (19:23,24). The prophet's vision was, therefore, at the same time both national and universal.

6. The Lord Acts through his Word

Like other prophets, Isaiah did not preach his own thoughts, but the word he received from the Lord (1:2 et seq). This word was closely related to the law or word the people had received hundreds of years earlier (1:10). The Holy One of Israel would always remain faithful to himself, his word, and his covenant with his people.

7. Notes

1. Vriezen (1966:322-328): God's holiness is the absolute glory of his being, which is so totally different that man cannot exist before it. This holiness is indicative of God's unapproachability and glory, or power, and is destructive with regard to sin and God's enemies, but it also saves. His glory (*kabod*) is the power that emanates from his being, and is the external manifestation of his holiness; it covers the whole earth (Isa 6). Yahweh has nothing demonic in him, because he is a person, and the demonical ways has something sub-personal in it. As the Holy One, he is a God who demands complete faithfulness from man (a "jealous" God; the translation "jealous", however, wrongly expresses a negative element: a jealous person is usually suspicious of someone else). God's holiness is closely related to his righteousness in the Old Testament (1966:333), as well as to mercy and grace. His mercy and faithfulness are based on his holiness. God does not have two faces, like some images of idols. He is not a double being, but single (Dt 6:4), even though he cannot be known completely by his creatures (1966:337).

2. Eichrodt (1961:265,276): Yahweh is an absolutely personal God. He is not a mere overwhelming force which overpowers people, but a divine "Thou", who enters into a relationship with man, and takes him seriously as a being with a will (1961:348). The uniqueness of the Old Testament definition of holiness is not to be found in its high moral standard, but rather in the personal nature of God. Together with the knowledge of holiness, Israel was also gifted with the knowledge of the divine Thou, a concrete personal will who intended to use the life of the nation in his service. In Hosea, it is the incomprehensible creative power of love which eventually indicates Yahweh as the complete "other" (1961:281).

3. Compare Eichrodt (1967:281-284) on the antinomy, incomprehensible to man, that he who is blamelessly righteous, holy and pure, gives man life and grace through his judgement, by way of death. He is the God who punishes, although he is also gracious. Only the conviction of being called and supported by God himself, enables man to transcend the limits of human potential, to walk with the mysterious God on the terrifying ways he follows through history. It presupposes repentance, humility and complete trust.

4. Compare paragraph 1 of Chapter 65.

69. II ISAIAH: "THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL": THE LORD IS UNIQUE AND SAVES THROUGH SERVITUDE

1. A Discouraged People in Exile

II Isaiah, that is, the second part of the book of Isaiah (Isa 40-66), deals with the period of Judah's exile, about a century and a half after the time of Isaiah's ministry. There is, however, a basic unity in the two parts of the book. This unity is evident in, among other things, the name "the Holy One of Israel", which occurs almost exclusively in this book, more or less an equal number of times in the two parts: twelve times in I Isaiah, fourteen times in II Isaiah, and only five times in the remainder of the Old Testament.

II Isaiah is directed at a dejected, submissive and discouraged people in exile (40:27-31). This part teaches that God is the creator of heaven and earth, who controls the fate of nations, including that of Babylon. The Lord is the God who remains faithful to his covenant, and who will direct world history in the favour of his people.

2. The Lord is the Only Subject of Everything: the Creator, Ruler and Saviour

Just like I Isaiah, II Isaiah also proclaims the Lord as "the Holy One of Israel". This second part of the book portrays man's sinfulness even more deeply than the first part: man is dead in his sin, he is powerless and unable to respond positively to the saving word.

However, II Isaiah also indicates God's miraculous grace more clearly, in the fact that even in this desperate situation he brings about salvation. The Lord is the only and powerful subject of everything, and he uses the people as his servant. The Lord works especially through suffering servitude.

II Isaiah contains many "I am..." sayings. It occurs in formulae, such as: "I, the Lord..." (41:4; 42:6; 45:7,8,21); "I am the Lord" (42:8; 43:15; 44:24; 45:5,6,18,19) etc. God reveals himself in these sayings, in which he says that he is the great and only subject of everything: the creator of all things, who controls history and the fate of his people, in order to save them. He is incomparable. Measured against him, everyone is absolutely nothing: the nations, the gods, the people who inhabit the earth, and the kings of the world (40:12-25).

The author strongly emphasises the fact that the Lord is the creator, and that, as a consequence, he now rules everything, and is able to save his people. The Lord is the sovereign ruler of nature, of the stars and the nations (40:21-26), as well as of history. Only his incomparable power as creator is sufficient to save his people from their incomparable fallen state. He does this by creating something new (40:4; 42:9,10; 43:19; 48:6; 62:2; 65:17,18). He steers history according to his purpose, namely that his sovereignty will be acknowledged, and that there will be fellowship with him. To this end, he makes use of Cyrus, for instance - the great Persian conqueror. Cyrus is the anointed one of the Lord, who will carry out his plan and save his people (45:1-6). Only Israel, however, is the true servant of the Lord.

The Lord's capacity as creator is especially related to salvation. The opening words of II Isaiah is a strikingly intimate, tender and comforting word of salvation: "Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God" (40:1 et seq). After this, God's incomparability and his creative power are praised (40:12 et seq). This was especially comforting to the exiles, because they were subordinates in a foreign country, where the gods were praised for victory over the people of the covenant. Even though the Jews were a small and powerless people in the mighty empire of Babel, they could confess God as the God of the whole world.

3. The Word Works Both Destructively and in a Life-giving Way

In II Isaiah, the powerful and saving meaning of the word is indicated more clearly than with any other prophet. The book even starts with a beautiful word of God who speaks, and it continues with a refrain of calls to proclaim the word (40:1-11). The book emphasises that ministry of the word is an important part of the calling of the servant of the Lord (cf the servant songs, 42; 49; 50; 53). The book also contains a call to listen to the word (55:2), and testifies to the powerful working of it: the word brings about salvation, even when man's lack of repentance makes salvation impossible (55:6 et seq).

II Isaiah is sometimes called the "evangelist" of the Old Testament. This name is related to the comforting

concept in this book of one "who brings good tidings" (40:9).

However, right at the beginning of his book, the prophet also confronts the reader with a paradoxical situation regarding the word. The saving glory of the word of God is not related to transient man or the people of the covenant, but has a destructive effect on them. Before God's Spirit and word, man withers like grass in the wind (40:6-8). The prophetic ministry, for instance, had caused Israel to end up in the national death of exile, because of their lack of repentance (Eze 37). Even at the first announcement of the Ten Commandments, in the time of Moses, the people had not been able to tolerate the word (Ex 20:19). Salvation is, therefore, actually quite impossible. Despite this, and in the same breath, the people is called to proclaim "a good message", the saving appearance of God himself. God comes in power and dominion, and he comes as a shepherd who enjoys fellowship with his people; he comes despite all obstacles (40:9-11; cf also 40:3-5). The people itself should be a servant, proclaiming the word. Because men and nations cannot and will not accept the word, this task requires perseverance and even suffering. It requires faith in God, who is able to do the impossible, who can bridge the widest gap or contradiction, who creates life out of death.

4. The Lord Saves through Servitude

The Lord is the sovereign subject, while man is a servant. This is how the prophet identifies the people of the covenant (41:8,9; 42:1,19; 43:10; 44:1; etc). Just like God's sovereignty, servitude includes a particularly intimate personal relationship of fellowship. The Lord used world leaders like Cyrus to save his people. Salvation requires more, however: in the place of the people as servant, someone should act who can do in an unusual way what the people failed to do. This is proclaimed in the so-called servant songs (42:1-6; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). They form part of the servant passages (41-55), which mention Israel's task as servant of the Lord. In the servant songs, the servant is sometimes Israel, sometimes not.

The servant is gifted with the Spirit, and will bring about salvation for the wretched. He is given as a covenant to the people of Israel (42:6); the covenant broken by the people will be made new in him. He will be a light to the nations, that is, he will restore them in a harmonious relationship with God (42:6,7). The servant will do what is humanly impossible. He will die and be resurrected from death (53:10). In this way he will fulfil what has been foreshadowed in the history of the people: God is sovereign and punishes man's sin in a destructive way; he also creates life out of death, because he also has unbreakable fellowship with his people. His dominion and fellowship cannot be stopped by anything, not even by man's deadly sinfulness. God himself provides someone to die as substitute for man's sin, and to rise from death for man's sake (53:3-12). This teaching is clearly related to Jesus Christ (Mt 8:17; 27:57,60; Mk 15:28; Ro 4:25).

5. Hope and Comfort

The book begins by offering hope and comfort in an unrivalled way (40:1 et seq). This hope and comfort are characteristic of the whole book. There is an urgent invitation to share in the abundance of the Lord (55). Even though the people had broken the covenant, this did not lead to divorce from the Lord (50:1). The Lord will forget them even less than a mother could forget the baby at her breast (49:15).

6. Universalism and Mission

II Isaiah is particularly universal in its approach. He proclaims the Lord as the only and universal creator, who maintains everything and rules all nations (cf above).

Salvation is also worldwide. The call to turn to the Lord goes to all nations (45:22). This is also part of the servant's task (42:5,6; 49:6).

7. Notes

1. Vriezen (1966:340, footnote 2): Isaiah 51:2 contains one of the few references to the patriarchs in the prophets. This minor role is the result of the prophets' emphasis on God's grace alone, instead of on the nobility of descent.

2. Compare Eichrodt (1967:331,332) on the meaning of suffering as a calling, an active service for God's people, and not merely negatively, as a threat to or restriction of life.

3. Zimmerli (1972:189 = 1978:215) indicates the absence of a visionary element in II Isaiah. Everything has become hearing in this part of the book. Compare also Zimmerli (1972:193 = 1978:219) on the gracious "I, even I..." ("I, even I am the Lord, and apart from me there is no saviour", Isa 43:11), and on the suffering servant (1972:194-199*1978:221-225).

4. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

70. JEREMIAH: THE LORD TOUCHES MAN IN HIS INNERMOST BEING

1. Through his Word, the Lord Touches and Changes Fallen Man in his Innermost Being

Jeremiah's ministry spanned the half century before the great disaster of the Babylonian exile. The short lived reforms of king Josiah never penetrated very far into the lives of the people, but it did make them very self satisfied. In reality, their religion was superficial and formalistic. Jeremiah was very critical of this. The essence of Jeremiah's ministry can be found in 1:5 and 1:8-10, in the account of his calling. This is in sharp contrast with the superficial attitude of reformation among the people and the authorities. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. [...] 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."

Jeremiah's ministry and actions say: through his word, the Lord touches man in his innermost being and, because he is totally fallen, he creates a new life for him. This happens through suffering and downfall, as well as a miraculous change in the being of man in the new covenant.

