

Blessings and Judgment

The Bible offers principles concerning blessing and judgment concerning the nation of Israel. Do any of them apply to the United States? Kerby Anderson examines this question.

Is God blessing America? Will God bring judgment against America? These are questions I often hear, and yet rarely do we hear good answers to these questions. Part of the reason is that Christians haven't really studied the subject of blessings and judgment.



In this article we deal with this difficult and controversial subject. While we may not be able to come to definitive answers to all of these questions, I think we will have a better understanding of what blessings and judgment are from a biblical perspective.

When we think about this topic, often we are in two minds. On one hand, we believe that God is on our side and blessing us. After the attacks on 9/11, for example, we launched a war on terror and were generally convinced that God was on our side. At least we hoped that He was. Surely God could not be on the side of the terrorists.

On the other hand, we also wonder if God is ready to judge America. Given the evils of our society, isn't it possible that God will judge America? Haven't we exceeded what other nations have done that God has judged in the past?

In his book *Is God on America's Side?*, Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. We will look at these in more depth below. But we should first acknowledge that God through His

prophets clearly declared when he was bringing judgment. In those cases, we have special revelation to clearly show what God was doing. We do not have Old Testament prophets today, but that doesn't stop Christians living in the church age from claiming (often inaccurately) that certain things are a judgment of God.

In the 1980s and 1990s we heard many suggest that AIDS was a judgment of God against homosexuality. In my book *Living Ethically In the 90s* I said that it did not look like a judgment from God. First, there were many who engaged in homosexual behavior who were not stricken with AIDS (many male homosexuals and nearly all lesbians were AIDS-free). Second, it struck many innocent victims (those who contracted the disease from blood transfusions). Was AIDS a judgment of God? I don't think so.

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, people called into [my talk show](#) suggesting this was God's judgment against the city because of its decadence. But then callers from the Gulf Coast called to say that the hurricane devastated their communities, destroying homes, businesses, and churches. Was God judging the righteous church-going people of the Gulf Coast? Was Hurricane Katrina a judgment of God? I don't think so.

In this article we are going to look at blessings and judgments that are set forth by God in the Old Testament so that we truly understand what they are.

Seven Principles (Part 1)

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The first principle is that God can both bless and curse a nation.[\[1\]](#)

When we sing "God Bless America" do we really mean it? I guess

part of the answer to that question is what do most Americans mean by the word "God"? We say we believe in God, but many people believe in a god of their own construction. In a sense, most Americans embrace a god of our civil religion. This is not the God of the Bible.

R.C. Sproul says the god of this civil religion is without power: "He is a deity without sovereignty, a god without wrath, a judge without judgment, and a force without power."[{2}](#) We have driven God from the public square, but we bring him back during times of crisis (like 9/11) but he is only allowed off the reservation for a short period of time.

We sing "God Bless America" but do we mean it? Nearly every political speech and every State of the Union address ends with the phrase, "May God bless America." But what importance do we place in that phrase?

Contrast this with what God said in the Old Testament. God gave Israel a choice of either being blessed or being cursed. "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known" (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

We should first acknowledge that Israel was unique because it had a covenant with God. America does not have a covenant with God. But it does still seem as if the principle of blessing and cursing can apply to nations today.

A second principle is that God judges nations based on the amount of light and opportunity they are given.[{3}](#) The Old Testament is a story of Israel. Other nations enter the story when they connect with Israel. Because Israel had a unique relationship with God, the nation was judged more strictly than its neighbors.

God was more patient with the Canaanites—it took four hundred years before their “cup of iniquity” was full, and then judgment fell on them. Likewise, Paul points out (Romans 2:12-15) that in the end time, God would individually judge Jews and Gentiles by the amount of light they had when they were alive.

A nation that is given the light of revelation will be held to greater account than a nation that is not.

Seven Principles (Part 2)

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The third principle is that God sometimes uses exceedingly evil nations to judge those that are less evil.[\[4\]](#)

Israel was blessed with undeserved opportunities, yet were disobedient. God reveals to Isaiah that God would use the wicked nation of Assyria to judge Israel. “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets” (Isaiah 10:5-6). In another instance, God reveals to Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans to march through the land, plundering, killing, and stealing (Habakkuk 1:5-11).

As I mentioned above, Christians are often of two minds when they think about America. On the one hand they believe America is a great country. We have been willing to rebuild countries after war or natural disaster. American missionaries travel around the world. Christians broadcast the gospel message around the world.

On the other hand, America is a decadent country. We are the leading exporters of pornography and movies that celebrate

sex, violence, and profanity. We have aborted more than 50 million unborn babies. Our judicial system banishes God from public life. Will God use another nation to judge America?

A fourth principle is that when God judges a nation, the righteous suffer with the wicked.{5} A good example of this can be found in the book of Daniel. When God brought the Babylonians against Judah, Daniel and his friends were forced to accompany them.

We also see a parallel to this in manmade and natural disasters. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a hurricane or tsunami, we see that believers and nonbelievers die together. We live in a fallen world among fallen people. These actions (whether brought about by moral evil or physical evil) destroy lives and property in an indiscriminate way.

A fifth principle is that God's judgments take various forms.{6} Sometimes it results in the destruction of our families. We can see this in God's pronouncement in Deuteronomy 28:53-55. When the Israelites were forced to leave their homes to go to foreign lands, the warnings were fulfilled. Today we may not be forced into exile, but we wonder if "God is judging our families just the same. He is judging us for our immorality."

In Deuteronomy 28:36-37, "The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone." When the ten tribes of Israel were exiled to Assyria, they were assimilated into the pagan culture and never heard from again.

Seven Principles (Part 3)

The sixth principle is that in judgment, God's target is often His people, not just the pagans among them.{7}

Yes, it is true that God judges the wicked, but sometimes the real purpose of present judgments has more to do with the righteous than the wicked. Not only do we see this in the Old Testament, we also see this principle in the New Testament. 1 Peter 4:17-18 says: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And 'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'"

This raises a good question. If judgment begins at the house of God, is the church today under judgment? Have Christians become too worldly? Have Christians become too political and thus depend on government rather than on God? Have Christians become too materialistic? Someone has said we should change the motto on our coins from "In God we trust" to "In gold we trust."

A seventh and final principle is that God sometimes reverses intended judgments.[\[8\]](#) We must begin with an observation. God's blessing on any nation is undeserved. There is always sin and evil in the land. When God blesses us, either individually or corporately, it is an evidence of God's grace.

Sometimes God calls for judgment but then spares a nation. A good example of that can be found in the life of Jonah. God called him to that city to preach repentance for their sins. He didn't want to go because it was the capital city of the Assyrians who had committed genocide against Israel. But when Jonah finally obeyed God, the city was saved from judgment.

God also used Old Testament prophets to preach to Israel. But the people didn't have a heart to care. Consider the ministry of Micah and Jeremiah. Actually, Micah preached a hundred years before Jeremiah and warned Judah that her "wound is incurable." A century later, Jeremiah is brought before the priests and false prophets who want him killed. After hearing him, they appeal to the preaching of Micah (Jeremiah 16:19).

King Hezekiah listened to Micah's words and sought God who withheld judgment.

Erwin Lutzer gives another example from eighteenth century England. The country was in decline, but God reversed the trend through the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by returning to the questions about whether God is blessing or judging our nation.

First, we must acknowledge that no nation can claim that God is on its side. In fact, there is a long and sorry history of nations that have claimed this. And the "God is on our side mentality" has done much harm throughout the history of the church.

Kim Riddlebarger: "Instead of letting God be God, our sinful pride leads us to make such pronouncements that are not ours to make. In these cases, God is not sovereign, he is a mascot."[\[9\]](#) As a nation, we must not claim that God is on our side.

