

## The Seed of Woman

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The Lord God said to the serpent,  
"Because you have done this,  
Cursed are you more than all cattle,  
And more than every beast of the field.  
On your belly you will go,  
And dust you will eat all the days of your life;  
And I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her seed;  
He shall bruise you on the head,  
And you shall bruise him on the heel."

-Genesis 3:14-15

The above prophecy has been called the *protoevangelium* of the Bible — the first place in Scripture where the gospel of Jesus Christ is foretold. It is an apt designation. According to clear New Testament statements, the curse upon the serpent in Genesis 3:14-15 was a curse upon Satan and a prediction of his eventual defeat and the defeat of all who follow his path of rebellion against God (Rev. 12:9; 20:2). What we have here is the very first prophecy of the Bible, one that sets up all that Scripture will subsequently say about sin, salvation, and God's victory over the devil. In this paper I want to analyze this Old Testament text and the way in which the ancient Jews and the New Testament writers interpreted it.<sup>1</sup> What we will discover is how foundational this passage is to the teaching of the entire Bible.

### The Beginning of Sin Upon the Earth

The Book of Genesis forms an introduction to the rest of the Pentateuch. Genesis has two major sections: a *primeval history* of the

human race (chs. 1-11), and *patriarchal narratives* (chs. 12-50). The primeval history explains how sin corrupted God's perfect world, compelling Him to come in judgment with a flood. Afterwards, the human race sinned again and God divided humanity into various nations. By the time Genesis is written, all of these nations had become ignorant of the true God. The patriarchal narratives recount God's attempt to remedy this situation by fashioning a godly nation from the seed of Abraham as the object and means of divine blessing.

Genesis 3 is part of an initial unit of material (2:4-4:26) that introduces the primeval history.<sup>2</sup> This material explains how the corruption of humanity began with the sin of the first human couple and spread to their offspring. Because people did not trust what God told them, transgression, selfishness, vengeance and murder tainted God's world (2:17; 4:6-7). Genesis says that it was the serpent who initially planted doubt about God's veracity.<sup>3</sup> The serpent approached Eve in the garden and asked, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" This overstated Yahweh's prohibition and made Him appear unreasonable for restricting any of the trees of Eden. When the woman explains that God only disallowed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that it was for their own good — "lest you die" — the serpent flatly denies what God said and suggests that God's motive is to keep the man and woman from attaining His level of divine knowledge (3:3-5).

There was some truth in what the serpent said. The forbidden fruit was not poisonous, and Adam and Eve did not literally die on the day they ate of it. They now knew about good and evil and, in a sense, were like God (cf. 3:22). But theirs was an experiential knowledge, one that was born of sin. The serpent had made God seem mendacious and self-serving, but it soon became clear that God's warning about the negative outcome of eating the fruit was indeed true — true on a higher level than Eve had previously considered "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (3:7). Their recognition of nakedness indicated the reality of their guilt. Adam and Eve had lost the moral innocence that little children possess, that which allows little children an absence of shame when unclothed. This first human couple now felt the guilt of sin, so nakedness before God had become a shameful thing.

### **The Curse Upon the Serpent**

The latter half of Genesis 3 records a trilogy of curses upon the three beings involved in humanity's downfall: the serpent, the woman, and the man. The curses pertain to their respective roles and relationships (Hamilton, *Genesis* 196). The woman would suffer pain in her role as child-bearer and be subservient to her husband. The man, though created from the ground, would now struggle to get the ground to produce edible vegetation. God's maledictions upon the woman and the man, though severe, were still indirect, mediated curses, and thus they reflected a degree of divine mercy which the serpent does not receive (Kidner 71). A cursed ground made it difficult for the man to bring forth the fruit of the ground, a cursed womb made it difficult for the woman to bring forth the fruit of her womb, but the serpent is cursed directly. "Cursed are you," God says to the creature — a personal execration and the harshest punishment of all.

It is possible to understand the words "cursed are you above (*mm*) all cattle. . . ." to mean that all animals were cursed by God, the serpent only more so (Willis 128). Some Rabbinic interpreters understood the Hebrew in this way, apparently seeing the serpent as representative of all animal life to some degree (*Genesis Rabbah* 20.4). Many of the ancients believed that all creatures originally had the gift of human speech, but the curse brought an end to this degree of familiarity between humans and the animal world (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1:41; *Apocalypse of Moses* 11:2; *Jubilees* 3:28; 12:26). But it is also possible to understand the Hebrew to mean that the curse is upon the serpent alone — that he would be cursed "away from" (i.e., banished from) all other creatures of the garden (cf. 4 11, Hamilton, *Genesis* 194, Westermann 258-259).

God's statement that the serpent will crawl on his belly is often regarded as an explanation for why snakes have no legs (Willis 121, Westerman 259). Some Rabbinic interpreters claimed that, prior to this curse, snakes walked on four legs as do other garden animals (*Genesis Kabbah* 19 1) But this etiological interpretation seems doubtful. One would not take literally the next expression, "and dust you will eat," so we are probably dealing here with a poetic way of predicting the humiliation and degradation of the serpent by using language that reflected a snake's means of locomotion.