2. The Lord Initiates and Does Everything for the Totally Fallen People

The Lord is the sovereign initiator of everything, who also brings about everything; man is completely subservient to him. The Lord knew and prepared the prophet even before he was born, and forced him to carry out the prophetic task (1:5,6; 20:7 et seq). The Lord is just as sovereign and free over against the people as a potter over against his clay (18). The Lord asserts his power over and applies his prophecy to all nations (1:5; 32:27; 46:51). Even the false prophets serve his purpose (4:10). He grants all people their existence, and chooses prophets and people as it pleases him (1:5; 31:31-34). Their election is accompanied by sanctification and separation, but with a view to contact: they have a worldwide prophetic task (1:5).

The command Jeremiah received at his calling, "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow" (1:10), typifies his ministry. It concerned the people in their innermost being. A breach that could not be healed existed between God and his people, and this would have disastrous consequences, because of the imperviousness of the people, despite continued calls to repent (3:7 et seq; 4:1 et seq; 6:16 et seq; 7:13 et seq; 7:23 et seq; etc). Sin had become second nature to the people (2:20 et seq; 5:8 et seq; 5:1 et seq; 13:23); they committed violence against others, especially against the poor and unprotected (2:34; 5:28; 7:5 et seq; 22:3). The process of purification had failed (6:27-30). Sin was indelibly and implacably engraved on the hearts of the people (17:1 et seq).

3. True Religion Entails Personal Fellowship, and Excludes Formalism

The Lord "knew" Jeremiah even before his birth (1:5), that is, he bestowed personal care on him (Ps 1:6), and the Lord was "with him" (1:8,19; cf Ex 3:14). The Lord wanted a personal relationship with the prophet and with his people. The people, however, made only superficial attempts at reform (3:10). Their lives had to undergo radical change; they had to break up the unploughed ground, and circumcise their hearts (4:3,4). Their worship services in the temple and their sacrifices were formalistic, empty and false; it created false confidence, and was accompanied by dishonesty and idolatry (7:4 et seq). In this way, the people made their cult despicable before God, and stood in the way of intercession (7:16;14).

At the exodus, the Lord reminded his people, the most important aspect had been a personal relationship between him and them. The way to this was ministry of the word and a life of obedience. The sacrificial

ministry was totally subordinate to this (7:22,23).

4. True Prophecy, Unlike False Prophecy, Requires Personal Fellowship with God, as well as Suffering

Jeremiah sheds important light on the nature of true prophecy, over against false prophecy. True prophecy is not about merely expressing a thought or opinion; the prophet is involved with his total and innermost being. This is why the Lord emphasises that he knew Jeremiah before his birth, and that he formed him in the womb (1:5). Jeremiah's calling and preparation for his ministry happened without any initiative of his own. It was even against his own will; he protested (1:6). The prophet was under divine constraint to proclaim the word (20:7,9). This coercive nature of the prophetic ministry can be ascribed to the breach between the word and man (Isa 40:6-8).

A prophet, therefore, does not act on his own initiative or with his own ideas; he is sent by God. He comes with the divine word, under divine constraint, and in intimate personal fellowship with God (1:5-8). False prophets, on the contrary, speak words from their own minds (23:16; 27:15 et seq; 29:8 et seq); they have a superficial consciousness of sin, do not preach God's judgement, and do not call people to repentance (23:16,22).

This difference is very clear in Jeremiah's struggle with the false prophet, Hananiah. Jeremiah was so dependent on divine revelation, that it apparently caused him embarrassment; he went away when Hananiah continued with his resistance and appealed to divine revelation. This, however, precisely proved that Jeremiah was a true prophet. He did not make a theological or political debate of the matter. He only said something when the Lord gave him something to say (28:11). Shortly after Jeremiah had gone away from Hananiah, this was indeed what happened (28:12,13).

5. The Lord Makes a New Beginning: a New Covenant

There was such a tense relationship between the word and the people, that only a new beginning could provide a solution. Because of the total depravity of man and society, this required a complete change of everything. The brokenness of the people was incurable (5:14). Jeremiah had to uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow. The final purpose was positive, however: to build and to plant (1:10). The Lord would cause life to sprout from the root through an unusual ruler, namely "The Lord Our Righteousness" (23:6), the Messiah.

In essence, Jeremiah's task was not revolutionary, and entailed, first of all, a personal change of heart. Only a new covenant could bring about salvation. The Lord himself would bring about repentance, and the word, or law, would be written in the hearts of the people. Only God can do such a thing, because he is the fountain of living water (2:13). He forgives, and he gives life (31:31-34).

The proclamation of the new covenant is one of the highlights of the Old Testament revelation of God. It was truly fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Heb 8:8-12; cf also Mt 26:26-28). Although Jeremiah taught new things, he was not so much concerned with change as such, but rather with personal servitude to God. Therefore, at the same time, he called the people back to the old ways in a powerful way (6:16; 35).

6. Realism and Hope

Jeremiah's preaching was realistic and firmly rooted in real life. Despite this, he opened a view of hope for the future (29:10,11). His realism was not pragmatic. He warned against treaties with the nations, especially with Egypt. Jeremiah was neither pro-Babylonian, nor pro-Egyptian, but called on his people to trust in God alone, under all circumstances.

The book ends with, on the one hand, the terror of the exile, and, on the other hand, the reprieve in Babylon of the Judean king, Jehoiachin, who had broken the covenant. There was a change in the tide of events, which gives rise to the question: would the people who had broken the covenant also be pardoned? It never became more than modest expectations, however, supported by true submission to God, as illustrated in the last verse of the book of Lamentations.

7. Notes

1. Kaiser (1978:228): Jeremiah uses the expression "This is what the Lord says", or similar expressions, 157 times, out of a total of 349 times in the whole Old Testament. Jeremiah is the prophet of the "word of the Lord" (1:2).

2. Kaiser (1978:233,234) indicates the following aspects of continuity between the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31- 34, and the covenant of the forefathers: 1. the same God who makes the covenant: "this is the covenant I will make"; 2. the same law: "my law" (not another one than that of Sinai); 3. the same divine fellowship promised in the old threefold formula: "I will be their God"; 4. the same "seed" and "people": "they will be my people"; 5. the same forgiveness: "For I will forgive their wickedness". According to Kaiser, therefore, the word "new" actually means "renewed". This covenant was the old Abrahamic-Davidic promise, in a renewed and enlarged form. The "new" began with the "old" promise to Abraham, Moses and David, and the renewal perpetuated the same promise, and much more.

3. Compare Eichrodt (1967:294,295) on the shift in the relationship with God, from an approach of obligation to one of direct affection, or love.

4. Compare Childs (1986:136-139) on the fact that the struggle between Jeremiah and Hananiah was not about an existential matter. The difference between the two was not merely that Hananiah's timing for the delivery of his message was bad. Neither was it merely a hermeneutic question (contrary to the opinion of J. A. Sanders), or even a psychological one, for instance: how did Jeremiah know that he was right? It was a theocentric problem: what was God's purpose? Jeremiah allowed God the freedom to change his mind. The test of truth was in God who makes known his will through revelation. The true prophet proclaimed the word of God; the false prophet proclaimed lies, because he had no contact with God's revelation (Jer 23:25 et seq).

5. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

71. EZEKIEL: THE LORD TAKES HIS PEOPLE THROUGH DEATH

1. Ezekiel Preaches to a Hardened, and later Helpless, People

The prophet Ezekiel was taken to Babylon in 598/7 BC, together with the first group of exiles, king Jehoiachin and a considerable group of other important people. He was, therefore, a younger contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. He had to guide his people during the same difficult times. His earliest preaching was even harsher than that of Jeremiah, and left no hope for salvation. This was because the people in Palestine continued in their sin after the first deportation. They were under the impression that they were the chosen remnant, in contrast to those who had been exiled. Until the fall of Jerusalem (587/6 BC), therefore, Ezekiel proclaimed only judgement. After that, he started to preach salvation, in order to gather the materially and spiritually helpless people from the ashes (36:21 et seq). They had gone through the most terrible ordeal, and now they were exiles, dying as a people.

The book of Ezekiel teaches: the Lord is the transcendent and incomprehensible ruler of the world. He glorifies himself by punishing his horribly obstinate people with death, but also by resurrecting the same people through his word and Spirit.

This message is quite evident in the vision of the mysterious animals that Ezekiel had when he was called (1-3; cf 2:5; 3:17,18), and in his vision of the valley of dry bones (37).

2. The Lord is Transcendent, and Exercises Immediate and Absolute Dominion in an Incomprehensible Way (3,10)

The prophecies against the nations (25-32) tell of the Lord's worldwide dominion. He determines the events of history.

The Lord appeared to Ezekiel at the Kebar River in Babylon (1:1 et seq). In his glorious appearance, he was not confined to the temple of Jerusalem or to the promised land, as the people thought. He actually did not want to live in a temple, but rather among his people, within people (cf 2 Sam 7).

Ezekiel saw a mysterious appearance of the Lord, in which four mysterious living creatures carried the throne of the Lord (1:5 et seq; 26). This vision portrays his dominion over the beings, as well as his omnipotence and omnipresence. The four living creatures are indicative of the incomprehensibility of the Lord, as well as his conduct in the extremely confusing and terrifying history of the downfall of the people of the covenant; at the

same time, however, it also expresses the idea that there is direction and a plan to these events. The wheels beside the creatures could go in any direction - a wheel intersecting a wheel at right angles (1:16).

The Lord's appearance was so overwhelming, and so unlike anything man is able to comprehend, that in describing it, the prophet had to make use of expressions like: "appearance" and "what looked like" (1:24,26,27,28). The Lord addressed Ezekiel as "son of man" (2:1,3,6,8; 3:1,3,4,10,16; etc), thereby expressing the great distance between God and man, the divine transcendence. This consciousness controlled everything Ezekiel did. The expression occurs about ninety times in the book.

3. The Lord Punishes and Saves his People for the Sake of his Name

The idea that, through the actions of the Lord, his people and the nations will know "that I am the Lord" (6:7,10,13,14; 25:5,7,11,17; etc), occurs about sixty times in the book of Ezekiel. The Lord's sovereignty and transcendence are emphasised so strongly, that both judgement and salvation are viewed from this perspective. The Lord himself explicitly says that it is not for the sake of Israel that he will save them, but for the sake of his holy name, which they have profaned when he had to disperse them on account of their sins. Because of that, the nations said: "These are the Lord's people, and yet they had to leave his land" (36:20; cf also 36:21-24).

The Lord, therefore, maintained the honour of his name over against unfaithful Israel by punishing them, as well as over against the nations, by proving that Israel was indeed his people to whom he had committed himself. Salvation entailed purification, as well as a radical inner change (36:25-28).

The people would especially realise that he is the Lord, because he would return them to life from the death of exile (37:6,13,14). In this way, the name "Lord" would indicate that he is the God who gives life, just like at the time of the exodus (cf the discussion of Ex 3:14; 20:2).