This is also true in the political debates we have within this nation. Richard Land in his book, *The Divided States of America*, says: "What liberals and conservatives both are missing is that America has been blessed by God in unique ways—we are not just another country, but neither are we God's special people. I do not believe that America is God's chosen nation. God established one chosen nation and people: the Jews. We are not Israel. We do not have "God on our side." We are not God's gift to the world.[\[10\]](#)

This brings us back to the famous quote by Abraham Lincoln who was asked if God was on the side of the Union forces or the Confederate forces. He said: "I do not care whether God is on

my side; the important question is whether I am on God's side, for God is always right."

Second, we should be careful not to quickly assume that a disease or a disaster is a judgment of God. Above I gave examples of people wrongly assuming that AIDS or Hurricane Katrina was a judgment of God.

We can take comfort in knowing that this isn't just a problem in the twenty-first century. Apparently it was even a problem in the first century. The tower of Siloam fell and killed a number of people. It appears that those around Jesus thought it was a punishment for their sins. He counters this idea by saying: "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

We should wisely refrain from too quickly labeling a disease or disaster as a judgment of God. But we should take to heart the words of Jesus and focus on our need for salvation and repentance.

Notes

1. Erwin Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 11.
2. R.C. Sproul, *When Worlds Collide* (Wheaton: Crossway, 202), 63.
3. Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?*, 17.
4. Ibid., 25.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Ibid., 41.
7. Ibid., 49.
8. Ibid., 65.
9. Kim Riddlebarger, "Using God," *Modern Reformation*, November/December 2007, 14.
10. Richard Land, *The Divided States of America* (Nashville:

Nelson, 2007), 197.

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Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully?

If Mark^[1] hadn't been willing to listen, he might have missed some great news. He enjoyed an adequate income, fulfilling work, a comfortable home, and many close friends. Then his employer offered a promotion requiring a move to another state. At first resistant, he eventually decided to listen to the offer and make the move.

Mark's job responsibilities expanded, his growing reputation opened doors for wider influence, and he met and married Gail. Reflecting twenty-five years later, he was glad he had carefully listened to news of the offer.



At a business convention Joan heard a brief announcement of an advanced degree program. Distracted by current concerns, she dismissed it. When the announcement was repeated the next day, Joan caught something she had missed. The degree would be from

one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Her company was encouraging managers to participate, promising them time to study, and offering to help pay for it. Joan investigated, enrolled, and her career was greatly enhanced. "To think that I almost missed the good news about this program because I was distracted," Joan reflected. "What a tragedy that would have been."

Perhaps you, too, have encountered news that first seemed insignificant but later became momentous. Great news isn't always trumpeted by headlines or television broadcasts. Sometimes the best news could slip right by if you're not attuned to its importance.

Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. A baby born in relative obscurity in the Middle East was hailed by a few as a future king who would rescue people from their troubles. "Good news of great joy for everyone!" said one announcement of Jesus' birth.[{2}](#)

Relatively few contemporaries acknowledged His importance. His followers later showed numerous clues to His identity, prophecies written many years before His birth. You may not share the faith of those early believers, but perhaps you'll find it interesting to eavesdrop on some of the clues, the prophecies. Consider just a few.[{3}](#)

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Birth

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 B.C. of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One." He indicated this deliverer would be from Bethlehem. He wrote, "But you . . . Bethlehem . . . are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." [{4}](#)

Matthew, a first-century biographer, noted that ". . . Jesus

was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . .”{5}

Isaiah, writing around 700 B.C., foretold an unusual aspect of the Messiah’s birth, that He would be *born of a virgin*. He wrote, “The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”{6}

The name “Immanuel” means “God is with us.” The indication—to all who were listening—was that God Himself would be physically present with humans through this child. What a promise! What good news to people who often felt abandoned by God.

Matthew recorded this about Jesus’ birth:

Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. . . . Joseph . . . brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.{7}

Jewish prophets mentioned several clues about the Messiah’s lineage. He was to be a *descendant of Abraham*. Moses, a famous Jewish leader writing fourteen hundred years before Jesus’ birth, recorded a prophecy about the Jewish patriarch Abraham. He wrote, “Through your [Abraham’s] descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed.”{8}

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Isaac*. Moses recorded another promise. He said, “God told Abraham, ‘ . . . Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted’.”{9} In other words, something important was going to come through the descendants of Abraham and specifically through the line of Isaac, one of Abraham’s two sons.

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Jacob*. Abraham’s son Isaac himself had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Some ancient

Jewish scholars{10} believed that another prophecy that Moses recorded prefigured the Messiah. Moses wrote, "A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel."{11}

Luke, a first-century physician, traced Jesus' lineage through these three Jewish leaders. He wrote of "Jesus . . . the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. . . ."{12}

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, and from the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The pieces of the prophetic puzzle were starting to become clearer. The details of His life would fulfill the prophecies further.

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Life and Death

Though Jesus was born in humble circumstances, learned leaders traveled great distances to hail the child as a king. In His youth, scholars marveled at His wisdom. In His thirties He began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

His enemies plotted His demise and paid one of his followers to betray Him. His closest friends deserted Him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced and executed. In agony during His execution He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"{13}

Many hurting people feel forsaken by God. But Jesus' cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion. The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by Israel's King David.{14} It said, "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."{15} "They have pierced my hands and my feet."{16} "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."{17} Historians record precisely this behavior during Jesus' execution.{18} It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as Jesus slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 prophecies that were literally fulfilled in Jesus' life and death. He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for His work.[{19}](#) He would enter the capital city as a king, but riding on a donkey's back.[{20}](#) He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver,[{21}](#) pierced,[{22}](#) executed with thieves[{23}](#) and yet, though wounded,[{24}](#) would suffer no broken bones.[{25}](#)

In His dying cry from the cross, He reminded His hearers that His life and death were in precise fulfillment of a previously stated plan. According to a biblical perspective, at the moment of death He experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place. He suffered the divine penalty due all the shortcomings, injustice, evil, and sin of the world, including yours and mine. Then—again in fulfillment of prophecy[{26}](#) and contrary to natural law—He returned to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.[{27}](#) To the seeker He offers true inner peace,[{28}](#) forgiveness,[{29}](#) purpose,[{30}](#) and strength for fulfilling living.[{31}](#)

Jesus' birth, life, and death fulfilled many prophecies. Many of these fulfillments involved details that were beyond His human control. But could this be coincidence? Could the prophecies have been fulfilled by chance?

Prophecies Fulfilled by Chance?

My good friend and mentor, Bob Prall, likes to make a distinction between prediction and prophecy[{32}](#) and uses a sports analogy to illustrate that distinction. I got to know Bob when I was a student at Duke University and he was the Campus Crusade for Christ director. Now, sports fans will know that Duke's men's basketball team often has contended for the national title. Alas, the Duke football team has suffered many losing seasons.

Bob notes that prediction can involve careful analysis of current events to make an educated guess about the future. Stock market analysts, political pollsters, social scientists, and CBS *Survivor* fans all seek to predict outcomes. But prophecy often involves events and situations hundreds of years apart or without apparent human connection. Bob explains that if someone were to study the Duke men's basketball team and announce they would win the national championship, and then it happened, that would be successful prediction. But if someone evaluated the Duke *football* team and announced they would win the national championship, that would be prophecy!

Could the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled have been fulfilled merely by chance? Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10^{17} that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17} , the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus. [\[33\]](#)

With all these signs, why wasn't more attention paid to Jesus' birth? No reporters with microphones and cameras waited outside the stable to interview the new mom. (Maybe if she'd had quintts?)

Some back then were looking for a conquering king promised by Hebrew prophets and did not anticipate a lowly birth. Others were perhaps too entangled in their own self-importance or preoccupied with the details of life: working, families,

relationships, emotions. Maybe they were a bit like us.