(Hamilton, *Genesis* 196; Kidner 70). Since snakes crawl in the dust, this prompted the use of that image to indicate the serpent's subjugation (Leupold 162).

*The Serpent and The Seed of Woman.* Verse 15 records the climax of the serpent's curse.

*And I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
And between your seed and her seed;  
He shall bruise you on the head,  
And you shall bruise him on the heel."*

This prophecy promises a future hostility between the serpent and the woman, an hostility extending to their respective seeds. Yet the progression of the verse is interesting. In line 1 the serpent is said to be in opposition to the woman, and in line 2 the serpent's seed opposes her seed. But in lines 3 and 4 the woman's seed is not opposing the serpent's seed, but the serpent itself. While the fate of the serpent would no doubt determine the fate of its offspring, the focal point of the prophecy is the conflict between the serpent and the seed of the woman (LaSor 83).

The Hebrew word for "seed," *zera*, is generally used in Scripture as a collective singular noun; i.e., it refers to a group of offspring, viewed corporately (Kaiser, *Zara* 253). The word can refer to the totality of a person's descendants or it can be limited to a particular line of descendants, but the collective nature of the singular noun is evident in either case. (On a few occasions *zera* refers to an individual descendant of a man rather than to a group, but in these cases the individual is an immediate descendant and is viewed as the progenitor of a lineage yet to be born; e.g., Gen. 4: 25; 21:13). Therefore Genesis 3:15 seems to be referring to descendants of the woman and descendants of the serpent.

The verse indicates their mutual conflict by twice using the Hebrew word *shuph*, a verb of uncertain meaning that might be translated "bruise," "crush," or "strike at" (Hamilton, *Wordbook* 912).<sup>4</sup> Whatever translation is adopted, the verse certainly indicates some kind of attack upon the head of the serpent and upon the heel of the woman's seed.<sup>5</sup> The intended imagery appears to be that of a man seeking to kill a snake by stamping its head with his

foot, and the snake responding by trying to bite the man's heel.<sup>6</sup> An attack upon the heel may also suggest the serpent's attempt to take over the position of man, in accordance with a Hebrew idiom where grabbing another's heel signified supplanting (cf. Gen. 25: 26). Likewise, treading upon the head of an enemy was a common figure in the ancient world to denote the subjugation of one's foes (cf. 2 Sam. 22:39; Ps. 8:6; 41:9; 110:1). Both of these ideas may be suggested by the imagery of Genesis 3:15.

Modern interpreters commonly assert that this passage says nothing about the defeat of the serpent (Willis 129-130). Since the bite of a venomous snake could be as deadly to a man as a crushed head would be to a snake, the verse could imply that the serpent's attack on the woman's seed will be just as deadly as her seed's attack on the serpent. All the passage says, we are told, is that there will be mutual hostility between human beings and snakes, with each group attacking the other, and nothing is implied about either group being victorious (e.g., Von Rad 93; Westermann 259-260). But it must be remembered that the serpent is being cursed in this passage! That fact strongly indicates that this verse is intended as a prediction of the serpent's defeat by the seed of the woman. It is the culmination of the degradation indicated in verse 14. This is how ancient Jewish interpreters understood it (e.g., *Targum Neofiti*), and it is also how the apostle Paul interprets the prophecy in Romans 16: 20 (a passage I will discuss subsequently).

There is another significant feature of this prophecy that must not be overlooked: the seed who will bring about the defeat of the serpent is called the *woman's* seed, not the man's seed. Obviously, the descendants of Eve are the descendants of Adam also. But it is the female role that receives the emphasis here. God is saying to the serpent that the woman whom it beguiled into bringing about the fall of man will, ironically, become the instrument of the serpent's own demise. Woman's unique capacity as a child-bearer will enable the birth of seed who will gain victory over the serpent and its offspring.

*Genesis 3 and the Rest of the Pentateuch.* Some readers of Genesis fail to appreciate how the events of chapter 3 and its trilogy of curses provide a background for the remainder of Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch. Looking at the primeval history of Genesis, for example, the name that Adam gives to the

woman, *Eve* (meaning "life"), and the names that she gives to the children she bears, hark back to the promise of Genesis 3 (Garrett 189; Kidner 72, 74, 78). Also, God's words to the murderer Cam, "Cursed are you," are an exact repetition of the direct curse God had pronounced upon the serpent. The implication is that Cain's lot has been cast with the serpent. The curse upon Cam is actually an intensification of the initial curse of the ground that God had directed toward the man: Cam is cursed from the ground, meaning that it "will no longer yield its strength to you, you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth" (4:12). He is therefore consigned to a nomadic existence — a lifestyle as far removed from the paradisiacal garden as it could be.