4. God Punishes his People in a Destructive Way, but Brings Them Back from Death – Resurrection and New Covenant

The prophet proclaimed the future siege of Jerusalem, as well as the accompanying famine, exile and other terrible things. He made special use of symbolic presentations (4:1 et seq; 5:1 et seq; 12:3 et seq; 21:20 et seq). The people of the covenant was corrupt and stubborn, and the Lord punished them for this in a destructive way. They served idols (8:14; 11; 12:21; 13:1 et seq), and would therefore be destroyed without excuse (6,7,14). No intercession would help them, not even if Noah, Daniel or Job were to intercede for them (14:14). The sorrow would be so great, that it would not be possible to mourn (24:22 et seq). In order to symbolise this and to make it clear to the people, Ezekiel was not allowed to mourn for his own wife (24:16 et seq).

The inhabitants of Jerusalem refused to repent, and had the false and proud idea that they were the Lord's remnant, to be distinguished from those in exile (11:15 et seq). Even so, the Lord would miraculously cause a small remnant to survive (5:3,4; 6:8; 9:6). The people were irrevocably headed for death, and did indeed die as a people, but the Lord brought about a miracle, and brought them back from death through his word and Spirit (37). Ezekiel saw this in a vision of countless dry bones in a valley. The Lord commanded him to prophesy to the bones. As a result, the bones came together, and tendons and flesh, as well as skin, covered them. Ezekiel then prophesied to the breath to come into the dead, and they became alive. This passage clearly teaches what has always been part of the history of the people of the covenant: the Lord's salvation of his people is nothing less than resurrection from death.

The Lord would also do something totally new, in the spiritual sense, in the midst of his people - he would make a new covenant with them. He would give them a new heart and new spirit in the place of the obstinate heart of stone. Then they would live according to his commandments (11:19,20; 36:26,27). He also saw to it that the mutual fellowship between him and his people would be maintained: "you will be my people, and I will be your God" (36:28). (Cf also Jer 31:31-34.)

In the place of the corrupt leaders, the Lord himself would provide a messianic leader in an unusual way (34:23 et seq; 17:19 et seq).

The restored people would live around a new temple. A complete renewal of the cult would occur, and the Lord would be served with true, personal commitment (40-48). The centre of the temple, and that with which the book closes, would be: The Lord is there!. This central role of the temple in the book of Ezekiel shows that there was no fundamental difference between the priestly and prophetic ministries in Israel; both represented the same religion, although from two different perspectives.

5. God's Word and Spirit are Life-giving, and Requires Personal Responsibility

Unlike Jeremiah, who seems to avoid mentioning the Spirit, Ezekiel speaks of the work of the Spirit in order to change man's heart (36:26,27; 39:29). In the new covenant, man is ruled by the Spirit. The word of the Lord is also effective - whether the people want to listen or not (2:5 et seq).

The word and Spirit can even do the impossible at God's command; it can resurrect the people from death (27:7 et seq). In sharp contrast with this, the ministry of the false prophets was without effect. Instead of salvation, they only received the destructive judgement of the Lord (12:22,28; 13:8 et seq).

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel also emphasised individual, personal responsibility. The Lord works neither in a merely collective way with his people, nor in a merely individualistic way with its members. They form part of a greater whole, and have the same characteristics, like stubbornness (20:8 et seq; 20:30 et seq), but they are also responsible, individual people (18:2). They are not each a mere slave of the group, neither are they all punished together with the group, without any distinction. The way of salvation is open to each individually (18:19 et seq).

The people had no reason to claim that they had not been warned and, therefore, had had no chance to change. At the same time as he was commissioned, the prophet also received the command to warn the wicked; if a wicked man remained unrepentant, and died without being warned, his blood would be claimed from the prophet (3:16 et seq; cf also 33:1 et seq). In this command to Ezekiel, there is also contained an individual and personal, as well as collective responsibility.

6. God Totally Claims the Prophet

As with Jeremiah, something of the confrontation between God's word and the people was embodied in the prophet Ezekiel. The word changed the people against their will, but only once they were practically destroyed within themselves. Right at the beginning of his commission, Ezekiel mentioned the coercive power of the Lord over him (1:3; cf also 3:22; 33:22; 37:1). He would also experience coercion from the side of the people (3:25). Ezekiel had to eat the scroll on which the word of the Lord was written, given to him in the vision. He had to take it in completely, and make it part of him.

His task was particularly stressful. On the one hand, his message contained laments, sighs and cries; on the other hand, it was as sweet as honey in his mouth, because it was God's word (cf. also Jer 15:16). The many symbolic actions he had to perform also gave evidence of the fact that he was, both physically and spiritually, in the Lord's service, and that the word wanted to be embodied in him (cf the relevant discussions of Jeremiah 3:26; 4:4 et seq; 24:16,17).

7. Apocalyptic Expectations

Ezekiel 38 and 39 are apocalyptic passages, and belong to the prophetic material which speaks in mysterious language of the events at the end of time (see Chapter 67 and Daniel).

Ezekiel 38 and 39 deal with Gog's onslaught against Israel. Gog is representative of all the world powers, and should not be made to represent one specific king or nation, even though an allusion to some or other historical name could be present. Just like in some other prophetic books (cf Zee 14), these passages teach that the nations will launch a terrifying attack against Jerusalem just before the end. The people will find itself in such mortal danger, that salvation would amount to being resurrected from death itself. The climax of history will be along the same lines as those indicated in the immediately preceding chapter - resurrection from death (37).

Ezekiel did not try to escape current reality, like apocalyptics in later times, but was also not blinded by it. He

recognised various levels of reality, in which transcendence also had its place. With him, there was both transcendence and concrete, historical reality, as can be gathered from his expectations and the description of the new temple in Jerusalem (4048).

8. Notes

1. Zimmerli (1972:187 - 1978:213): Ezekiel was among the exiles. He confronted their resignation with the announcement of Yahweh's new works in the new return, new temple and the recreation of hearts.
2. Compare Eichrodt (1967:245-253) on the meaning of the individual in the relationship between God and man, the relationship between the individual and society, and the emphasis on repentance and forgiveness, especially with Jeremiah and Ezekiel.
3. To the question whether Ezekiel 40-48 is only an ideal, symbolic description or prophetic reality, Kaiser (1978:244) answers that these categories are perhaps too simplistic. There will once again be a real temple in the land, and God will be served according to the ways of worship that were known in Ezekiel's time. However, in his description of the river of life and the fruit, he moves more in the direction of apocalyptic terminology, like that found much later in the Revelation according to John. The reality of the restored heaven and earth, however, in which the new Jerusalem of Israel is determined by "the Lord is there" (Eze 48:35), is incontrovertible. It is an extension of Isaiah 65 and 66, on the new heaven and new earth. The accent, however, is now on the Lord, who dwells in the midst of his worshipping people, while nature has been healed and restored to its original design and productivity.
4. Compare Verhoef (1967:36-51;70-80) on texts that usually form the basis of expectations of a millennium, and of Israel's place in the new dispensation.
5. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

72. DANIEL: THE LORD IS THE TRUSTWORTHY RULER OF THE WORLD, EVEN IN THE MOST DESPERATE SITUATIONS

1. A Call to Persevere

The book of Daniel is focused, on the one hand, on the unshakeable faith of Daniel and his three fellow exiles under the oppressive and seductive reign of Nebuchadnezzar. On the other hand, it is focused on the terrible religious persecution under the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, a few centuries later. The book seems to look back into the past, in order to strengthen the believers in the time of Antiochus. At the same time, there is a view towards the end of time; it will be preceded by terrible persecution, and replaced by a new dispensation. Daniel differed from the other prophets, in that he was a statesman and wise man, and in that he gave an apocalyptic prophecy.

The book teaches that the Lord is the absolute and wise ruler of the powerful and corrupt world leaders oppressing the faithful; even in the most desperate situations, he can be trusted absolutely by persecuted believers.

2. Struggle, Trust and Wisdom

The book of Daniel indicates that believers are persecuted by world powers, and that this persecution will become worse near the end of time. According to the book, the end of time has already begun. The Lord gives wisdom to his faithful witnesses, in order to preserve them in a society characterised by religious persecution (2:27,28). It is he who gives wisdom to all wise men, and especially to Daniel and his friends (2:21; 1:17,20; 2:23; 5:11). They resisted Nebuchadnezzar's attempts at making them into true Babylonians, and held on to the laws of the torah (1:3 et seq; cf Lev 11; Dt 14:2-21). In this way, they showed that they were wiser than the others. Wisdom is not something once received as a gift of God, and now exercised more or less independently of him. It should be accompanied by a living faith in God, as well as personal fellowship with him. This is clear from Daniel's intimate prayer life (2:30; 6:11,12). The book does not promise salvation without a struggle, but it does promise victory through struggle and total surrender to God. The three friends had to be willing to pay the highest price for their faith - death. They had to go all the way, right into the furnace (3:18 et seq). The same applied to Daniel, who ended up in the den of lions (6:11 et seq). He was lifted from the den without a scratch, "because he had trusted in his God" (6:23).

Salvation, therefore, requires absolute trust in God, even in the most desperate situation. Not everyone would be saved from death in the same way as Daniel and his friends were saved. The Greek-Macedonian empire would split in four, and from these four parts, one terrible king would emerge, the Seleucid king, Antiochus. Many believers would be tempted to forsake their faith, but others would persevere and be killed (11:32,33). God would give the persecutors free reign ("a time [and] times"), but in his love for the believers, he would also end it abruptly ("and half a time") (12:7). Even death would not be able to keep them, for they would rise from it (12:2).

3. The Lord has Absolute Dominion over Nations and People

Every chapter of the book emphasises God's absolute dominion. Chapter 1 indicates that God even has dominion over man's spirit, by giving him wisdom, or making him propitious (1:17,19). Daniel 2 deals with Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a great statue. This dream reveals the Lord's wisdom, his power over the spirit of the king, as well as over the successive kingdoms in their waning power. They will be destroyed by the kingdom of God. God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings, who reveals mysteries (2:47).

Nebuchadnezzar's dream of his own rejection shows that such a world ruler, who persecutes believers, can have no rest (4). He cannot even control his own spirit, but is devoured by his own self satisfaction. Even such a king will eventually have to acknowledge that God has the absolute dominion, and that he is absolutely free to grant power. He gives special priority to the humble (4:17,25,26).

The history of Belshazzar teaches that it is God who passes world dominion from one nation to the other. In the midst of the most terrible conditions and of oppression by their enemies, God sometimes places persecuted believers in a position of authority. This he also did with Daniel (5).

The Lord determined the future of the Jewish people in their struggle, first under the reign of the Persians, and after that, of the Greeks (10). Even the outcome of the struggle between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids ("kings of the South" and "kings of the North", respectively) was determined by him (11).

God himself would destroy the power of the cruel Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes (8). The time for this was already determined, but only God knew it (8:25,26). The believers had to be encouraged to persevere through it. They had to know and trust that the Lord would take his people to a renewed life, through death.