What does all this mean for us this Christmas?

Today's Good News

Jesus' "good news" offers a chance to hook into God's unchanging love, to be forgiven of all wrong and to live forever with Him. He can help you accept yourself, replace anxiety with peace and provide the best friends you've ever had.

If His news is so good, why do people still miss it today? Some are enmeshed in careers or relationships that offer little time for reflection. Chasing dollars blinds some. Family strife can make life a blur: teens experimenting with sex or drugs, a spouse wanting out. Western life itself can be exhausting: media overload, the rush to taxi kids or complete shopping, cellphones, beepers, PTA, soccer practice, e-mail, laundry, Web surfing . . . Help! Maybe you could use some time to reflect.

I suspect you've had hints of God's good news. Maybe you've admired the majesty of the universe and wondered Who was behind it. Perhaps a friend told you their story of faith. Maybe a magazine article got you thinking.

For eighteen years I heard the story of Jesus but did not understand it. The summer before entering university, I wrestled with concern over my own afterlife but gave up because it seemed too complicated. That fall I met some vibrant Christians whose love, joy, and enthusiasm attracted me.

They told me I could not earn eternal life. Rather I needed to receive Christ's free gift of forgiveness accomplished by His death for my sins and His resurrection. They told me all this would be a "gift of God; not . . . a result of works, so that no one . . . [could] boast" about it.[\[34\]](#) That was good news

to me. I accepted His gift of forgiveness and have found Him to be a wonderful friend.

Life hasn't been perfect. I've had my share of domestic strife, job conflicts, and minor health struggles. God never promised perfection, painlessness, or complete prosperity in this life. But He does offer unusual peace, pardon from guilt, ultimate purpose, and the inner power to cope with any struggle. He promises to cause "all things to work together for good" to those who love Him.[\[35\]](#) He is a friend who will never leave.[\[36\]](#)

Might this Christmas season be a good time for you to ask God to forgive you and become your friend? It's a decision that only you can make for yourself. You can simply talk to Him right now, ask Him to forgive you and become your friend forever. Then contact this station or visit the Web site Probe.org to learn more about a relationship with God.

Maybe there's some good news for you in the story of Jesus. Do you hear what I hear? Are you listening?

*This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" *Pursuit* VII: 3, 1998, pp.12-15. Copyright © 1998 Rusty Wright. Used By Permission.

Notes

1. Names and some details in certain stories in this article have been altered for privacy while preserving the points of the stories. Details of stories that name me personally have not been changed.

2. Luke 2:10 NLT.

3. Adapted from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972) 147-157 ff.

4. Micah 5:2 NLT.

5. Matthew 2:1 NASB.
6. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.
7. Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 NLT.
8. Genesis 22:18 NLT.
9. Genesis 21:12 NLT.
10. McDowell, op. cit., 154.
11. Numbers 24:17 NLT.
12. Luke 3:23, 34 NASB.
13. Matthew 27:46 NIV.
14. Psalm 22.
15. Psalm 22:7 NIV.
16. Psalm 22:16 NIV.
17. Psalm 22:18 NIV.
18. Matthew 27:39-44, 35; John 20:25.
19. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1,2.
20. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21:1-9.
21. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15, 27:3.
22. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.
23. Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38.
24. Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.
25. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.
26. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31-32.

27. See McDowell, op. cit., 185-273.
28. John 14:27.
29. Colossians 1:14.
30. Matthew 28: 18-20.
31. Galatians 5:22-23.
32. Bob Prall, *The Master Plot of the Bible* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 1997) 56; Bob Prall, *As You Are Going... Make Disciples* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 2001) 108-109.
33. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 99-112.
34. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.
35. Romans 8:28 NASB.
36. Hebrews 13:5.

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Kerby Anderson answers some intriguing questions: Is God blessing America? Will God bring judgment against America? What are the biblical principles of blessing and judgment we find in the Bible concerning the nation of Israel? Do any of them apply to our nation?

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On the other hand, we also wonder if God is ready to judge America. Given the evils of our society, isn't it possible that God will judge America? Haven't we exceeded what other nations have done that God has judged in the past?

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R.C. Sproul says the god of this civil religion is without power: "He is a deity without sovereignty, a god without wrath, a judge without judgment, and a force without power."[\[2\]](#) We have driven God from the public square, but we bring him back during times of crisis (like 9/11) but he is

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A second principle is that God judges nations based on the amount of light and opportunity they are given.^{3} The Old Testament is a story of Israel. Other nations enter the story when they connect with Israel. Because Israel had a unique relationship with God, the nation was judged more strictly than its neighbors.

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Seven Principles (Part 2)

In his book *Is God on America's Side?* Erwin Lutzer sets forth seven principles we can derive from the Old Testament about blessing and cursing. The third principle is that God sometimes uses exceedingly evil nations to judge those that are less evil.[\[4\]](#)

Israel was blessed with undeserved opportunities, yet were disobedient. God reveals to Isaiah that God would use the wicked nation of Assyria to judge Israel. "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger; the staff in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets" (Isaiah 10:5-6). In another instance, God reveals to Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans to march through the land, plundering, killing, and stealing (Habakkuk 1:5-11).

As I mentioned above, Christians are often of two minds when they think about America. On the one hand they believe America is a great country. We have been willing to rebuild countries after war or natural disaster. American missionaries travel around the world. Christians broadcast the gospel message around the world.

On the other hand, America is a decadent country. We are the leading exporters of pornography and movies that celebrate sex, violence, and profanity. We have aborted more than 50 million unborn babies. Our judicial system banishes God from public life. Will God use another nation to judge America?

A fourth principle is that when God judges a nation, the righteous suffer with the wicked.[\[5\]](#) A good example of this can be found in the book of Daniel. When God brought the Babylonians against Judah, Daniel and his friends were forced to accompany them.

We also see a parallel to this in manmade and natural disasters. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a hurricane or tsunami, we see that believers and nonbelievers die together. We live in a fallen world among fallen people. These actions (whether brought about by moral evil or physical evil) destroy lives and property in an indiscriminate way.

A fifth principle is that God's judgments take various forms.[{6}](#) Sometimes it results in the destruction of our families. We can see this in God's pronouncement in Deuteronomy 28:53-55. When the Israelites were forced to leave their homes to go to foreign lands, the warnings were fulfilled. Today we may not be forced into exile, but we wonder if "God is judging our families just the same. He is judging us for our immorality."

In Deuteronomy 28:36-37, "The Lord will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone." When the ten tribes of Israel were exiled to Assyria, they were assimilated into the pagan culture and never heard from again.

Seven Principles (Part 3)

The sixth principle is that in judgment, God's target is often His people, not just the pagans among them.[{7}](#)

Yes, it is true that God judges the wicked, but sometimes the real purpose of present judgments has more to do with the righteous than the wicked. Not only do we see this in the Old Testament, we also see this principle in the New Testament. 1 Peter 4:17-18 says: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And 'If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?'"

This raises a good question. If judgment begins at the house of God, is the church today under judgment? Have Christians become too worldly? Have Christians become too political and thus depend on government rather than on God? Have Christians become too materialistic? Someone has said we should change the motto on our coins from "In God we trust" to "In gold we trust."

A seventh and final principle is that God sometimes reverses intended judgments.[\[8\]](#) We must begin with an observation. God's blessing on any nation is undeserved. There is always sin and evil in the land. When God blesses us, either individually or corporately, it is an evidence of God's grace.

Sometimes God calls for judgment but then spares a nation. A good example of that can be found in the life of Jonah. God called him to that city to preach repentance for their sins. He didn't want to go because it was the capital city of the Assyrians who had committed genocide against Israel. But when Jonah finally obeyed God, the city was saved from judgment.