The mortality of the lineage of Adam and Eve, the result of humanity's banishment from the garden's tree of life, is stressed in the genealogy of chapter 5 by means of the recurring refrain "... and he died.. .." When Noah is born his father heralds the event with a pronouncement that is reminiscent of Genesis 3: Lamech names the child Noah, saying "This one will give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed" (5:29). The salvation of the human race indeed comes about through Noah, whom God rescues along with his family at the time of the great flood. Because of Noah's righteousness humanity receives another chance and the promise of Genesis 3:15 remains alive.<sup>7</sup>

The chief theological issue that pervades the Book of Genesis is the issue raised in the mind of Eve by the serpent, viz., whether God's words are trustworthy. The patriarchal narratives of Genesis constantly emphasize the integrity of God Yahweh calls upon Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his 12 sons to have faith in His promised blessings, and the events of their lives show that God is true to His word even when human beings are dishonest (cf. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:6-11; 27:1-41; 29:21-30, 31:1-9; 34:13-31; 37:18-35; 39:13-21)

The promise to Abraham is predicated upon his seed's receiving a land where they can live a sedentary lifestyle reminiscent of Eden, rather than having to wander nomadically like Cam. The rest of the Pentateuch continues this theme, for the Law of Moses is designed to establish a sedentary, agrarian society in Canaan. Such a lifestyle is viewed as the ideal — as a close approximation of

the original state of unfallen man in the garden of Eden. The entire Pentateuch is predicated upon the idea that a nomadic lifestyle is a cursed lifestyle, but the quiescent lifestyle of the Mosaic system is a superior existence where one can dwell peacefully in the presence of God.

The above examples show the importance of Genesis 3 in setting up the story that Genesis and the Pentateuch are telling. The curse upon the serpent in 3:15 is particularly crucial in this regard.<sup>8</sup> As T. Desmond Alexander has observed, "Most commentators miss the obvious connection which exists between this reference to 'seed' and the fact that Genesis highlights a particular line of 'seed'. . . . The implication is surely that the divine pronouncement against the serpent will be fulfilled through the divinely chosen family lineage" (35).<sup>9</sup> Genesis is teaching that the seed is a particular line of humanity, a line that is traced through Shem, through Noah, and then through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The postdiluvian world continued to sin against God, and the nations that emerged failed to retain a knowledge of Him. But the message of Genesis is that God's promise will be fulfilled through one segment of humanity, a seed of woman whom God would raise up through the lineage of Abraham.

Genesis 3:15 also provides the background for the many occasions in Genesis where key women have difficulty conceiving children. The fecundity of these women is crucial, for if the matriarchs of God's promised lineage cannot conceive offspring, then the victory over the serpent cannot be realized and the Abrahamic covenant collapses. Yet we read of Sarah's apparent inability to become pregnant, the same with Rebekah, the same with Rachel (11:30; 25:21; 29:31). But God intervenes in each case and these women do bear offspring. The lesson to be learned is that Yahweh's word can be trusted despite any contrary circumstances, His promises will not fail.

### **Identifying the Serpent**

*Satan.* The identification of the serpent of Genesis 3 is a controversial issue in modern times. The text of Genesis gives no identification other than what we read in verse 1. "Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God

had made." On the surface it would seem impossible for the New Testament to be correct when it identifies the serpent as Satan, the angelic accuser of God's people who is rarely mentioned in the Old Testament (see Job 1-2; Zech. 3; 1 Chron. 21:1) and never in the Pentateuch (unless this passage is the exception). Liberal commentators discount the New Testament's interpretation and treat the talking serpent of Genesis 3 as a fairy-tale figure of Jewish folklore, a symbol of human temptation or of the power of evil (e.g., Westermann 237; Von Rad 87).

Yet the New Testament writers treat the events of Genesis 3 as historical fact, and they clearly connect the serpent with Satan. The Book of Revelation could not be more explicit.

And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. (12:7-9)

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer. (20:1-3)

Other passages, Romans 16:20 and 2 Corinthians 11:3-15, indicate that Paul also understood the serpent who tempted Eve to be Satan.<sup>10</sup> This seems to be the reason why he is called "the tempter" in Matthew 4:3 and 1 Thessalonians 3:5. In John 8:44 Jesus alludes to the events of Genesis 3 when he says that the devil was a liar and a murderer from the beginning.<sup>11</sup> Since the New Testament writers clearly connected the serpent with Satan, they presumably understood the seed of the serpent to be the wicked angels whom Satan rules (Matt. 9:34; 25:41). Yet it would seem that human beings can also be reckoned as part of the serpent's offspring since Jesus tells a recalcitrant group of His countrymen, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father" (John 8: 44; cf. 1 John 3:8-10).