4. The Lord is Patient and Loving

Despite the fact that the curse came on the people because of their sins, the Lord is merciful and forgiving (9:9-13), but he requires repentance and prayer. Daniel did this for his people (9:15 et seq). Because of the corruption of the world, and even of his own people, the Lord would bring about a totally new dispensation (9:24 et seq). The Lord keeps his covenant for those who love him and obey his commands (9:4). He is also patient with other people, and urge them to repent, like Nebuchadnezzar (2,3,4; especially 4:27). A measure of sympathy with hardened sinners is also evident: man is a pitiable slave of his conceitedness. This was the case with Nebuchadnezzar in his insanity, as well as with Darius who got helplessly entangled in the laws of the Medes and Persians (6). God's mercy is extended especially to the oppressed, and he demands, therefore, that those in authority also show them kindness (4:27).

5. Decline of the Cruel World Empires

The statue that Nebuchadnezzar saw, is described in a descending line (2). This applies especially to the parts of the statue: from head to feet; it also applies to the value of the materials of which it was made: gold, silver, bronze, and a mixture of iron and clay. It portrays the decline in power, as well as continuing dividedness. The parts of the body represent the following empires:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| The golden head | - Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar |
| Chest and arms of silver | - Median empire |
| Belly and thighs of bronze | - Persian empire of Cyrus and his successors |

or

Head	- Babylonian empire
Chest and arms	- Median-Persian
Belly and thighs	- Greek Macedonian
Feet	- Roman

The stone represents the kingdom of God.

6. The Son of Man Rises to Power, Together with the Faithful

Daniel received a vision with a meaning similar to that of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but viewed from a different perspective. The prophet saw the world empires according to their true nature, as predators, and not as metals, like Nebuchadnezzar had seen them (7). Contrary to the corrupt and brutal empires, the kingdom of God would be ruled by the Son of man, that is, by the true man (7:13 et seq). His kingdom will not be brutal, but humane. He also has a heavenly origin, and he comes in the clouds.

The "saints of the Most High", the members of the people of the covenant, would rule together with the Lord (cf Ex 19:6; Dt 7:26; 26:19 on the covenant people as "holy nation/people"). They would not conquer the worldly powers on their own, but would rather themselves be conquered. They would "receive" their dominion from God (7:21,22). The faithful would be pulled out of death, as it were, and be given dominion. This eventually happened in Jesus Christ, who often called himself the Son of man (cf Mt 24:30 et seq; Jn 5:25-27; Rev 1:13).

7. Notes

1. Eichrodt (1967:509-517): the basis of belief in the resurrection is the fundamental aspect of the Old Testament hope, namely that history will end in the arrival of God's dominion, and the establishment of a kingdom over Israel. This expectation was not replaced by an unworldly salvation of the righteous individual, apart from any relationship with earthly things. Israel's belief in the resurrection was also not dependent on Persian views. In the Old Testament, the perspective is not that of a systematic completion of a doctrine of retribution, but rather that of life as God's free decision through which he destines man for fellowship with himself. This is accompanied by the assurance of a final, unrestricted implementation of his life-giving will that cannot be permanently restricted, not even by death.

2. Zimmerli (1972:200 = 1978:228): the teaching of the book of Daniel is still very much in the style of the Old Testament, in that its central concern is with historical events in the world of the nations, and in that the mysteries of nature and the heavens, unlike in post-canonic apocalypics, are still without meaning.

3. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

73. HOSEA: GOD'S ENDERADICABLE LOVE FOR HIS APOSTATE PEOPLE

1. A Time of Self-satisfaction, Immorality, Injustice and Confusion

Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah (cf Isa 1:1). Unlike Isaiah, he focused primarily on the Northern Kingdom. The greatest part of his ministry, however, was characterised by the rapidly deteriorating political and religious situation, following the murder of Zechariah, son of Jeroboam n, which ended the dynasty of Jehu. It was during the chaotic last days of the Northern Kingdom, when the self-satisfaction that characterised the reign of Jeroboam II was replaced with an anxious search for the right leader and policy that would provide a solution. One king after the other was murdered by a would-be successor. At this stage, the people were frightened by the rise of the feared Assyrians, with their policy of exile for subdued nations. The Assyrians also started to advance towards Syria and Palestine.

Just like Amos, Hosea also strongly rejected the people's passion for luxury, as well as the injustice and immorality that were rampant among them. Because of the changed situation, however, he focused more on the cultural and religious situation. He both preached and embodied God's ineradicable love for his corrupt and apostate people.

2. A Striking Message of Love for a Doomed People without "Knowledge"

At his commission, Hosea received the command to marry an adulterous wife, and to take in her children.

She was either an ordinary prostitute, or a temple prostitute, in imitation of the Canaanite fertility cult (4:14). This relationship symbolised God's love for a people and land that committed scandalous adultery by departing from the Lord (1:2).

The names of Hosea's children symbolised the people's corruption and depravity.

Jezeel (1:4) alludes to the blood-guilt of Jehu's dynasty. Lo-Ruhamah means "not loved" (1:6), while Lo-Ammi means "not my people" (1:9). Even so, both the names and the situation were changed by the unfathomable love of the Lord: they were later called children of the living God, Ammi, or "my people", and Ruhamah, or "my loved one" (1:10-12).

It is the Lord, and not the Baals, who provides growth, fertility and life (2:17-22). The people, however, were without "knowledge", and did not realise that religion is primarily about the Lord's personal love for them, and, therefore, also their personal love for him. To "know" the Lord means to have personal fellowship with him, not through a kind of physical experience, like in the Baalist fertility rites, but fellowship through the word and obedience to his commands (4:1-6). It is about honesty, justice, love, morality and faithfulness.

The corruption of the people was so great that destructive punishment, on the one hand, and a new education, on the other hand, were needed to salvage the situation. For this reason, the prophet had to marry an unfaithful woman, and educate her to a totally new life, by teaching her the true principal of life. This is love. Love is free and unmotivated; it is not a reward for merit or performance; it is shown even to an unworthy person. This love is totally personal, and in return requires personal love and faithfulness.

3. Unbreakable, Divine, Covenant Love

Israel committed adultery, both in the literal and in the figurative sense. She took part in the religions of other nations, as if they were her lovers, and brought the immoral fertility cult of Baal worship into the service of the Lord (1:2; 2:1 et seq; 4:10 et seq; 5:4 et seq; 6:10; 7:4 et seq; 9:1 et seq; etc). The people also sought unlawful alliances, instead of trusting in the Lord (8:9; 10:4; 12:2). Israel was unrepentant (7:10), and sinful by tradition (8:4; 9:10 et seq; 12:4; 13:6 et seq). However, God's covenant love was more wonderful and richer, and did what only true love could do.

Hosea used the image of marriage, but, unlike the other nations, to whom the gods were nature deities, he also emphasised the historical actions and historical relationship of the Lord with his people (11:1; 12:10; 13:4,5). The image of marriage did not exhaust the idea of the covenant. Hosea used the image of father and son: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (11:1; Ex 4:22,23). The assurance of the Lord's indestructible love for his people also brought the expectation of future historical salvation in a messianic age (3:5; cf also 1:11).

4. Total Return and a New Covenant Beginning

Because Israel's sin amounted to rejection of the Lord's love, and, therefore, also contempt for him personally, his judgement of Israel was destructive, and meant death for them (5:12,14; 6:1,2,5; 13:1,4-8). Even so, the Lord's holiness is, fundamentally, love. The Lord experienced an inner struggle concerning his condemned people, and in this struggle, his love and compassion gained the upper hand. His heart was changed within him, and, at the same time, his compassion was aroused (11:8,9). He is the holy God, and not a vindictive man.

The people were so corrupt, and the relationship with the Lord so broken, that a totally new beginning was needed. This beginning had to be related to the earliest times of their existence as a people, to the root of their national existence. The situation of the exodus from Egypt and the journey through the desert had to return (2:13 et seq).

The Lord's unfathomable and ineradicable love would bring an unexpected change to the situation of punishment, and envisage wonderful salvation. In one breath, the prophet mentions Israel's rejection of the

Lord's love, and their consequent punishment, as well as the Lord's plan to allure her, and win her with his love (2:12 et seq). Israel would answer as in her youth, when she went up from Egypt (2:15), and she would call the Lord "my husband", and not "my Baal" (2:16). She would be free of her Baalist view of the Lord.

The Lord would make a new covenant with his people, one that would involve all of nature, as well as the course of history. The land would bear fruit (2:21), war would come to an end, and there would be safety and rest (2:17). The Lord is the God who determines nature (cf also 2:7 et seq) and history (11:11), and he is also the God of human life (1-3). He is able, therefore, to bring about universal rest.

The roles were reversed: the rejection was cancelled, and replaced with a mutual covenant relationship between the Lord and his people (2:22). A new birth and resurrection occurred (6:2; 13:14), and this required repentance (cf 2:1; 6:1; 14:2 et seq).

5. Embodiment of the Word

As with Isaiah, it is also clear in the book of Hosea that the one who brings the word, finds himself in a position of suffering, because of the tension and conflict between word and people (cf Isa 53). Hosea also makes it clear that the suffering of the prophet is symbolic of the Lord's suffering in his relationship with his people. It is also made clear that preaching as such would not save the people, but only the word embodied in a concrete act of love, transcending lack of love, unfaithfulness and contempt. The word to be embodied in an act of love, and implying suffering, already contained in principle the proclamation of the incarnation of the Word, and of the way of his saving work through love and suffering (Jn 1:1 et seq).

6. Notes

1. The command to Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman presents an ethical problem to many commentators. They argue, therefore, that Hosea looked back on his marriage to such a woman, who was only later, after their marriage, revealed to be unfaithful (cf Kaiser, 1978:198). Such an approach, however, does not solve the "problem" of God's way specifically with Hosea and this woman. The obvious interpretation clearly emphasises God's unfathomable love for his corrupt people.

2. Compare Eichrodt (1967:291-294) on the right relationship with God as expression of the direct consciousness of inherently and mutually belonging to each other, especially as expressed in the concept of "knowledge of God". This does not indicate mere theoretical knowledge of God's nature and will, but rather the practical application of a relationship of love and trust, as seen in a real relationship between husband and wife. This love is not fickle, instinctive feeling, but the answering love and trusting surrender kindled by God's undeserved love.

3. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

74. JOEL, OBADIAH: TERRIFYING WORLDWIDE JUDGEMENT

1. Joel: A call to Repentance in the Face of Terrifying Judgement and the Outpouring of the Spirit

It is not clear when the prophet Joel acted. His preaching contains a call to regret and heartfelt repentance, instead of superficial formalism (3:12,13). This call was the result of a horrible invasion of locusts, which was at the same time also a prophecy of invading armies, and even of the great and terrible Day of the Lord (2:2,11,31). God, however, is extraordinarily gracious and faithful (2:13 et seq; 3:2,3,16,17). There was, therefore, also a promise of abundance in nature (1:3 et seq; 2:19 et seq; 3:18 et seq), as well as a general outpouring of the prophetic Spirit on all people, without distinction of gender, class or age (2:28 et seq). However, this applied only to the remnant (2:32; cf Isa 1:9; 6:13), and was given in a very personal way (cf also Jer 31:31-34).