God also used Old Testament prophets to preach to Israel. But the people didn't have a heart to care. Consider the ministry of Micah and Jeremiah. Actually, Micah preached a hundred years before Jeremiah and warned Judah that her "wound is incurable." A century later, Jeremiah is brought before the priests and false prophets who want him killed. After hearing him, they appeal to the preaching of Micah (Jeremiah 16:19). King Hezekiah listened to Micah's words and sought God who withheld judgment.

Erwin Lutzer gives another example from eighteenth century England. The country was in decline, but God reversed the trend through the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by returning to the questions about whether God is blessing or judging our nation.

First, we must acknowledge that no nation can claim that God is on its side. In fact, there is a long and sorry history of nations that have claimed this. And the “God is on our side mentality” has done much harm throughout the history of the church.

Kim Riddlebarger: “Instead of letting God be God, our sinful pride leads us to make such pronouncements that are not ours to make. In these cases, God is not sovereign, he is a mascot.”[\[9\]](#) As a nation, we must not claim that God is on our side.

This is also true in the political debates we have within this nation. Richard Land in his book, *The Divided States of America*, says: “What liberals and conservatives both are missing is that America has been blessed by God in unique ways—we are not just another country, but neither are we God’s special people. I do not believe that America is God’s chosen nation. God established one chosen nation and people: the Jews. We are not Israel. We do not have ‘God on our side.’ We are not God’s gift to the world.”[\[10\]](#)

This brings us back to the famous quote by Abraham Lincoln who was asked if God was on the side of the Union forces or the Confederate forces. He said: “I do not care whether God is on my side; the important question is whether I am on God’s side, for God is always right.”

Second, we should be careful not to quickly assume that a disease or a disaster is a judgment of God. Above I gave examples of people wrongly assuming that AIDS or Hurricane Katrina was a judgment of God.

We can take comfort in knowing that this isn’t just a problem

in the twenty-first century. Apparently it was even a problem in the first century. The tower of Siloam fell and killed a number of people. It appears that those around Jesus thought it was a punishment for their sins. He counters this idea by saying: "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

We should wisely refrain from too quickly labeling a disease or disaster as a judgment of God. But we should take to heart the words of Jesus and focus on our need for salvation and repentance.

Notes

1. Erwin Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 11.
2. R.C. Sproul, *When Worlds Collide* (Wheaton: Crossway, 202), 63.
3. Lutzer, *Is God on America's Side?*, 17.
4. Ibid., 25.
5. Ibid., 35.
6. Ibid., 41.
7. Ibid., 49.
8. Ibid., 65.
9. Kim Riddlebarger, "Using God," *Modern Reformation*, November/December 2007, 14.
10. Richard Land, *The Divided States of America* (Nashville: Nelson, 2007), 197.

Six Months in Paris that Changed the World

Decisions have consequences. Our own lives and world history confirm that. The 1919 post-World War 1 Paris Peace Conference made decisions that echo in today's headlines. Fascinating stories about Iraq, Israel, Palestine and China prompt us to consider the impact of our own daily choices.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Carving Up the World

Think about the really important decisions you have made in your life: choices concerning your education, vocation, spouse, or friends; your spiritual beliefs and commitments. Are you happy with the outcomes? Have you made any bad choices in life that still haunt you?

Choices have consequences and how we make decisions can be critical. In this article, we'll look back more than eighty years ago at a fascinating gathering of world leaders who made significant decisions that touch our lives today.

In 1919, leaders from around the globe gathered in Paris to decide how to divide up the earth after the end of World War 1. Presidents and prime ministers debated, argued, dined, and attended the theater together as they created new nations and carved up old ones. Margaret MacMillan, an Oxford Ph.D. and University of Toronto history professor, tells their captivating story in her critically acclaimed bestseller, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*.^[1] *The Sunday Times* of London says, "Most of the problems treated in this book are still with us today indeed, some of the most horrific things that have been taking place in Europe and the Middle East in the past decade stem directly from decisions made in

Paris in 1919.”{2}

The cast of characters in this drama was diverse. The Big Three were leaders of the principal Allied nations: U.S. president Woodrow Wilson and the prime ministers of France and England, Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George. Joining them was a vast array of “statesmen, diplomats, bankers, soldiers, professors, economists and lawyers . . . from all corners of the world.” Media reporters, businesspersons and spokespersons for a multitude of causes showed up.{3}

Lawrence of Arabia was there, the mysterious English scholar and soldier wrapped in Arab robes and promoting the Arab cause.{4} Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, not yet leaders of their governments, played supporting roles. A young Asian man who worked in the kitchen at the Paris Ritz asked the peacemakers to grant independence from France for his tiny nation. Ho Chi Minh – and Vietnam – got no reply.{5}

This article highlights three of the many decisions from the 1919 Paris Peace Conference that still influence headlines today. They concern Iraq, Israel, and China. Fasten your seatbelt for a ride into the past and then “Back to the Future.” First, consider the birth of Iraq.

Creating Iraq

During the first six months of 1919, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson along with French and British prime ministers Clemenceau and Lloyd George considered exhausting appeals for land and power from people around the globe. At times, they found themselves crawling across a large map spread out on the floor to investigate and determine boundaries.{6} The challenges were immense. Clemenceau told a colleague, “It is much easier to make war than peace.”{7}

Eminent British historian Arnold Toynbee, who advised the British delegation in Paris, told of delivering some papers to

his prime minister one day. To Toynbee's delight, Lloyd George forgot Toynbee was present and began to think out loud. "Mesopotamia," mused Lloyd George, ". . . yes . . . oil . . . irrigation . . . we must have Mesopotamia."[{8}](#)

"Mesopotamia" referred to three Middle Eastern provinces that had been part of the collapsed Ottoman empire: Mosul in the north, Basra in the south, and Baghdad in the middle. (Is this beginning to sound familiar?) Oil was a major concern. For a while back then, no one was sure if Mesopotamia had much oil. Clues emerged when the ground around Baghdad seeped pools of black sludge.[{9}](#)

Mesopotamia's British governor argued that the British, largely for strategic security reasons, should control Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad as a single administrative unit. But the three provinces had little in common. MacMillan notes, "In 1919 there was no Iraqi people; history, religion, geography pulled the people apart, not together."[{10}](#) Kurds and Persians chafed under Arabs. Shia Muslims resented Sunni Muslims.[{11}](#) (Now is this sounding familiar?)

Eventually geopolitical realities prompted a deal. In 1920, the Brits claimed a mandate for Mesopotamia and the French one for Syria. Rebellion broke out in Mesopotamia. Rebels cut train lines, attacked towns and murdered British officers. In 1921, England agreed to a king for Mesopotamia. Iraq was born. In 1932, it became independent.[{12}](#) Today . . . well, read your morning paper. Decisions have consequences.

Creating A Jewish Homeland

Another major decision made at the Paris Peace Conference affected the Jewish world and, eventually, the entire Middle East.