Liberal scholars may object to the New Testament's identification of the serpent and Satan, but Christianity was not unique in its reading of Genesis 3. Ancient Jews commonly associated the serpent with Satan. For example, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, a late first-century work, said that the devil possessed a serpent in order to tempt Eve: "The devil said to [the serpent], 'Do not fear; only become my vessel, and I will speak a word through your mouth by which you will be able to deceive'" (16:1-5).<sup>12</sup> In *1 Enoch* 69:6 (first-century B.C.), the angel Michael speaks of the serpent as the wicked angel who rebelled against God: "This is the one who showed all the deadly blows to the sons of men, and he led Eve astray, and he showed the weapons of death to the children of men." In *4 Maccabees* 18:7-8 (first-century A.D.), a woman avers her virginity by saying, "No deceiver in the field corrupted me, nor did the seducing and beguiling serpent defile my maidenly purity." The allusion to Genesis 3 is obvious and, in the context, its language is used to speak of demonic spirits (Anderson 563). Other ancient texts also associated the serpent with Satan, including *The Wisdom of Solomon* 2:23-24 (late first-century B.C.) and *2 Enoch* 29:4-5 (first-century A.D.).

Though Satan is not mentioned by name in the Pentateuch, ancient Jewish interpreters read Genesis with the understanding that he and his demonic entourage were present during those events, if only just behind the scene. New Testament authors had the same conception. The Book of Jude, for example, accepts as accurate the oral tradition of the dispute between Satan and the archangel Michael over the body of Moses. This was a well-known extra-canonical expansion of Deuteronomy 34:6, "And God buried him in the valley in the land of Moab."<sup>13</sup>

The fact of the matter is that the New Testament writers and the ancient Jews shared the same dualistic view of the spiritual world; i.e., they believed that unseen spiritual beings or angels were a part of God's creation, some of them obedient to God and some of them disobedient. Indeed, most of the things that the New Testament says about the spiritual realm — viz., the concepts of Satan, demons, principalities and powers, heaven and hell — are presented not as novel teachings, but as part of an undisputed cosmology that the original audience was assumed to understand (Fuller 342; Bruce, *Matters* 104-107). To be sure, there are differences between Jewish literature and the New Testament

when it comes to cosmology, but these differences must not be exaggerated.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that the New Testament writers accept as essentially correct the Jewish conception of the spiritual realm as well as the common way of understanding the primeval history of Genesis.<sup>15</sup> This includes the understanding of who the serpent of the garden really was.

*The Basis of this Interpretation.* If the New Testament's identification of the serpent with Satan reflects a standard Jewish reading of Genesis, on what basis was such an interpretation derived? We never read in Genesis of a being called Satan, the devil, Beelzebul, etc., nor do we encounter any angelic being corresponding to him. The serpent of chapter 3 is not even described as a spirit but as a "beast of the field." So how can the Jewish-Christian reading of Genesis 3 be legitimate?

While it is true that Genesis describes the serpent as a garden animal, it is also true that this serpent is no ordinary snake. It speaks, it reasons, it beguiles, it opposes God.<sup>16</sup> It has all the characteristics of personhood, and it is condemned by God as if it is a free-will agent. Nor does the serpent's curse take these characteristics away (Boyd 157). If this creature is nothing more than a snake, and if the story is intended merely as an etiology to explain the fear that people feel for snakes, why emphasize people's fear of this animal above that of other dangerous creatures? (Kugel 73). Since the serpent of Genesis 3 is so unique, is it any wonder that Jewish readers of Scripture would seek an explanation of him in later passages that speak of a spiritual foe of God who accuses God's people? The fact that Genesis called this creature a serpent and a beast of the field would not have prevented its being an evil spirit. Jewish thinking frequently viewed evil spirits as taking the form of earthly beasts; e.g., the goat of Leviticus 17:7 and the night hag of Isaiah 34:14 were interpreted this way (Aune 919).<sup>17</sup> In the ancient Near Eastern world demons and spiritual beings were often pictured in the form of serpents (Boyd 156).

Modern liberal scholars tend to regard the figure of Satan as a much later invention of Jewish theology, perhaps prompted by the cosmic dualism of the Persians whom Israel served in captivity. While I would not rule out a measure of Persian influence in Scripture's terminology and manner of depicting the spiritual

realm (after all, God has always been willing to accommodate His explanation of the supernatural to the perspective of man), nevertheless, the basic idea of God and His righteous angels being opposed by spirits who rebelled against their Creator's authority is a cosmology that was supported in the early writings of the Old Testament (Fuller 341; Twelftree 164).<sup>18</sup>

The Pentateuch itself manifests this concept. Deuteronomy 32: 8 says, "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God."<sup>19</sup> Interpreters generally recognize that the phrase *sons of God* refers to angels, a reading corroborated by the Septuagint's "angels of God" (Block 13-22; cf. Job 1:6; 2:1). In verse 43 these angels are called "gods" and they are told to bow before Yahweh who will come in judgment.<sup>20</sup> These statements in Deuteronomy correspond to other Old Testament texts that speak of wicked angels who lead the nations (e.g., Daniel 10:13-21 and Psalm 82).<sup>21</sup> The cosmology is not taught so much as it is alluded to as something already well-known: Yahweh appointed certain angels over the nations of the world but they rebelled against His authority and pridefully accepted the worship that rightly belonged to Yahweh. The pagan world concocted elaborate, false mythologies around these beings. Deuteronomy 32 goes on to speak of Israel rejecting Yahweh's unique and personal relationship with them and adopting instead the paganism of the Gentiles: "They sacrificed to demons who were not God" (vs. 17).