This happened after the Lord had judged the nations because of their dispersal of Israel. He is the God who dwells in Zion (3:17,21), that is, the particular place where he demonstrates his dominion, especially in favour of his people. The Lord's revelation in word, nature and history is integrated in a wonderful way.

In the book of Joel, the day of the Lord is seen as being "near". This applies to time only in the secondary sense; more primary is the confrontation with God himself (cf Chapter 26). The reality of this divine action

was already evident. (The expression "And afterward" in 2:28 is quite vague in terms of its reference to the future, and does not necessarily imply that the following events would occur directly after the invasion of locusts.) The strong emphasis on the personal relationship with the Lord and on his call of repentance to Israel, explains why Joel's focus was restricted to the people of the covenant. His preaching should not be regarded as exclusivist.

Joel's preaching has strong apocalyptic characteristics (cf Chapter 67). It deals with the great final battle during which the nations will rush upon the people of the covenant, when the Lord will rescue his people at the last moment (3:12). Joel envisages the opposite situation for the end of time to that sketched in Isa 2:4 and Mic 4:1,2: they will beat their ploughshares into swords and their pruning hooks into spears (3:10 - there will be war, not peace. It reveals another side of the truth regarding the end of time.

Joel 2:28 et seq is quoted by the apostle Peter as a forecast of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Ac 2:16-21). This prophecy was, therefore, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, although the final fulfilment is still in the future (Lk 21:11).

2. Obadiah: the Lord Punishes Arrogance towards his People with Worldwide Judgement, and Establishes his Kingdom

Edom is accused of gloating over the great misfortune of Israel (v10 et seq), his brother (11-13). This was probably at the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the exile (586 BC). History forms a unity: the same basic characteristic and the same enmity of Esau's time still existed in the time of the prophet, and will exist even in the eschatological future (6,15).

The Lord is the absolute ruler. This is the basis of the unity in history, and enables Obadiah, like Joel, to place concrete historical events in an eschatological framework. Obadiah teaches: because of complicity in and gloating over the fate of God's people, Edom, together with all the other nations, will be punished on the day of the Lord. God's people will then be glorified, and the kingdom will belong to the Lord.

3. Notes

1. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

75. AMOS: FORMALISM AND SELFISHNESS PUNISHED BY THE LORD

1. Formalism and Moral Corruption

Amos is the earliest prophet whose message has been written down. He ministered during the reign of Jeroboam n of the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes, a time characterised by prosperity, national independence and self-confidence (6:13). The people lived in luxury, and celebrated many festivals (3:15; 6:4-6). On the religious scene, everything seemed to be going well: many offerings were brought, and festivals were well attended. Depth and seriousness, however, were sorely lacking (4:4,5; 5:21,22). The people were also guilty of outrageous religious syncretism with the Baal cult (2:8; 5:25,26). They were morally corrupt, greedy, and always in search of profit (5:11,12). Fraud and dishonesty was at the order of the day, both in business and in the courts of law. The poor and needy were oppressed without mercy (8:5 et seq). Extra-marital sexual intercourse was quite common (2:7). Modern society would do well to measure itself against this portrait of social decline.

Amos came with the urgent call: formalism in worship of God, and selfish conduct towards one's fellow man, lead to unrepentance; therefore, it also leads irrevocably to the disenchanting day of reckoning.

2. A Surprising Messenger with a Disenchanting Message

The Lord is sovereign; he is the creator and keeper of all things (4:7,8,13; 5:8 et seq; 8:8; 9:5,6). He also determines all events, as well as history. As judge of the world, he uses this power to punish crimes against

people – no matter where, by whom or against whom these crimes are committed: Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon or Moab (1:32:16; 3:6; 4:6-11; 9:7). The Lord is also the sovereign ruler of his word.

Amos came to his people with a surprising and disenchanting message. The form of his preaching was just as surprising and disenchanting. It began with judgement on the nations (1:3 et seq), and then, quite unexpectedly, also included the people of the covenant (2:6). This first announcement ended with the disenchanting announcement of the Day of the Lord (2:16; cf also 8:9). The people of the covenant did expect this day, but always as a day of judgement on the nations, and of celebration for themselves. Amos came with the unexpected message that this day would disillusion the people of the covenant, for God would judge them together with the nations (5:18-20). Such preaching is never popular with any nation, and Amos made himself very unpopular with his message (7:10 et seq).

Just like the other prophets, Amos emphasised that he did not proclaim his own message, but the word of the Lord: "This is what the Lord says" (1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6; 3:11; 5:3,4,16; 6:8; 7:17; 8:9,11; 9:13,15). This word claimed the prophet unconditionally for the service of the sovereign God. The prophet was not in the least able to resist this; it was as overwhelming as the roar of a lion (3:8). The sovereignty of the word is also indicated by the fact that Amos was a surprising choice for the prophetic ministry; he did not belong to the established order of prophets or the prophets' sons. He was called away from his sheep in a special way, by the Lord himself, in order to enter the prophetic ministry (7:14,15).

The ordinary prophetic ministry had become passive and static. The ordinary prophets were caught up in a stereotypical order, pattern of thought and expression, as well as religious and social structure. It was impossible for them to break free of this in order to call the people and "church" to repentance (cf 2:11,12). The Lord decided to bypass this formalistic order, and called a farmer to become a prophet. This did not abolish the prophetic ministry as such. Amos acted like an ordinary prophet, and referred favourably to the other prophets as servants of the Lord (2:11,12; 3:7). Amos was also not revolutionary in any other respect. He did not incite the oppressed to stage a revolution, but aimed his message specifically at the guilty leaders, and fearlessly called them to repentance. By calling Amos, however, the Lord did show that he was bypassing the established order that had caused his word to become part of that rigid order, instead of causing it to actively serve him.

3. The Lord Requires Repentance and Personal Religion

Amos' sombre and terrifying announcement of judgement was primarily intended as a last call to repentance and a true relationship with God and the people's fellow men. Israel's formalism was aimed at impersonal duties, festivals and ceremonies. Over against that, Amos called on his people to prepare themselves to meet their God personally (4:12)! Amos himself had had personal encounters with the Lord, at his commission, as well as when he saw his visions (7:8; 8:2). This was characteristic of his ministry, unlike that of the other prophets who acted during that time. They were caught up in the paralysing atmosphere of a formalistic established order and ministry (7:15).

Amos placed God in the centre of everything. The people should not visit the place of the holy God, but the Lord himself, he said, because only in him is life to be found (5:4,6). Religion, therefore, is no impersonal matter; it is thoroughly personal. The fundamental cause of the social decay and corruption of the time was the faulty relationship with God. A right relationship with God also includes a personal relationship with one's fellow man. It requires righteousness and justice, not offerings as such (5:11,12,14,24). For this reason, Amos did not direct his message at the social order or social structures as such, but he called the people to the right relationship with God and their fellow men. This personal emphasis of Amos was so different from the established order, that a clash with the royal officials at the royal sanctuaries in Bethel was inevitable (7:10 et seq).

4. The Day of the Lord is Coming – Only a vague Hope for a Remnant

Amos probably announced the imminent arrival of the Day of the Lord in relation to one of the festivals (5:21 et seq). On the Day of the Lord, Israel would be entangled in their formalism and injustice. Because of God's judgement, they would thirst after his words, previously despised by them, but it would be too late (2:12; 7:12 et seq; 8:11 et seq)! The Day of the Lord would be paradoxical: darkness instead of light (5:18,20), because

the people lived paradoxical lives. They searched for evil and loved it, and despised good (5:14,15). They turned justice into poison, and the fruit of righteousness into bitterness (6:12). At the time of the exodus from Egypt, the Lord had passed over his children in his judgement; the Passover was a lasting reminder of this fact (Ex 12:13,23). He would, however, not "pass over" his people again, but he would pass through their midst (5:17;7:8; 8:2). The end of the people had come; they would fall and not rise again (8:2,14)!

However, the Lord is not only a righteous and hard God; he is also full of mercy. He saw Israel as a young fallen virgin, who could not rise again (5:2; cf also Lam 1:1). The Lord relented, therefore (7:3,6). He would "perhaps" also have mercy on the remnant (5:15).

The people were not allowed to understand the idea of a remnant in a formalistic or mechanical way, as something self-evident. It had to be regarded as the fruit of God's grace, and as something that goes together with repentance. It cannot just be claimed, but should be asked of God, and his time should be patiently awaited (cf also Lam 5:21,22).

Because of their extreme evil and lack of repentance, the people ended up in death (4:6,8,9,10,11; 5:7-15; 6:12). They had no inner strength, or anyone to lift them up (5:2; Lam 1:1). Even the remnant disappeared (6:8,9; 9:1). What was left was like the leg bones and pieces of an ear of a sheep eaten by a lion (3:12). The sinful kingdom was wiped from the face of the earth (9:8)!

Despite all of this, there is also, without any motivation and quite paradoxically, a promise of salvation: "...yet I will not totally destroy the house of Jacob" (9:8). The judgement would be a process of selection in which the falsely confident would die, but in which the Lord would also restore David's fallen tent (9:9-11). Salvation is resurrection from downfall and death.

5. Notes

1. Compare Vriezen (1966:343) on God's freedom to reject a prayer of penitence or to forgive, as well as on the fact that he is not a high-handed despot.
2. Compare Childs (1986:130-131) on the unity of the book of Amos (as well as other prophetic books), which contains destructive, but also (abruptly) salvation preaching (Chapter 9).
3. Compare Bright (1953:63-65) on the fact that Amos rejected a mechanical view of the covenant, but not the covenant as such, and that he was not a revolutionary who incited the oppressed masses to action.
4. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

76. JONAH: THE LORD IS FREE IN HIS BOUNDLESS JUDGEMENT AND BOUNDLESS GRACE

1. A Sovereign Command to Call a Cruel Enemy to Repentance

Jonah's name, as well as the nature of his ministry and experiences, identify him as the prophet of the time of Jeroboam II of Israel, mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, a successor of Elijah and Elisha. Jonah received a command to go and preach against the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, the cruel traditional enemy and oppressor of the people of the covenant, and to announce God's judgement to its people because of their wickedness. His preaching was intended to be proselytising, however, and, therefore, envisaged salvation. It was for this reason that Jonah refused to go.

In the book of Jonah, the Lord's sovereignty is once again strongly emphasised. This applies specifically to his freedom to judge those who refuse to repent, but also to show mercy to whom he wants, even to heathen nations (4:11). He is also sovereign in that both his judgement and his grace are boundless, and even reaches into death. This is in sharp contrast to the selfishness of the prophet, the representative of his formalistic people, who remained stubbornly unrepentant, even after he was saved from certain death.