In February 1919, a British chemist appeared before the peacemakers to argue that Jews of the world needed a safe

place to live. Jews were trying to leave Russia and Austria by the millions. Where could they go? Chaim Weizmann and his Zionist colleagues thought they had the perfect answer: Palestine.[{13}](#)

Zionism had a powerful ally in British foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour. Balfour was a wealthy politician with a strange habit of staying in bed all morning. "If you wanted nothing done," reflected Winston Churchill, Balfour "was undoubtedly the best man for the task."[{14}](#) Son of a deeply religious mother, he was fascinated with the Jews and Weizmann's vision.[{15}](#)

Prime Minister Lloyd George was another fan. Raised with the Bible, he claimed to have learned more Jewish history than English history. During the war, Weizmann, the Jewish chemist, provided without charge his process for making acetone, which the British desperately needed for making explosives. In return, Lloyd George offered Weizmann support for Zionism. Lloyd George later hailed that offer as the origin of the declaration supporting a Jewish homeland. The French posed an alternate theory: Lloyd George's mistress was married to a well-known Jewish businessman.[{16}](#)

In October 1917, the British issued the famous Balfour Declaration, pledging to help establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1919, Weizmann and other Zionist leaders made their pitch to the Paris peacemakers. But there was a problem. The Brits had made conflicting promises. During the war, they had supported a Jewish homeland in Palestine. They had also encouraged the Arabs to revolt against Ottoman rule, promising them independence over land that included Palestine.[{17}](#)

President Wilson, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was sympathetic to Zionism. "To think," he told a prominent American rabbi, "that I the son of the manse should be able to help restore the Holy Land to its people."[{18}](#) But the peacemakers postponed a decision. In 1920, at a separate

conference, the British got the Palestinian mandate (a form of trusteeship) to carry out the Balfour Declaration. Palestinian Arabs were already rioting against the Jews.[\[19\]](#) And today? Well, check your radio news.

Decisions have consequences. Next, how Paris 1919 influenced the great Asian dragon.

China Betrayed

U.S. president Woodrow Wilson once described a negotiating technique he used on an associate. "When you have hooked him," explained Wilson, "first you draw in a little, then give liberty to the line, then draw him back, finally wear him out, break him down, and land him."[\[20\]](#)

A Chinese-Japanese conflict would challenge Wilson's negotiating skills.[\[21\]](#) The Chinese had joined the Allies and hoped for fair treatment in Paris. Many Chinese admired Western democracy and Wilson's idealistic vision.

Shantung was a strategic peninsula below Beijing. Confucius, the great philosopher, was born there. His ideas permeated Chinese society. Shantung had thirty million people, cheap labor, plentiful minerals and a natural harbor. Shantung silk is still fashionable today. In the late 1890s, Germany seized Shantung. In 1914, Japan took it from the Germans.[\[22\]](#)

In Paris, Japan wanted Shantung. Japan sported a collection of secret agreements that remind one of a *Survivor* TV series. China placed hope in Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, which rejected secret treaties and included self-determination.[\[23\]](#)

The Chinese ambassador to Washington called Shantung "a Holy Land for the Chinese" and said that under foreign control it would be a "dagger pointed at the heart of China."[\[24\]](#) Wilson seemed sympathetic at first, but the decision on Shantung had to wait until late April as the Allies finalized the German treaty. By then, an avalanche of decisions was overwhelming

the peacemakers. When the Japanese forced their hand, Wilson, Clemenceau and Lloyd George conceded Shantung to Japan in exchange for Japan's concession on another significant treaty matter.[{25}](#)

Chinese blamed Wilson for betraying them. On May 4, thousands of demonstrators rallied in Tiananmen Square. The dean of humanities from Beijing University distributed leaflets. May 4 marked the rejection of the West by many Chinese intellectuals. New Russian communism looked attractive to some. In 1921, radicals founded the Chinese Communist Party. That dean of humanities who had distributed leaflets became its first chairman, Mao Tse-tung. His party won power in 1949[{26}](#) and today . . . have you listened to the news recently?

Iraq, Israel, Palestine, China . . . Paris 1919 influenced them all. What does all this mean for us?

Decisions, Consequences, and You

As they departed Paris in 1919 after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, Woodrow Wilson told his wife, "It is finished, and, as no one is satisfied, it makes me hope we have made a just peace; but it is all in the lap of the gods."[{27}](#)

As the journalists and delegations left Paris, the hotels that had become headquarters for the conventioners reopened for regular business. Prostitutes groused that business dipped.[{28}](#)

The big three peacemakers did not last much longer in power. Lloyd George was forced to resign as prime minister in 1922. Clemenceau ran for president in late 1919, but withdrew in anger when he discovered he would face opposition. Wilson faced great resistance in the U.S. Senate which never ratified the Treaty of Versailles. In October 1919, a massive stroke left him bedridden and debilitated. In December, he learned he

had won the Nobel Peace Prize.[{29}](#)

Iraq, a nation patched together in Paris and its aftermath, still boils with religious, ethnic, and cultural dissent. Israelis and Palestinians still clash. China still distrusts the West. Certainly many decisions in intervening years have affected these hotspots, but seeds of conflict were sown in Paris.

What is a biblical perspective on Paris 1919? I don't claim to know which peacemakers may or may not have been following God in their particular choices, but consider three lessons that are both simple and profound:

First: *God's sovereignty ultimately trumps human activity.* God "raises up nations, and he destroys them."[{30}](#) He also "causes all things to work together for good to those who love" Him.[{31}](#) History's end has not yet transpired. Once it has, we shall see His divine hand more clearly.

Second: *Decisions have consequences.* "You will always reap what you sow!" Paul exclaimed.[{32}](#) This applies to nations and individuals. We all face decisions about what foods to eat, careers to pursue and life partners to select, about whether to become friends with God and to follow Him. Our choices influence this life and the next. Our decisions can affect others and produce unforeseen consequences. So . . .

Third: *We should seek to make wise decisions.* Solomon, a very wise king, wrote, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths."[{33}](#)

Decisions have consequences. Are you facing any decisions that you need to place in God's hands?

Notes

1. Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the*

- World* (New York: Random House, 2001). Most of the historical material in this article is drawn from MacMillan's research.
2. Ibid., back cover.
 3. Ibid., xxvii.
 4. Ibid., 388-395 ff.
 5. Ibid., 59.
 6. Ibid., 255, 275.
 7. A. Ribot, *Journal d'Alexandre Ribot et correspondances indites, 1914-1922* (Paris, 1936), 255; in Ibid., xxx.
 8. A. Toynbee, *Acquaintances* (London, 1967), 211-12; in MacMillan, op. cit., 381.
 9. MacMillan, op. cit., 395-96.
 10. Ibid., 397.
 11. Ibid., 400.
 12. Ibid., 400-409.
 13. Ibid., 410.
 14. Ibid., 413.
 15. Ibid., 413-415.
 16. Ibid., 415-16.
 17. Ibid., 416-21.
 18. Ibid., 422.
 19. Ibid., 4; 98; 103; 420; 423-427.
 20. Ibid., 194.
 21. Ibid., 322-344.
 22. Ibid., 325-27.
 23. Ibid., 328-29; 336; 338; 322; 495-96.
 24. Ibid., 334.
 25. Ibid., 330-38.
 26. Ibid., 338-341.
 27. T. Schachtman, Edith and Woodrow (New York, 1981), 189; in MacMillan, op. cit., 487.
 28. MacMillan, op. cit., 485.
 29. Ibid., 487-92.
 30. Job 12:23 NLT.
 31. Romans 8:28 NASB.
 32. Galatians 6:7 NLT.
 33. Proverbs 3:5-6 NLT.

Genesis Unbound

A New and Different Genesis 1

Have you ever read a book that totally changed the way you thought about something? Or heard an idea that gave you a completely new picture of something you thought you knew well? This essay is about just such a book.

Most of us know the verses of Genesis 1 so well we could recite parts of them from memory. Some have studied them for years and read shelves of books about what the first chapters of Genesis mean. But what if someone suggested that most of what you have thought and pictured and been told about those early chapters might not be quite right? Would you reach for the red tag of “Heresy” to slap on the book? Would you be sure that the author could not possibly be right? In this discussion we are reviewing a new book called *Genesis Unbound*, and it may well cause you to reexamine what you thought Genesis 1 and 2 are about.

The author, Dr. John Sailhammer, is not a newcomer to theology. Educated at Dallas Theological Seminary and UCLA, Dr. Sailhammer taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He now teaches at Northwestern College. He has written several well-respected books on the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) and is considered an excellent conservative Old Testament scholar. The commentary on Genesis in Zondervan’s *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* is by Dr. Sailhammer. His recent book gives a surprisingly new, and yet very old, look at the first chapters of Genesis.