This is the theological milieu of the Pentateuch. In order to interpret Genesis properly, one must remember that the world-view within which it operates is one wherein angelic beings have rebelled against the true God and seek to induce the same rebellion in human beings. It is not difficult to see why Jewish and Christian interpreters would see the serpent of Genesis 3, a creature who opposed God and induced Eve to commit sin, as one of these rebellious angels — indeed, as their leader.<sup>22</sup>

Reinforcing this understanding is the fact that Genesis 6 explicitly discusses rebellious angels who were responsible for the corruption of the human race which led to the great flood. At least this is how ancient Jews and Christians customarily understood the reference in Genesis 6:1-4 to the "sons of God" who took the

"daughters of men" as wives and sired children by them. Jewish intertestamental literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls are replete with this interpretation of the passage, and it also has some attestation in Rabbinic documents. Even modern scholars generally agree that this is the proper understanding of the passage. Some conservative scholars argue that the "sons of God" are not angelic beings, but are the apostate lineage of Seth (Leupold 249-254) or perhaps human kings who resorted to polygamy (Kline 191-204). But neither of these interpretations does justice to the wording of Genesis 6, nor to several New Testament passages that appear to take an angelic interpretation of that text (viz., 1 Pet. 3:18-22; 2 Pet. 2:4-5; Jude 6).<sup>23</sup> Thus, the primeval history of Genesis climaxes in chapter 6 with an account of spiritual beings who rebel against God and encourage humanity to rebel as well, with the result that divine judgment is pronounced upon the human race (Blenkinsopp 57-59). The parallel between this event and the incident of Genesis 3 is quite precise, particularly if one interprets the serpent of Genesis 3 to be a spiritual being as well.<sup>24</sup>

*Further Questions.* If the creature who tempted Eve was really Satan, several questions arise. First of all, why would Satan, a supernatural being, take the form of a serpent of the garden? Scripture does not give an explicit answer, but it may be that taking the form of a garden animal was the devil's way of accommodating to the level of Adam and Eve so as to appear non-threatening. One must not overlook the fact that even God manifests himself to Adam and Eve in the form of a physical being, namely, a human being who "walks in the garden in the cool of the day" (3:8). God and man share a physical resemblance in the garden, for man is made in the image of God. Though the Bible will later indicate that God is Spirit and that man's being made in His image actually pertains to their spiritual, rational, and moral nature, God made himself known in the garden anthropomorphically. Adam and Eve could not relate to Him intimately on earth in any other way. Nor could they relate to Satan as a spiritual being. So in the garden Satan took the form of a serpent, and God the form of man.

But if the serpent is really Satan, why does Genesis identify him only as a serpent and not as a spiritual being? Why do we have to rely upon later revelation to clarify the real nature of the serpent? This

is the chief objection that many people raise to the identification of the serpent with Satan. But again, God himself is not depicted in Genesis 3 as a spiritual being per se. Were it not for later revelation, we would not realize that the anthropomorphic form of God in Genesis 3 is not His true nature but that God is actually Spirit.

It is also worth considering that *the account* of these events may be, to some degree, accommodative and symbolic. Genesis may use the serpent motif because it is borrowing imagery from the mythological culture of that day regarding a cosmological foe of Deity. Old Testament writers commonly take features of well-known pagan myths and rework them in order to present the truth of Israelite monotheism. Psalms 29 and 74, for example, recast poetic images about Baal, the storm god, into depictions of Yahweh as the Lord of nature (Craigie 147-151). Isaiah 27 and Psalm 74 transform stories about Baal's primeval defeat of Leviathan, the god of chaos, into accounts of Yahweh's defeat of this creature when He brought order to creation (Emerton 327-328; Hugenberger 109). Many scholars suggest that this kind of reshaping of pagan themes into a presentation of monotheistic truth is, to some degree, what Genesis is doing in its creation account (Boyd 84-85). It is interesting that in the ancient world Leviathan was imagined as a draconic serpent with seven heads (cf. Isaiah 27:1; Ps. 74:14) and Revelation 12 makes use of this same figure to depict Satan: "And behold, a great red dragon having seven heads.... And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan" (Rev. 12:3, 9).

It is possible, therefore, that Genesis recounted man's primeval fall using the language and symbology that was best suited for its original audience. Since ancient creation myths gave a serpentine form to the being who opposed the order of creation, it was fitting that the tempter in the garden be depicted in this way (Boyd 156). Such a literary device may have been quite obvious to the original audience of Genesis.

It seems likely that later Jews and Christians recognized the various factors discussed above when they identified the serpent of Genesis 3 with Satan. There was no other reasonable conclusion to draw than that which the apostle John expressed: "The serpent of old ... is the devil and Satan" (Rev. 20:2). What we see here is a "translation" of the antique theological images of Genesis

into the cosmic language that had become commonplace by the Greco-Roman period. Yet the essence of what Genesis relates is unaltered.