2. The Lord is Absolutely Sovereign, and his Dominion is Inescapable

Every chapter of the book teaches that the Lord is absolutely sovereign. This applies to all areas of life, without exception, as well as to all people and nations. Nothing and nobody is excluded from his dominion, or can withdraw from it (cf 1:16). No matter what he did, Jonah was unable to escape the Lord's dominion; not even in death was he able to do so.

On the boat in which he attempted to flee his commission, his plans were frustrated by a storm, created by the Lord. When he was thrown into the sea, the Lord caused a fish to swallow him; there he kept him alive in a wonderful and miraculous way (cf also Ps 138:7-10).

3. An Empty Confession of God's Grace and Love

With a whole series of expressions, Jonah taught that it is characteristic of the Lord to be forgiving: "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2). In his selfishness, however, Jonah was blind to the wonderful, universal implications of his confession. He was also blind to the sovereign, boundless grace of the Lord both to himself and to his people, even after the Lord had saved him from death into which he had thrown himself on account of his sin, as well as to the Lord's grace despite his current obstinacy.

4. The Deadly Grip of Selfishness and Religious Formalism

Jonah was so incorrigible in his selfishness and obstinacy, that he entered death: he was thrown into the stormy sea, and swallowed by a fish (1:15-17). For all practical purposes, he was dead, because he remained inside the fish for three days and three nights (1:17).

The Lord is so sovereign that he not only gave Jonah new life, but also enabled him to pray in the language of the psalmists (2:3-9) and to be rescued as a righteous man (2:3; cf Ps 42:8). Jonah's prayer contains passages and expressions from quite a number of psalms (42:8; 31:23; 5:8; 40:13; 69:2; 107:5; 18:7; 144:2). It is expressed in the language of the righteous, who tell of the ways in which the Lord saved them from the fears and dangers of death in which they had found themselves, especially because of the enmity of the unrighteous (cf the psalms). Despite this, Jonah continued in his selfishness, even after God had saved him. The Lord's mercy to his enemies caused him to prefer death to life (4:1-3)! He was, therefore, in the deadly grip of selfishness. The pious language of prayer, taken from the psalms, was mere formalism.

The Lord is totally personal in his relationship with the believer. He went to Jonah and spoke to him (4:4). Jonah, however, thought that he could serve the Lord, while at the same time avoiding his personal presence (1:3). He was not in the first place concerned with personal fellowship with the Lord. The climax of the book is in the conversation between the Lord and the selfish Jonah, in which Jonah was angry enough to die about the miraculous plant the Lord had provided for his comfort, but which had withered overnight. The Lord's words testify to his absolute sovereignty, as well as his personal involvement, compassion and mercy (1:9). He even showed mercy and compassion towards the animals (4:11)!

Death and life are thematic in this book, and are highly concentrated in its climax (4:3,8,9). It is representative of the deadly selfishness of the people, requiring a radical change of heart, on the one hand, and the Lord's boundless grace despite death, on the other hand. This grace implied more than saving sinners from death. They had to die properly, so that a new, different man and people could appear in their place. On the one hand, the book implies that only God can bring about such a change, and on the other hand, it calls implicitly but urgently for repentance.

5. God's Word is Powerful and Free

Just like the other prophets, Jonah also proclaimed only the divine word (1:1), and stood in its service. This word was effective, and brought about in Nineveh what the Lord had planned it to do (3:5 et seq). As with the other prophets (cf Jer 20:7; Eze 3; Am 3:8), there was strong tension between the prophet and the word he had to proclaim. In this book, we even find it drawn into a climax: the prophet's unwillingness became disobedience. In this we see the full consequences of the tension between the word and sinful man, represented by the prophet. Man cannot and does not want to take God's saving and life-giving word (Ex 20:19; Isa 6:9,10;

40:6-8). He even mutilates it (Isa 5:18-20), and applies it in a selfish and one-sided way (Jon 4:2).

The word of the Lord, however, is free and powerful, and is not limited even by the unwillingness of a disobedient prophet and people. The word does not exist by the grace of man, but is effective regardless of man, even regardless of God's people.

6. Missionary Work is the Fruit of God's Sovereignty

Jonah was the only prophet to receive the command to go and preach to the unbelievers in their own land. The book of Jonah is, therefore, often called the missionary book of the Old Testament. The motive for this missionary task was the absolute sovereignty of the Lord, and his absolute authority over the recipients, as well as the preachers, of the word. Missionary work is not merely the fruit of human approval or compassion, but rather the fruit of a divine command and compassion. The Lord ensures that his command is carried out, regardless of the natural unwillingness of the person he sends, like Jonah and his people. This contains a call to repentance.

7. One Greater than Jonah

Jesus directly applied Jonah's history to himself, to his death and resurrection, as well as to the call to repentance (Mt 12:40,41). Salvation entails more than merely a new beginning; it entails radical death, and a radically new beginning, but also an element of continuation of the existing. This only became possible with the total death and total resurrection of Jesus Christ. He did this in the place of the people of the covenant and the believers, so that they are regarded as having done so themselves. However, this only applies to those who believe, and who carry the sign of death and resurrection through their union of faith with Christ. It means a changed life, a life in which the believer dies unto himself, in order that Christ may live in him. It is a life not determined by selfishness and formalism, but by love for God and one's fellow man.

8. Notes

1. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

77. MICAH: A MESSIANIC KINGDOM OF PEACE, AS OPPOSED TO FORMALISM AND DOWNFALL

1. Intoxicated by Self-satisfaction

Micah prophesied during the reigns of the Judean kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (1:1), and was, therefore, a younger contemporary of Isaiah. His prophecies were directed at Samaria and Jerusalem (1:1), representing both kingdoms of the people of the covenant. It was a wonderful time in their national existence, but more difficult times were approaching, because of the rise of the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser. During the reign of Ahaz, Judah was also seriously threatened by an anti-Assyrian coalition of the Syrians and the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes.

Micah's prophecies not only fall in the same time as those of Isaiah, but also show great similarities to it. Like Isaiah, he also emphasised God's greatness and comparability. His name means: "Who is like God?" (Furthermore, Mic 4:1-3 is identical to Isa 2:2-4; cf the discussion there.) He taught that downfall and exile would be the fate of Samaria and Jerusalem (3:12; 4:10), because of religious formalism, false confidence, and a lack of justice, love and humility; there would, however, also be salvation from downfall, and a messianic kingdom of peace would eventually come.

2. Formalism and Social Injustice, instead of Justice, Love and Humility

Social injustice was rampant: injustice, especially with regard to widows and the helpless (2:2,8,9; 6:11,12; 7:3); the people hated good, and loved evil (3:2,9; cf Isa 5:18-20); they were guilty of terrible bloodshed (3:10; 7:2), and were even untrustworthy towards family members (7:5,6). Their religion was very formalistic, with

a multitude of offerings (6:6,7). The Lord, however, first of all requires personal religion towards himself and one's fellow man: "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8). Their impersonal religion also caused the people to fall prey to false confidence, in that they quite comfortably assumed the saving presence of the Lord in their midst (3:11). Even the prophets were entangled in this formalism, and prophesied only to their own advantage (2:6,11; 3:5,11). Micah himself, however, enjoyed a direct and personal relationship with the Lord, acted in the power of the Spirit of the Lord, and showed the people their sins (3:8).

3. Salvation from Downfall – Messianic Peace

As with Isaiah, the idea of a remnant that will be saved is strongly emphasised in the book of Micah (2:12,13; 5:2; 7:18,19). They would return from exile, and the Lord himself would appear at their head (2:12,13; cf Isa 40:9 et seq). Zion is the centre from which the Lord rules the nations (1:2), to which all nations will stream to worship the Lord and hear his word (4:1-3; cf Isa 2:2-4). Micah envisaged salvation under a messianic ruler, coming from humble Bethlehem, whose origins are from ancient times (5:1). The remnant would return from exile (5:3), and there would be a time of messianic peace and prosperity (5:6 et seq; 7:9 et seq); the people would be purified of their idolatry (5:12 et seq). The messianic prophecy should, as usual, first be regarded in the historical context, and then, as it transcended the ruler of that time, be applied to Christ (Mt 2:6).

The Lord was incomparable in his grace to the remnant (7:18,19), and treated them according to his faithfulness and goodness to the patriarchs (7:20). In this way, he maintained his sovereignty and holiness, and perpetuated his covenant through downfall.

4. Notes

1. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

78. NAHUM, HABAKKUK, ZEPHANIAH: GOD'S WORLDWIDE DOMINION

1. Nahum: the World Empire will be Destroyed, and God's Kingdom will Triumph

Nahum prophesied between the fall of the Egyptian city Thebes in the Assyrian onslaught against it (663 BC), and the fall of the Assyrian capital, Nineveh (612 BC), because he refers to the first as being in the past, and announces the latter as imminent. He was a contemporary of the prophet Zephaniah.

In rich images, Nahum prophesied that the Lord was going to act in his sovereign, punishing justice, by destroying the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, the city of blood, which had trampled nations underfoot, and represented the human world empire (3:1,19). The Lord is patient, but he also has great power. He is a God who avenges himself on the guilty.

He rules over nature, the nations and history, and makes use of these in the execution of his judgement (1:3 et seq; 2:3 et seq; 3:2 et seq). This book is not about personal vengeance against the enemies of the people of the covenant, but rather about the Lord's punishing justice against injustice in the world, and against the rejection of his dominion.

Over against the message of destruction, is the good message of peace for the Lord's people (1:15; cf Isa 52:7).

2. Habakkuk: Vigorous Faith in God's Righteous Dominion

Habakkuk appears to have prophesied during the reign of king Jehoiakim, a time of instability and injustice. It was the time when the Assyrian empire started crumbling as a result of the direct onslaught of the Chaldeans of Babylonia (around 612 BC). The book reflects the spiritual struggle of the believers who experienced the great changes of this period. Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and Zephaniah.

Habakkuk provides a solution to the problem of injustice, with which the believers of the time were struggling

- injustice in the national life of the people of the covenant, as well as in the international world. His message was that justice is trampled underfoot in the face of the holy God's dominion; the righteous, however, will live by their faith (2:4).

Habakkuk did not doubt that God is the sovereign and holy ruler of the people and of world history. Precisely for this reason, however, he also struggled with the same problem of so many others: how to justify God's unintelligible way with man (theodicy). There is a change of fate in the world, and the unrighteous do fall; each time, however, another one takes the previous one's place. How can the Lord tolerate this constant violation of justice, he who cannot tolerate wrong, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil (1:12,13)? The answer to the question on injustice within Israel itself (1:1-4), was that the Lord would punish the oppressors through the Chaldeans (1:5-11). The next question to arise, however, was how the Chaldeans could be a scourge; they were even more unrighteous than the people to be punished! What of their own injustice (1:12 et seq)? The answer: their injustice and unrighteousness would also be punished (2:5 et seq). Fundamentally, however, the answer is to be found in the acknowledgement of the Lord's sovereignty. This implies that he is not obliged to give an explanation, and that everything should unconditionally be left in his hands.