To lay the groundwork for any new view, it is important to understand the prevailing view first. Sailhammer helpfully provides five basic assumptions that he says make up the core beliefs of nearly all the current views.

The first of these core assumptions is that the first verse of Genesis 1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," refers to the creation of some sort of unformed mass that God will make into a universe as the six days progress.

The second assumption that almost all commentators make about Genesis 1 is that the "light" created on day one was something unique and temporary for dividing the days until the fourth day when God would create the sun, moon, and stars.

Third, it is generally assumed that the sun, moon, and stars were actually created on the fourth day.

Fourth, until recent science began to question the assumption, it has been almost universally believed that the days of Genesis 1 were normal, 24-hour days. Some placed a gap between the first and second verses, to place all of the geological ages, but this was not a widely held view. In our century it is common to make the days long ages so the Bible will agree with the consensus of modern geology.

Lastly, the earth that God is making ready for man in Genesis 1 has almost always been seen as the whole planet. Accordingly, verse one is about the creation of the whole universe, and verse two begins a description of how God fashioned the earth for (1) the creatures He was about to make, and (2) a home for the two people He would make in His own image.

But suppose there were some assumptions in this list that we did not need to make? How would that change our view of these first chapters of Genesis? Next we will consider how a Jewish reader of Moses' time might have understood Genesis 1.

The Forming of the Promised Land

We all make assumptions when we read or hear something; we cannot think without a structure. But sometimes we make unnecessary assumptions that hinder our understanding. Of the five assumptions that many make about Genesis 1, could some be unnecessary baggage? The first assumption was that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” describes an initially chaotic state out of which God would create the material world. But suppose instead that this verse actually described God’s creation of heaven and earth? Dr. Sailhammer carefully develops the view that in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “In the beginning” often describes a period of indeterminate time. Genesis 10:10 says “And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel and Erech and Accad and Calneh.” Jeremiah 28:1 describes “The beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year.” Genesis Unbound suggests that we picture God creating the whole universe, “the heavens and the earth,” over some unspecified time in the past.

When we begin verse two, “And the earth was formless and void,” Sailhammer says it is not talking about the whole of planet earth. What are Moses’ five books about? The nation of Israel. What is the whole theme of the Pentateuch? How God chooses a people and takes them to the promised land He has made for them. Why not give “earth” in verse two its other meaning of “land”? And specifically “The Land.” God, through Moses, is telling us how He prepared the Promised Land for the people He already knew He would choose.

Startling?

Why, then, was the land “formless and void?” It wasn’t! Genesis Unbound contends that this assumption crept in with the first Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint. It translates the Hebrew into Greek as “unseen and unformed” in order to harmonize the Bible with the view of the Greeks, who

believed the world was formed out of chaos, so the translators wanted to seem relevant and mirrored that idea! According to Dr. Sailhammer, it would be better to translate the phrase as “an uninhabitable wasteland.” God had not yet prepared it for man, but it was not chaos either. God was preparing to take the “wasteland” and make it the “promised land.”

On day two, God prepares the sky for the land He will soon begin to make ready. The word often translated “firmament” Sailhammer suggests actually refers to what we would call the sky. And the waters above the firmament are the clouds that God sets in the sky. Interestingly, this is exactly what John Calvin thought. He wrote, “To my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy . . . let him go elsewhere.”

On day three, God gathers together the seas and makes the dry land appear. The land is brought out of the water to make a fit place for Adam and Eve. The water settles into rivers and lakes. The Hebrew word for any body of water can be translated “sea.” Here it is plural, while if it referred to the ocean it would be singular.

Then God creates “fruit trees.” In Sailhammer’s understanding, that is what the words describe, not all kinds of vegetation.

At the end of the third day, the Promised Land has been prepared with clouds in the sky, rivers and lakes, and fruit trees for food.

The Filling of the Land

The book *Genesis Unbound* presents what seems at first a completely new understanding of Genesis 1. But by seeing the chapter as God preparing the Promised Land, first for Adam and Eve, and eventually for His chosen nation Israel, many problems are avoided. Dr. Sailhammer takes the days to be

normal 24-hour days, but sees the creation of the whole universe as having taken place in the first verse, over some unstated period of time in the past. Then God focuses in on His preparation of a place for His last creation to live.

Now, on day four, God gives a new purpose to the sun, moon, and stars that have been shining since He created them “in the beginning.” On day four, God declares they are to guide the people He is about to make. They will act as measures of time; they will serve humanity. There have been no people placed on earth yet, so the sun has merely been a star in the sky. Now God speaks, and the host of heaven takes on a new function as celestial markers. On the first three days, God created the land and places for things. Now He is declaring what is to fill each part of the stage, and what their functions will be.

On day five the same word for “create” that was used in verse one occurs again: bara. Why does God use this word again? Dr. Sailhammer suggests that Moses is drawing our attention back to 1:1 to remind us that only God can create things out of nothing. But on day five, when God populates this new land He has made, it is with animals and birds that are descendants of those He made on day one. God speaks, His creation responds, He sees it is good and blesses His creation.

Day six is the climax of the account, and the center of God’s activity. From nothing God has created the universe in Genesis 1:1. He has prepared a special land and populated it with His creations. And then we come to man.

Here God changes His whole approach. He now announces, “Let us make man in Our image.” And in order for the creation to fully bear His image, He makes them male and female. Sailhammer makes an interesting point here as he discusses why the text suddenly says “Let us.” He sees a reflection of God’s character in the fact that it takes both a male and female before God’s image can be born by humans. Just as men and women complement one another, so too the “us” points to the

relationships that exist within the Godhead. So, in Dr. Sailhammer's fascinating argument in *Genesis Unbound*, when God sets out to create "in His image" for the first time, He first creates a special land for them, then appoints the sun, moon, and stars to a new purpose, fills the land, sky, and waters with creatures, and creates a garden for Adam and Eve to live in.

Some might object that God doesn't seem to do very much. But, Sailhammer argues that God had already created everything out of nothing in Genesis 1:1. Now, God speaks ten times (just as He spoke the Ten Commandments) and makes a land perfect for humans to live in. He creates for Adam and Eve a garden. And that garden will someday be the very land that God promises to Abraham, and eventually brings the nation of Israel to, for as we will see next, Eden is the land of Israel.

Does Genesis 2 Contradict Genesis 1?

At last we come to day seven. God has created a place for each of His creations, and just as He instructs His creation to do in the Ten Commandments, God Himself is said to "rest."

He has taken a wild land, unfit for people, and made it into a literal garden spot. Now, in a pattern that He sets for His creation to follow, He takes a day of rest. This becomes deeply significant later on when Moses receives the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20:11 God says "For in six days the LORD made the sky, the earth, and the seas and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day." Thus the divine pattern is also to be the human plan. Even now that we are burdened with the effects of the Fall, even in our rebelliousness, God still wants His creation to rest, and take time to bless our Creator.

Then what are we to make of Genesis 2? Many modern scholars have spoken of two creation accounts and seen this as an inconsistency or an error in the Bible. The usual answer has

been that the account in Genesis 2 is a narrowing of focus from chapter 1, looking just at the creation of man and woman in detail. If this is so, Dr. Sailhammer asks, then why not see Genesis 1 as describing the same place as Genesis 2, Eden? Thus he continues his argument into chapter 2.

In Genesis 2:5-6, some have seen a contradiction with the first chapter. How can there be no shrubs or plants or rain? What *Genesis Unbound* sees in these verses is a comparison being set up between before and after the Fall. There are no "shrubs of the field" or "plants of the field" because these would come as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. These are the "thorns and thistles" and "plants of the field" that Adam is told he must work to cultivate in Genesis 3:18-19.