### Identifying The Seed of Woman

*The Messiah.* If Genesis 3:15 is foretelling the defeat of Satan and his followers, then as Christians we find Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The *Seal of Worthy* applies this prophecy to Jesus, but that is probably due to the obviousness of the fulfillment and the fact that no occasion arose requiring an explicit reference.<sup>25</sup> Several New Testament passages, however, do allude to Genesis 3:15 and treat it messianically. One cannot fail to think of God's curse upon the serpent when reading the following words of the apostle John: "The devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8; see also 1 Tim. 2:15; 2 Cor. 11:3-15; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1: 20-22; Rev. 12). Clearly, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection was the decisive blow upon the head of Satan.

Ancient Jews also read Genesis 3:15 in terms of the Messiah (though they never thought in terms of a crucified Messiah).<sup>26</sup> *Targum Neofiti* (ca. A.D. 100) says that the serpent's oppression of the people of God would come to an end "in the day of the King Messiah." The earliest messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 appears to be found in the Septuagint's translation of the passage (Martin 425-427). The Greek word for "seed," *sperma*, is a neuter noun. Thus, if the woman's seed is taken as a collective singular and refers to the offspring of the woman corporately, then the next line ought to be rendered with the neuter pronoun *auto*, giving the meaning, "it [i.e., the corporate group of the woman's descendants] shall bruise you on the head." But the Septuagint translators chose instead to use the masculine pronoun *autos*, giving the meaning, "he [i.e., a singular individual] shall bruise you on the head."<sup>27</sup> The translators apparently understood the prophecy to refer (at least primarily) to an individual descendant, and the messianic king is the only individual ever known to be attached to this prophecy (Hamilton, *Genesis* 199). It would seem, therefore, that the messianic reading of Genesis 3:15 goes back at

least as early as ca. 250 B.C., the time when the Septuagint translation of the Pentateuch was made.

But why did ancient readers interpret Genesis 3:15 messianically? Because they read Old Testament passages in light of what the entire canon of Scripture unfolded about God's plan. This hermeneutic approach was standard among ancient Jews and Christians and it differed from the strictly grammatical-historical method of modern scholarship. The latter method reads each Old Testament book as an individual and autonomous document since these books were produced by different authors writing at widely divergent times. The result is a piecemeal approach to the study of Scripture. But the approach used by ancient readers was to examine a given passage canonically, that is, in light of what other relevant portions of the canon had to say. They treated the entire corpus of Scripture as one Book, the product of one omniscient Author. Under that method of interpretation, different documents written at different times by different human authors becomes a largely inconsequential consideration.<sup>28</sup>

From such a perspective there was good reason for a messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15. In its immediate context, the statement about the woman's seed naturally suggested a corporate reference to the totality of Eve's descendants, i.e., the entire human race to come. But the rest of Genesis narrows down this corporate reference, for God makes a special covenant with Abraham and his descendants, an act which implies that the prophecy of Genesis 3: 15 will be fulfilled through this portion of humanity (Gen. 12:1-3). Even this group is narrowed down further. Abraham becomes the father of a multitude of nations and therefore has several "seeds." Genesis indicates that the seed of promise will be a particular lineage of Abraham, the seed of Jacob (Gen. 22:18; 28:12-14). Thus, the unfolding story of Genesis nuances one's understanding of who the promised seed of the woman is intended to be (Kaiser, *Uses Of* 154). The Abrahamic promise qualifies the promise of Genesis 3:15.

Then the rest of inspired Scripture qualifies the Abrahamic promise. The prophets declared that the royal seed of David would have dominion in the last days and a messianic king would lead the eschatological seed of Abraham in the defeat of all of God's enemies (Isa. 11:1-16; Amos 9:11-15; Ps. 2, 110). Ancient readers of Scripture could not help but view Genesis 3:15 in light of later

prophecies about the royal seed of David, prophecies that Jews ultimately interpreted in a messianic sense. The Messiah would "crush" his enemies (Ps. 89:24) and make them "lick the dust" (Ps. 72:9); they would fall "under [his] feet" when he "crushed them and stamped them" (2 Sam. 22:39, 43; Ps. 110:1).

This intertextual reading of various passages so as to connect them with Genesis 3:15 becomes even more attractive when one realizes that the enemies whom the Messiah will defeat are the pagan nations who are ruled by the rebellious angels of Satan. Micah 7:17 says that the defeated nations will "lick the dust like a serpent," a statement that would likely have been read in connection with the curse of the serpent in Genesis (Day and Jordan 418). The same can be said of the promise of Isaiah 65:25 concerning the fall of the enemies of God: "And dust will be the serpent's food" (Sailhamer 16). Psalm 91, whose words were recited by Jews of the first century when they sought to exorcise demons, may especially have contributed to the messianic understanding of Genesis 3:15.