The answer to the problem is, therefore, that God should be trusted, and that this trust should be embodied in a life of doing good (2:4). This answer is given in direct contrast to the attitude and actions of the self-righteous and brutal person (2:4,7), who trusts in his own power and violence (1:11). The answer is, therefore, to be found in trusting surrender to the sovereign God, and in a life of doing good. Trust in God implies that one remain faithful and trustworthy as a result of being near to God and waiting for God, doing what is good, and not looking for solutions along other ways, like brute force or violence. Both concepts, faithfulness and trustworthiness, are included in the Hebrew word *emuna*. (It is used, for instance, in Ex 17:12 of Moses' hands; the word "amen" - it is certain - has the same root.)

Paul quoted this verse (2:4) in a slightly different context, arguing that righteousness cannot be obtained by works, but only by faith (Ro 1:17; Gal 3:11). The common element in the arguments of Habakkuk and Paul is that the matter is completely in God's hands, and that it should be entrusted to him. There is no other ground or proof than only God himself. For this reason, one should surrender one's life to him.

The book of Habakkuk, therefore, teaches that only trust in God can bridge the apparent contradiction of paradoxical life and world. God perpetuates his righteous dominion and personal fellowship with the believer, despite the fact that both man and world are incurably depraved. He brings this about through the apparent downfall of the righteous.

3. Zephaniah: Universal Judgement, but also Universal Salvation of a Remnant

Zephaniah prophesied before the fall of Nineveh (612 BC), because he announced the event. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, and acted during the reign of king Josiah of Judah (1:1). Taking into account the low religious level of the people (1:4 et seq), it must have been before Josiah's religious reforms in 621 BC.

Zephaniah portrayed the Lord's judgement in harsh colours (1:2,3; cf also 1:18 et seq). He was acutely conscious of the Day of the Lord quickly drawing near (1:14,15; cf also 2:2). The deportation into exile of the people of the covenant was the beginning of this, but the Lord's judgement included all nations (2:4 et seq; 3:8). There would be no escape from this judgement, because the Lord would search Jerusalem with lamps (1:12)!

The people were guilty of scandalous social and religious sins, and were practically atheists (1:4-6,9 et seq; 12; 3:2,4). There was a possibility of salvation - but only for a converted, righteous and humble remnant. Just like Amos (Am 5:15), Zephaniah also said that there would "perhaps" be salvation, and he related it directly to righteousness and humility (2:3). The idea of humility is strongly emphasised in the book of Zephaniah. In his call to repentance, he set humility on the same level as righteousness (2:3). While Isaiah strongly rejected pride, and regarded it as the cause of the day of the Lord (Isa 2:12), Zephaniah envisaged a people cleansed of pride (3:11). The Lord would save a humble people that is meek and wretched, and who seek shelter with the Lord (3:12,13). They would also be cleansed of injustice and lies. This only applies to the remnant, those who would have survived the Lord's judgement, as well as the purifying judgement within themselves (cf Isa 6:19), those who would emerge as new people.

This salvation is universal, because the Lord himself will give the nations pure lips to call on his name, and to serve him "shoulder to shoulder" (3:9).

4. Notes

1. Compare Eichrodt (1967:285) on *emuna* as faith in the book of Habakkuk.
2. Compare paragraph 1, Chapter 65.

79. HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH AND MALACHI: A CALL TO LIVING FAITH AND EXPECTATION

1. Haggai: Spiritual and Material Stagnation, and God's Renewing Covenant Act

Haggai prophesied during the difficult times immediately following the return from exile, when the people were at a material and spiritual low. He reproached the people for their slowness in rebuilding the temple, and encouraged them to complete their work. Indolence in worship, he taught, was a sign of stagnation. A remnant had to be revived from this stagnation, because a new and radical covenant act of the Lord was at hand.

The people's slowness in rebuilding the temple and their bad economic situation were related, Haggai said, because the Lord was withholding his blessing (1:6 et seq; 2:19). Haggai, therefore, emphasised the importance of the cult; in this, he differed considerably from pre-exilic prophets like Amos, Micah and Isaiah. They emphasised righteousness and justice, over against the cult or worship service. This difference in the message of the prophets was the result of the topicality of prophecy, as well as the requirements set by concrete situations. Haggai's message amounted to the requirement that God be put first in everything. This was in line with Jesus' requirement: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).

Haggai emphasised God's dominion in nature, over his people, and in world history. God determines rain, dew and harvests (1:6,10,11; 2:16). He makes heaven and earth tremble, and determines the fate of his people and the other nations (2:7,21; 1:6; 2:23; 2:7,22). The name "the Lord of Hosts", or "the Lord Almighty", is used fifteen times in the two chapters of the book of Haggai, and emphasises his omnipotence. However, ever since the exodus from Egypt, the Lord had been involved in a personal relationship with his people, and he was "with them" (1:13; 2:4,5; cf Ex 3:14).

This emphasis on God's sovereignty and on the personal relationship with his people, caused Haggai's message to be strongly determined by hope, despite the hopeless situation. Haggai called the people to change, and envisaged a new, universal and epoch-making covenant act of the Lord. The lordship of Zerubbabel, the signet ring and servant of the Lord, was already a foreshadowing of this (2:7 et seq; 2:21 et seq).

Because of their sin, the people were actually dead, and resembled an unclean corpse: they made everything they had contact with, unclean. They could not have any sanctifying or saving influence, nor did they repent when the Lord punished them with failure of their crops (2:11-19). Only the remnant was, therefore, entitled to any hope, because it consisted of those who lived by faith and righteousness (1:12,14; 2:2; cf Isa 10:20 et seq; Zee 8:6-8).

2. Zechariah: Rebuilding of the Temple, Piety and Neighbourly Love are Necessary, because God's Judgement and his Universal Kingdom are Near

Zechariah prophesied at the same time as Haggai. He proclaimed the necessity of rebuilding the temple, and especially of repentance, righteousness and neighbourly love. He also proclaimed God's unchangeable, surprising and life-giving grace, which would be revealed in the universal messianic kingdom that would come together with the day of judgement, which was near.

The book of Zechariah begins with a serious call to repentance. The prophetic messages of repentance and judgement had finally overtaken the people's unrepentant forefathers (1:36). Zechariah had eight nocturnal

visions, in which the Lord revealed to him that he was going to judge the nations, forgive his people's debt of sin, and cleanse them of their wickedness. They would be able to live with him in Jerusalem, under the blessed reign of the messiah. (The visions were: the man among the myrtle trees; four horns and four craftsmen; a man with a measuring line; clean garments for the high priest; the golden lampstand and the two olive trees; the flying scroll; the woman in a basket; the four chariots; Zee 1-6).

No fasting was allowed on account of the fall of Jerusalem (7-8), but the people were to live in righteousness, love and mercy, as well as festive joy (7:9,10; 8:16,17,19). The peaceful kingdom of the messiah was drawing near. He would be a gentle ruler, riding on a donkey instead of a horse, which was a symbol of war (9:9 et seq). He would be a servant, as well as a shoot from a dead branch (8:8). Despite this, his dominion would be universal, and he would return his people to the promised land. He would be a true king and shepherd, in contrast with human rulers, both of Israel and of the other nations (9-11).

On the Day of the Lord, Jerusalem would be rescued at the last moment. The nations would already have advanced on it, ready to crush it (12-14).

The Lord is the absolutely sovereign ruler. His dominion over all nations and all of creation (the heavens, the earth and the human spirit) is irresistible (8:23; 12:1; 14:16-21). The Lord is mighty, the Lord of hosts (1:3,4,6,12,14,16,17, etc). He also has covenant fellowship with his people; he says: "They are my people", and they say "The Lord is our God" (13:9); he will be a God to them, and they will be his people (8:8; cf also 14:5; 8:23). The people, represented by the high priest, is snatched from the fire like a burning stick (3:2); the Lord revives them through his Spirit (12:10). He rescues his people through his life-giving power.

3. Malachi: the Messenger of Repentance before the Day of the Lord

Malachi prophesied after the time of Joshua and Zerubbabel, and before that of Ezra and Nehemiah. He focused on the people's unfaithfulness, as well as their unfaithful messengers, the priests. The terrifying day of the Lord would be the punishment of the deprived, cynical and denatured people of God. Before that day, however, a true messenger would lead the true members of the people to repentance through the law and the prophets.

The people were ungrateful and unfaithful to the Lord (1:2,6,8,12-14). They were especially unfaithful in their worship, and committed injustice in their social life. They were guilty of sorcery, adultery and perjury; they oppressed labourers, the widows, the fatherless, and aliens (3:5). They brought inferior and unlawful offerings, and robbed God by withholding the tithes (1:13,14; 3:8 et seq). They were traditionally sinful, from the days of their forefathers. They were sinful from birth, because they were children of Jacob, the deceiver (3:6,7). They were half-hearted and cynical about the justice of the Lord's authority over the godless and believers (2:17; 3:14,15). The people's unfaithfulness were revealed especially in their marriages and family lives. It caused the people to disintegrate, because their unfaithfulness afflicted both a creation ordinance of God, and the essence of the covenant (2:10-15).

The Lord, therefore, would cause his day of judgement to come as a surprise and disillusionment; it would come soon and suddenly (3:1,5), on a day created by him (4:3). On this day, the Lord they were seeking (3:1) would come, to maintain justice and to punish injustice (2:17; 3:1). He who would come, was the Lord, and yet someone distinct from the Lord, namely the Angel (or messenger) of the covenant (3:1). The exact meaning of this is not clear from the book itself, but it would be clarified in Jesus Christ.

Malachi strongly called his people to repentance. The messenger before the day of the Lord will do the same (1:9; 3:7; cf Zee 1:3; Lam 5:21). That day will have a purifying and cleansing effect (3:2,3; 4:1). On that day, the law of Moses will apply, and there will be a living prophetic ministry, like that of Elijah (4:4-6). The messenger will restore the true covenant atmosphere, in which the hearts of parents and children alike are anchored in the word of God, thereby being reconciled with each other. In this way, the breach of the people will be healed, and the land will be saved from the destruction of God's judgement. God will save his people from their material and spiritual death and downfall, through his life-giving power. The messenger before the day of judgement was John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus Christ (Mt 11:10).

4. Notes

80. THE FULFILMENT OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. An Old Testament, as well as a New Testament – through Jesus Christ

The names Old Testament and New Testament, used for the two parts of the Bible, indicate that there was a change in revelation history. This change was envisaged in the Old Testament with the message that there would be a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). The New Testament regards this new covenant, or new testament, as a present reality through Jesus Christ (Hebrews). Jesus himself said that he had come to fulfil "the law and the prophets", that is, the Old Testament (Mt 5:17). God's journey with his people in the perpetuation of his royal dominion was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ. It is true that this was only a partial fulfilment. Because of this fulfilment, both John the Baptist and Jesus himself spoke of the kingdom as being near (Mt 3:2; 4:17). In Jesus, the Old Testament found both its culmination point and its true meaning. For this reason, the Old Testament should be interpreted with Jesus always in view. In him, all five aspects of the kingdom mentioned in the Old Testament are integrated: absolute divine dominion; personal covenant fellowship with man; God's life-giving work; God's work through his word, and God's work in and through history.