When the text says "it had not rained on the earth," it is a contrast to when God will "send rain on the earth" during the Flood. And there was "no man to cultivate the ground" because this too would come as a result of the Fall in Genesis 3:23. So the text is already preparing us for what the results of man's disobedience will be, even as the Garden is being made.

Dr. Sailhammer also finds the large amount of space devoted to locating Eden of considerable significance. While modern commentators have despaired of ever locating the exact place, he sees the length of the description as indicative that at least Moses expected people to recognize where Eden was located.

The primary way that Eden is located is by the rivers that flow from it. And what are those rivers? One of them is the Pishon, a river now unknown. But the second is the Gihon, which flows around the land of Cush. Since Cush is roughly the same as Egypt, might not the river Gihon be the Nile River of Egypt? And the other two rivers are the Tigris and the Euphrates. Sailhammer thinks it is not coincidence that two of these rivers are exactly the ones that God uses to explain to Abraham where the promised land will be (Gen. 15:18).

Next we will consider why Eden and Israel are so closely connected, and whether Genesis should be read as poetry or not.

Genesis Unbound and the Rest of Scripture

Dr. John Sailhammer's new book *Genesis Unbound* has many novel explanations of Genesis 1 and 2. But at the same time, it both helps us see how a Hebrew reader might have understood what Moses wrote and answers a number of puzzling questions that most of us have had about the text. One of these questions is, "What became of Eden after God devoted so much care to making it?"

Earlier we looked at how the rivers God uses to describe where Eden was, are much the same as the ones He uses to tell Abraham where the promised land was to be. Think of the parallels. In the same way that God prepares a special place for Adam and Eve, a place they will be driven out of if they are disobedient, so too, He promises first Abraham, and then the whole nation of Israel a special place, that they will be driven out of if they are disobedient. In fact, both are sent the same direction, to the east, when they do disobey. And then, where will the Messiah come to? Exactly the same area as the first Adam lived! And where is the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 located? Just where God placed the first Jerusalem, which was in the same place that He created for Adam and Eve: Eden!

In this view, the whole Bible ties together in a way that makes complete sense and has God wasting nothing as He prepares a land for His people. The blessings and curses that form so much a part of the later books of the Pentateuch, can now be seen as being foreshadowed in God's initial command to Adam and Eve.

But should we even be reading Genesis so literally? After all, isn't Genesis really poetry? As an Old Testament scholar,

Sailhammer makes short work of the argument. What is it that characterizes all Hebrew poetry? Parallelism and meter. Parallelism is the use of two lines to express the same idea in two ways. For example:

The Lord is a great God
And a great king above all gods.

These express the same thought in two related ways. Hebrew poetry also has a certain meter, where either the number of words or symbols will be approximately the same between two lines. Does Genesis 1 or 2 fit that pattern? Absolutely not. And in fact, Sailhammer chides Evangelicals, who, to try to take these chapters less literally, speak of “poetry-like” language. As he says, this seems like “little more than an attempt to dismiss the obvious intent of these narratives to tell us, in literal terms, what actually happened at creation.”

In conclusion, he considers the question, “Is the Big Bang being described in Genesis 1:1?” Interestingly enough, his answer is a fairly firm, “No.” As he pointedly comments, “When understood as the Big Bang, creation becomes just another example of the forces of the physical world we see around us today. . . . Our world, however, cannot be traced back to the divine act of creation. Science and history will always be separated from the divine acts of creation.”

You will have to read all of Dr. Sailhammer’s provocative book to make up your own mind. But at least give him the chance to make his case directly from the text. *Genesis Unbound* is a book to stir your thinking, and should be read slowly. But go back and read Genesis to be reminded of God’s greatness in His creation.

Israel's History Written in Advance

According to an old story, the powerful Prussian King Frederick the Great had a chaplain who was a Bible-believer, though Frederick himself was a rationalist. One day, Frederick challenged his chaplain, "In a word, give me a good argument for the God of the Bible." His chaplain, a knowledgeable man, responded, "The Jew, your majesty!" To unpack the chaplain's concise remark is the purpose of this essay.

Neglected Evidence for the God of the Bible

The history of the Jews is a demonstration of God at work, sometimes miraculously, sometimes providentially, in the affairs of men and nations. The particular significance of the Jews—in contrast to other nations—is that God called Israel His special people and made covenants with them through Abraham, Moses, and David. In addition, the Old Testament predicts what God planned to do with His people. We'll look at three rather wide-ranging prophecies about the nation Israel and see how they have come to pass. These involve first, the covenant curses; second, an acted parable of the marital relations between God and Israel; and finally, a prediction of Israel's return to her own land.

The first area of prophecy involves what God promised to do to the nation of Israel if they did not keep the laws Moses had given them from Mt. Sinai.

When the Israelites were rescued from slavery in Egypt about 1,400 B.C., God made a contract or covenant with Moses to

define Israel's relationship to Him as His own special people. This covenant reminded them of what God had already done for them and what He promised to do in the future. God had saved them from slavery, brought them safely through the desert, was about to bring them into possession of the land of Canaan, and would protect them from all disasters if they would be faithful to Him. To test their faithfulness, God gave them an elaborate set of laws—some moral, some civil, some ceremonial—which also set them apart from the nations around them. God showed His reality through the lifestyle that He had designed for Israel. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8 Moses explained it:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'

Moses goes on to say only Israel has a God who is near when they pray, and only His people have such righteous laws to guide them.

In the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy and the 26th chapter of Leviticus, the provisions of the covenant are set out in the form of blessings and curses—blessings if Israel would obey God's commands and curses if they disobeyed. Through these sanctions, Israel would be reminded of how they were doing in obeying God, and their neighbors would see an objective demonstration of God's judgment in history.

Israel as a History Lesson

Israel's history demonstrates that when they broke the laws God gave them, they experienced exactly the results God predicted would happen if they were unfaithful. No other nation has prophesied its own downfall with such accuracy.

Thus history demonstrates how accurately God predicted what would happen to Israel if they disobeyed His laws. And what did God predict? To summarize nearly a hundred verses, Israel's disobedience brought wasted effort in labors; natural disasters such as drought, blight, and locusts to their crops; and disease and death to their animals and themselves.

Their enemies would defeat them in battle and besiege their cities, resulting in plague, famine, cannibalism, and starvation. They would be scattered to foreign countries. There some would die; others would live in constant fear of both real and imagined disasters, or turn to other gods. They would be sold as slaves. Their numbers would decline greatly, as they suffered from fearful plagues, prolonged disasters, and lingering illnesses. What an amazing list of disasters!

Not only are these curses severe, but the Bible predicts them in some detail. In Deuteronomy, fourteen verses describe the blessings and fifty-four the curses. In Leviticus, eleven verses are blessings and thirty-two are curses. Altogether, over 75 percent of the verses concern curses for disobedience. God-predicted disasters will be a major part of Israel's future.

This proportion is very unusual. Other religious people might concede that their own history had been three-fourths disaster, but who would admit it had been three-fourths disobedient? And this proportion is borne out not only by the history of Israel recorded in the Bible, where one might claim the biblical history writers either molded the narrative to match the prophecy or adjusted the prophecy to match the history. It is also demonstrated in the long history of disaster experienced by the Jews after the Bible was written.

No other national group has experienced such disaster as the Jews. Most nations have not survived long enough to experience so much disaster! Yet Israel has experienced disaster at every point sketched in the long lists of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

They have, unfortunately, been persecuted again and again for over two thousand years. For most of that time they were without a national homeland, having been driven out of Palestine. They have faced decimation and sometimes genocide from nearly every group they have lived among: Greeks, Romans, Christians, Muslims, Nazis, and Communists. Even now the recently re-established nation of Israel faces continual harassment and threats of annihilation from hostile forces all around her.