For He will give orders to His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. In their hands they will lift you up, so that you do not strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the cobra and the viper; you will trample underfoot the strong young lion and the serpent.<sup>29</sup>

The writers of the New Testament recognized that the ultimate goal of Jesus' kingship was the subjugation of all spiritual powers who opposed God. Paul says that Jesus ascended to the heavenly throne and put under His feet "all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:20-22); He "disarmed the rulers and authorities" and "made a public display of them, having triumphed over them" (Col. 2:15). Christ "must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:25). Again and again the New Testament emphasizes Jesus' opposition to, and ultimate defeat of Satan and the angels who oppose God (e.g., Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 3:18-22; Heb 1:4-14; Rev. 12: 1-17; 19:13-15; 20:1-15).

*Born of a Woman.* The ancient world generally regarded a woman as a lowly, subordinate creature (Edwards 1089-1091). The fact that women were not educated like men helped to foster a reputa-

tion of deceivability which Eve's folly in the garden amply illustrated. Her ability to get Adam to commit sin also demonstrated the negative power of women over men. Warnings about feminine weakness are given in the Scriptures (Eccles. 7:26-28; 1 Tim. 2: 14) and Jewish literature often went further, depicting the female sex as mentally and morally tainted (e.g., *Sirach* 25:24; 42:13-14; *Letter of Aristeas* 250; *Testament of Reuben* 5-6; *Mishnah: Sotah* 3.4). Therefore, being born of a woman was not seen as a particularly laudable beginning for a human being. It tended to suggest man's inherent fallibility: "How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?" (Job 25:4).

This attitude toward women is what makes the curse upon the serpent in Genesis 3 so interesting. The enmity predicted is an enmity between the serpent and the woman, and it is her seed who will tread upon the serpent's head, while nothing is said about the seed of man. This emphasis upon the woman, as we noted before, reflects the idea that even though the serpent beguiled a female into causing the downfall of man, the female sex would bear the promised seed and become the means of the serpent's defeat. Later Old Testament prophecies elaborate upon the special role of woman in God's plan. Micah 5 uses the following words to foretell the restoration of the Davidic throne in the person of the messianic king: "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you one will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity. Therefore He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child." Isaiah 7:14, a parallel passage, says, "Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel." This text is treated messianically in the New Testament, and is interpreted as a prediction of the virgin conception of Jesus (Matt. 1:23).

The prophecy of Genesis 3 provides the backdrop for a curious comment that Paul makes in Galatians: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, *born of a woman*, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law" (4:4). Every child is obviously brought into this world by means of a mother, so why would the apostle emphasize this point in regard to Jesus? It may be that Paul is merely using this expression to indicate the humanity of Jesus (cf. Matt. 11:11; Brown 519; Bruce, *Galatians* 195). But it seems to me that the apostle is also alluding

to the prophecy of Genesis 3, even as he often does in other letters (viz., 1 Tim. 2:14; Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 11:3,14; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22). Genesis 3 indicated that the child-bearing capability of the female would be the means of the serpent's defeat, and Paul saw Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of that prophecy (Cole 115).

It may also be that Paul is thinking of the Christian doctrine of the virgin conception of Christ. The phrase "born of a woman" does not require it, but if Paul is alluding to Genesis 3:15 here, it is hard for me not to think that he had this doctrine in mind.<sup>30</sup> The Book of Genesis emphasized the prophecy's focus on the female role of child-bearing by noting that the key matriarchs of the Abrahamic lineage were often barren and able to conceive only by divine intervention. The gospel of Christ proclaimed that divine intervention was also required for the Messiah's birth, and in a most unique way. Jesus was not sired by any human father; He was miraculously conceived in the womb of a virgin. This great miracle was all part of God's plan, and though no one before the gospel era could have anticipated it from reading Genesis 3:15, in retrospect the words of the prophecy perfectly fit the reality of the virgin conception of Jesus.<sup>31</sup> In a unique sense, it would be "*her* seed" and not his (man's) seed who would crush the serpent's head.

In view of the significance of Genesis 3 in biblical teaching, it is surely not coincidental that the first time Satan appears in the Book of Revelation — the vision of chapter 12 — he is introduced along with a pregnant woman who gives birth to a male child. Satan opposes the woman and tries to devour her child, but the child escapes and ascends to the heavenly throne of God. Satan and his angels then wage war in heaven, are overcome by God's righteous angels, and are cast down to the earth. There Satan persecutes the woman and the rest of her children, those who maintain the testimony of Jesus. There have been several suggestions as to who the woman in this vision represents. Some suggest the Church, others Mary the mother of Jesus. But it seems more likely that she symbolizes the Jewish nation or, better still, the righteous remnant of that nation (Hailey 268). In any case, it is clear that the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 provides the basis for this entire vision.