2. The Elements of the Kingdom Integrated in Christ

The integration of the elements mentioned above occurred in the following way:

God's power was concentrated in Jesus, who was able to say: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18). He was even able to conquer the powers of death and hell.

In him and through him, God and man were reconciled with each other; this made personal covenant fellowship possible. For this reason, Christ is Immanuel, God with us (Isa 7:14; Mt 1:23). He also made possible reconciliation and true fellowship between people, thereby emphasising the fundamental requirement of the Old Testament, that is, to love God with heart and soul, and one's neighbour as oneself (Dt 6:4; Lev 19:18; Mt 22:37-40).

In him, God's life-giving power was made evident in a striking way, in that God made him die, but also resurrected him from death (Mt 28). Through his death and resurrection, reconciliation and a new life were made available to people. The same Spirit that resurrected Christ from death, also brings God's children back to life. This will eventually also happen physically, but for the moment it is a spiritual resurrection from the death of sin.

God's work through his word is concentrated in Christ, in that he is the word incarnate (Jn 1). In this way, he eased the tension between man and word, so that the word no longer causes man's destruction because of his sin (cf Isa 40:6-8; Lk 2:10-14).

God's work in and through history is concentrated in Christ, in that God made his son become human and come to earth, thereby becoming one with man in all respects, except sin. God does not bring about salvation in a timeless way, but rather in a historical way. Biblical religion is about life in its full historical reality.

Christ did not abolish the Old Testament, but fulfilled it. Both Testaments have a rightful place in the Canon, or authoritative Scripture, and should be read as mutually supplementing each other. Christ did not come with a new idea, a new doctrine, or a new religion. His message was the same as that of the Old Testament, although it was now also fulfilled in him. The message is still one of the divine gift, the divine demand, and the divine promise. It is about salvation through grace alone, about the demand to love according to God's will, and about the promise of final salvation, when God will come to his people. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, there is now a much stronger emphasis on the believer's resurrection to a new life through the Spirit of Christ. It is a life of gratitude. Christ especially concentrates the light of the Old Testament in the command to love God with heart and soul, and one's neighbour as oneself. It is now also clear that the kingdom of God is not merely about something great and powerful, or even about an important impersonal event, but about God's

relationship with people and their relationship with one another. The kingdom has a personal centre, and is embodied in a special way in the person of Christ, as well as in the relationship with him, who is the mediator between God and man.

3. Revelation Historical Interpretation and Preaching of the Old Testament

The Old Testament should be interpreted in a revelation historical way. Each passage should be read in the light of the whole Old Testament, as well as in the light of its fulfilment in Christ. The interpreter should not make the Old Testament passage say something else than it intended to say at that time. New Testament ideas should not be carried or read into the Old Testament. Even so, the Old Testament is not the end of divine revelation. The revelation historical trail should be followed into the New Testament. This applies specifically to preaching, because preaching is concerned with interpreting the text, as well as applying it in today's context. The line should be followed from the Old Testament message to its fulfilment in Christ, especially fulfilment in important revelation historical events. In preaching, one should demonstrate how a specific message or theme in the Old Testament received its full meaning in Christ's death and resurrection (culminating in the Holy Spirit's gift of new life), as well as in his second coming. The most important revelation historical events are about Christ's redemptive work (his death on the cross), and about the life-giving work of the Spirit in the hearts of men through rebirth, repentance and a new life. The Spirit is the fruit of Christ's resurrection (Jn 16:13,14). Furthermore, the most important revelation historical events are about Christ's return (Mt 24:30), when he will finally hand over the kingdom to God (1 Cor 15:24), fulfil the promises, and gather the believers around him. Christ's death is primarily about what he did for us, while the work of the Holy Spirit is primarily about what Christ does within us. Christ's return, on the other hand, is about what he envisages for us, when he will hand over the kingdom to God, who will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

4. Notes

1. Compare Helberg (1983:93-102) on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.
2. Compare Helberg (1983:113-116) on preaching the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(For a more extensive bibliography and a concise discussion of some books compare J.L. Helberg. 1993. *Openbaringsgeskiedenis van die Ou Testament. Inleiding. Th.B-gids. Potchefstroom: PU vir CHO. Diktaat 243/93. p. 39-45.*)

BARR, J. 1983. *Holy Scripture. Canon, Authority, Criticism.* Oxford: Clarendon.

BRIGHT, J. 1953. *The Kingdom of God.* Nashville: Abingdon.

BRUEGGEMANN, W. 1972. *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith.* Atlanta: John Knox.

BRUEGGEMANN, W. 1992. *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text.* Minneapolis: Fortress.

BURDEN, J.J. & PRINSLOO, W.S. eds. 1987. *Tweegesprek met God.* Kaapstad: Tafelberg. (Die literatuur van die Ou Testament. III.) (= *Dialogue with God: Preachers, Poets and Philosophers.* 1987. Cape Town: Tafelberg. *Literature of the Old Testament. III.*)

BURDEN, J.J. 1987. Die boek Daniël. (*In Burden, J.J. & Prinsloo, W.S. eds. p. 195-220.*)

BURDEN, J.J. 1987. Hooglied. (*In Burden, J.J. & Prinsloo, W.S. eds. p. 57-82.*)

BURGER, J.A. 1987. Die Psalms. (*In Burden, J.J. & Prinsloo, W.S. eds. p. 9-40.*)

CHILDS, B.S. 1979. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture.* London: SCM.

CHILDS, B.S. 1986. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context.* Philadelphia: Fortress.

CLEMENTS, R.E. 1978. *Old Testament Theology: a Fresh Approach.* London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott.

DENTAN, R.C. 1972. The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament. (*In Laymon, CM. ed. The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible.* London: Collins, p. 1159-1166.)

DU TOIT, S. 1969. *Openbaringsgeskiedenis van die Ou Testament.* Potchefstroom: Pro Rege.

EICHRODT, W. 1961/1967. *Theology of the Old Testament. I/II.* London: SCM.

EYBERS, I. 1977. *Old Testament Prophecies: Twelve Theocratic Testimonies.* Cape Town: United Protestant Publishers.

FOHRER, G. 1972. *Theologische Grundstrukturen des Alten Testaments.* Berlin: De Gruyter.

GOTTWALD, N.K. 1975. Biblical Theology or Biblical Sociology? On Affirming and Defining the "Uniqueness" of Israel. *Radical Religion*, 2(2&3):42-57.

HELBERG, J.L. 1959. A Communication on the Semasiological Meaning of Basar. (*In Van Zyl, A.H. ed. Die Ou Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid Afrika. Papers read at the Second Meeting.*)

HELBERG, J.L. 1976. A Startingpoint and Method for Old Testament Study. *RES Theological Bulletin*, 4(2): 1-14.

HELBERG, J.L. 1983. *Verklaring en prediking van die Ou Testament.* Potchefstroom: Potchefstroomse Teologiese Publikasies.

- HELBERG, J.L. 1984. Klaagliedere. Ontnugtering en hoop. Potchefstroom.
- HELBERG, J.L. 1986. Lig op die Nuwe Afrikaanse Bybelvertaling. Pretoria: NGKB.
- HELBERG, J.L. 1988. Die selfbekendstelling van God in Eksodus 3 en die betekenis daarvan vir vandag. *Koers*, 53(1):39-58.
- HELBERG, J.L. 1990. Die verbondsvolk se verhouding tot sy land (Veral in die tyd rondom die wegvoering in Babiloniese ballingskap: die Groot Profete en Klaagliedere). Potchefstroom: Departement Sentrale Publikasies, PU vir CHO.
- HELBERG, J. L. 1993. Openbaringsgeskiedenis van die Ou Testament. Inleiding. Th.B-gids. Potchefstroom: PU vir CHO, Diktaat 243/93.
- HOLWERDA, B. 1971. *Historia Revelationis Veteris Testamenti*. Kampen: Copieërinrichting v.d. Berg.
- KAISER, W.C. 1978. *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- KÖHLER, L. 1936. *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).
- KRAUS, H.J. 1972. *Psalmen. I. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag*. (BK. XV/1.)
- KROEZE, J.H. 1953. *Die Hooglied*. Potchefstroom: Pro Rege.
- KROEZE, J.H. 1965. *Handboek Bybelse geskiedenis. Die Ou Testament*. Pretoria: Interkerklike Uitgewerstrust.
- KROEZE, J.H. 1978. *Die boek Jona*. Pretoria: NGKB.
- LE ROUX, J.H. 1987. Die boek Sagaria. (*In Burden, J.J. & Prinsloo, W.S. eds. p. 297-328.*)
- LOADER, J. 1987. Prediker. (*In Burden, J.J. & Prinsloo, W.S. eds. p. 49-56.*)
- LOADER, J. 1987. Spreuke. (*In Burden, J.J. & Prinsloo, W.S. eds. p. 41-48.*)
- MICKLEM, N. 1953. The Book of Leviticus. (*In The Interpreter's Bible, II. New York: Abingdon, p. 3-134.*)
- MILGROM, J. 1972. The Book of Leviticus. (*In Layman, CM. ed. The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible. London: Collins, p. 68-84.*)
- NICHOLSON, E.W. 1986. *God and His People; Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- SANTMIRE, H.P. 1985. *The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- SCHUURMAN, E. 1980. Creation and Science. Fundamental Questions Concerning Evolutionism and Creationism. *RES Theological Forum*, 8(2).
- STEK, J.H. 1978. Salvation, Justice and Liberation in the Old Testament. *Calvin Theological Journal*, 13(2): 133-165).
- TERRIEN, S. 1978. *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*. New York: Harper & Row.

- VAN SELMS, A. 1967/1967a. Genesis. I/II. Nijkerk: Callenbach. (Prediking van het Oude Testament.)
- VERHOEF, P.A. 1967. Israel in die krisis. Pretoria: NGKB.
- VERHOEF, P.A. 1993. Profete en profesie. Kaapstad: Lux Verbi.
- VON RAD, G. 1962/1965. Old Testament Theology. I/II. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd.
- VRIEZEN, TH.C 1966. Hoofdlijnen der theologie van het Oude Testament. Wageningen: Veenman (= An Outline of Old Testament Theology. Oxford: Blackwell. 1970).
- WESTERMANN, C 1978. Theologie des Alten Testaments in Grundzügen. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- YOUNG, E.J. 1978. My Servants the Prophets. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- ZIMMERLI, W. 1972. Grundriss der alttestamentlichen Theologie. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer (= Old Testament Theology in Outline. Edinburgh: Clark. 1978).