In the midst of these curses, however, comes a promise that Israel will not be totally destroyed.

Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God (Lev. 26:44).

But as predicted, the Jews still exist as a people today. “Of course!” you say. “If Israel had been destroyed, we would never have heard of them.” Not true – unless they had been destroyed before the coming of Jesus. With the rise of Christianity, the Old Testament was preserved by non-Jews and would have survived whether the Jews survived or not. In fact, many of the threats the Jews have faced came in the past two thousand years. Yet Israel, unlike most oppressed nations of antiquity, has survived as a distinct people.

Thus the evidence from Israel’s predicted covenant curses points to God’s activity in history, keeping His words of both judgment and promise.

Israel’s Harlotry

It’s easy to miss the book of Hosea in the Old Testament. But it describes an amazing parable that would picture Israel’s situation for some two thousand years. The prophet Hosea was divinely directed to live out a powerful parable depicting

God's relationship with Israel.

In chapter 1, Hosea is instructed to marry a harlot, Gomer, and have children. He obeys, thereby picturing God's choice of the nation Israel for a personal relationship with Him, even though Abraham was an idolater when God called him and the Israelites were idolaters when they were called out of slavery in Egypt.

In chapter 2, Gomer runs off with her lovers. In the same way, Israel abandoned God for the more sexually exciting worship of the Canaanites, even though God had brought the people safely into the promised land. Finally Gomer winds up in slavery, as Israel would later be taken captive to Assyria and Babylon.

In chapter 3, Hosea is directed to go and buy her back. But she is to have no relations with Hosea or with her lovers. This last event in Hosea's living parable is a prediction of the status of Israel for a long time to come:

For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king . . . in the last days (Hos. 3:4-5).

Hosea predicted that Israel for "many days" will lack a king, even though God had promised that Israel would never lack a descendant to sit on the throne if the nation was obedient to God.

In fact, the prediction states that Israel will lack even a prince. Since in Hebrew, "prince" means a government official, not the son of the king, Israel would lack both government and king.

Hosea also predicts that sacrifice, pillar, ephod, household idols will be lacking. Two are associated with the sacrificial

system and two with idolatry. Sacrifice was an integral part of Israel's covenant and worship. The ephod, a sort of vest, was one of the most important of the ceremonial garments worn by Israel's high priest. Although some pillars had orthodox uses, the most common reference is to those used in Canaanite worship. Israel was to lose both true worship and the false religion which had been such a problem since it entered Canaan.

This has happened exactly! Since A.D. 44 (the death of Herod Agrippa I), Israel has had no native king to this day. For 1,878 years, from the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to the formation of the modern nation in 1948, Israel had no government of its own either. Thus the predictions regarding Israel's governmental status were fulfilled in detail.

With the loss of the Temple and the priestly garments came the end of the sacrificial system. Israel has not had a high priest to this day. So Hosea's prophecy about the loss of sacrificial worship has also proved true.

From A.D. 70 to 1948, the "sons of Israel" lacked all six items predicted in Hosea 3:4. Now they have a government, but five are still lacking. Hosea 3:4 has been literally fulfilled.

A Regathering of Israel?

In our own generation we may also be seeing the fulfillment of Hosea 3:5. Many Jews have physically returned to Palestine in this century. If their seeking of "God and David their king" is understood as a turning to Jesus as the true Messiah, we can point to the growing Messianic Jewish movement which has flourished in the past two decades. But we are still too close to these events to be sure.

Whether or not Hosea 3:5 refers to Israel's return to the promised land, a number of other Old Testament passages do.

Let's look at one such passage, Isaiah 11:11-16. Verse 11 reads:

Then it will happen on that day that the LORD will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.

Sometime after Isaiah wrote these words, Israel was to be regathered to its homeland. The reference to a "second time" as well as the places from which they would return suggests that this is not the return from the Babylonian exile.

According to the whole passage, several significant features will characterize this return. First, verse 13 suggests that Israel will no longer be two nations as it was after Solomon's time, but a single unified country. Second, Israel will fight the surrounding nations (the Philistines, the Edomites, The Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Egyptians) as a part of this return (vv. 14-15). Third, something spectacular will happen to dry up the "tongue of the sea of Egypt" and the "River," presumably the Euphrates (v.15). Fourth, the places from which the return will take place are explicitly named, except for the general phrase "islands [or 'coastlands'] of the sea" (v.11).

Of these four items, three have already occurred in the return of Jews to Israel in our own generation; only the third has not yet taken place.

The return of Jews to Palestine and the formation of a state of their own is amazing in itself, given that just a century ago the territory was controlled by the Muslim Turks who hated the Jews. Yet a world Zionist movement was formed; the land came under the control of Britain at the end of World War I; Britain allowed the Jews to have a homeland; the Nazi holocaust drove Jews to Palestine who otherwise would have stayed in Europe; the United Nations agreed to partition

Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state; and the Jews were able to defeat a coalition of Arab states bent on their destruction.

The Jewish state formed in 1948 in Palestine included persons descended from both the northern and southern tribes. The enmity of the divided kingdoms that existed at Isaiah's time has, in fact, been healed.

Israel has already fought with all the surrounding nations, in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Though the Philistines, Edomites, and such are no longer identifiable as separate peoples, the Arab nations occupying their lands (and most likely including some of their descendants) are Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. These were the nations Israel fought and dispossessed to regain its territory.

Once again, the prophecies of the Bible about the Jews show the God of the Bible to be true.

In this essay we have examined three significant passages in the Bible that predict the history of Israel. We have shown that numerous prophecies from the Old Testament regarding Israel have been fulfilled. We have made the following observations:

1. The Jews would have fierce and repeated persecution and disaster. This has been characteristic of the nation for two thousand years.
2. In spite of such disasters, the Jews would continue to exist as a recognizable people group, in spite of treatment which has destroyed other such people groups.
3. Israel would be without a king for a long period of time. Israel has been without a king for nearly two thousand years, though a Davidic royal dynasty was an important part of the Old Testament revelation.

4. Israel would lack government officials for a long time. Now, after almost 1,850 years, the Jews have them again.

5. Israel would lack sacrifice and ephod, both associated with God's commands at Mt. Sinai. This has been true for nearly two thousand years and is quite surprising in view of how important sacrifice and the priesthood were in the Old Testament.

6. Israel would lack pillar and idols. This seems obvious today, because the Jews so adamantly worship one God, but the situation was rather different when Hosea made the prediction about 800 B.C.

7. Israel would return to its land as a single united nation. A century ago, such an event would have seemed almost impossible. Palestine was controlled by a Muslim government which had no interest in providing a homeland, much less an independent state, for the Jews. Yet it has come to pass!

8. The countries explicitly named in Isaiah 11 have been nearly emptied of Jews in this return to Palestine.

9. The Jews have fought successfully with the surrounding nations in establishing and maintaining the new state of Israel.

Sadly, some elements of the Christian church have ignored or participated in the persecution of God's special covenantal people, the Jews. Yet Romans 9-11 exhorts Christians never to rejoice in the misfortunes of the Jews. To do so brings shame to the church and to our Lord.

As we look at God's hand in the history of Israel it may seem fierce to us, for at least two reasons: first, we regularly ignore the biblical teaching that there is a life beyond this one, and that in the last judgment with its rewards and punishments everything will be made right, and no one will get less than he or she deserves; and second we regularly minimize

our own sin, blaming our actions on circumstances and environment. Whatever may be the faults of our parents, teachers, or society, God will apportion to them (and us!) exactly what we deserve—unless we accept the offer of God's forgiveness through believing on Christ as our personal Savior.

Are all the predictions we have listed trivial? Did they just happen by chance? Or is the God of the Bible indeed the One who controls history and who announces the end from the beginning? The decision is yours.

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