*The Messiah and His People.* Does the messianic interpretation of Genesis 3:15 exhaust the meaning of the prophecy? In other

words, is the seed of the woman to be understood *exclusively* of the Messiah? Ancient Jews did not think so. Even though they believed that the work of the Messiah was a key element of the prophecy, Jews recognized that "seed" (*zero*) is a collective noun and that it had a corporate sense throughout Scripture. Consider the following excerpt from *Targum Neofiti*, a late first-century Aramaic paraphrase of Genesis 3:15. (The non-italicized portion is the translation of the biblical text, the italicized portion is an interpretive paraphrase).

And I will put hostility between you and the woman,  
And between your children and her children.  
*And when her children guard the Torah and keep the commandments,*  
*They will aim against you and strike you on your head and kill you.*  
*And when they forsake the commandments of the Torah,*  
*You will take aim and bite them on their heels and cause them to sicken.*  
*However, there will be a cure for her children, but for you there will be no cure.*  
*For in the future they will find relief in the Remnant of Israel in the day of the King*  
*Messiah.*

The author of this targum understands the defeat of the serpent to be the result of more than just the activity of the Messiah in the end-time. The righteous seed of Abraham strike a blow against the serpent whenever they diligently keep the commandments of God's Law. This interpretation of the passage does complete justice to the corporate nature of the seed of the woman.<sup>32</sup>

What many people fail to *recognize*: is that the New Testament reflects essentially the same understanding of Genesis 3:15. The promised seed of the woman is Jesus the Messiah, but the Messiah *inclusive of His people*. This is evident when we look at Paul's warning about false teachers in Romans 16:18-20.

For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. For the report of your

obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.*

Paul's application of Genesis 3:15 to Christians could not be more clear (Reid 866). False teachers who "deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting" are functioning in the same role as did Satan in the garden. Just as Satan took the form of a serpent in order to beguile Eve, so he uses human beings to beguile people today (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3-15). But Christians who resist the devil's advances and expose his error will ultimately be victorious. Paul undoubtedly understood the final victory to come through Christ, but notice that he says, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under *your* feet," not Christ's feet. As Christians, we need to recognize that we also have a part to play in the defeat of Satan and his evil forces. "With her risen Lord the church shares the privilege of fulfilling the prophecy of Genesis 3:15" (Youngblood, *Commentary* 57).<sup>33</sup>

Sharing the privilege of fulfilling the prophecy also means that Christians must face the attack of the serpent. This idea is presented in Revelation 12:17, a passage that reflects a corporate understanding of the seed of the woman (i.e., the Messiah and his people): "So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Persecuted Christians can take comfort, however, in the fact that the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 ultimately foretells the defeat of our enemy. As the people of Christ, we will share in His victory.

Liberal scholars often criticize Christianity's messianic interpretation of Genesis 3 by claiming that it incorrectly interprets a corporate prediction in terms of an individual, Jesus Christ (e.g., Von Rad 93; Westermann 260). But from what we have seen above, this criticism is completely unfounded. The New Testament writers (like the ancient Jews) did *not* understand the prophecy to refer exclusively to the Messiah as an individual, but to the Messiah and his people. The New Testament's use of Genesis 3:15 accords perfectly with the corporate sense of the word "seed" and with the way in which the Book of Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament interpret the prophecy. The seed of the woman comes to be defined in terms of a single lineage of Abraham, a promised seed

that are ultimately ruled by a Messiah of the line of David who leads his people in battle against the enemies of God.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the true seed are identified in connection to him.<sup>35</sup>

Just as the resurrected Christ was elevated above all rule and authority in the heavenly places, so the people of Christ are elevated with Him. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:4-6). Paul says that the Church was an eternal mystery that was kept hidden in the past "so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (3:10). In times past angelic rulers and authorities rebelled against God and led astray the nations of the world. But God's great plan was to take men and women from these nations and produce one spiritual nation — a group of people who would honor Him and be zealous for righteousness (Tit. 2:11-14).

*Salvation Through Child-Bearing.* The New Testament's interpretation of Genesis 3 helps us to understand Paul's explanation of the requirement of female submission in 1 Timothy 2.

[13] For Adam was formed first, then Eve. [14] And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. [15] But women will be saved through childbearing — if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (NIV)

Verse 15 has been a notoriously difficult verse for interpreters. The major problem is determining what Paul means by "will be saved" (*sozo*) and why he says this is accomplished by the act of child-bearing. Paul normally uses *sozo* in the sense of salvation from sin or deliverance in heaven. But how can he suggest that the eternal salvation of women is dependent upon their ability to give birth? That would mean that an unmarried or childless woman has no hope of heaven.<sup>36</sup>

Some commentators suggest that in this passage Paul uses the word *sozo* differently than normal, viz., that he speaks of Christian women being preserved through the strain of labor and delivery. (Note the translation offered by the NASB: ". . . *will be preserved*")

through the bearing of children.") But this suggestion would have the apostle make an absolute statement that is not absolutely true; Christian mothers do not always survive the process of giving birth. Other commentators believe that eternal salvation is indeed under discussion here, but that Paul is referring to the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. This view also seems unlikely because the wording of the verse is too generic to be limited to Jesus' birth alone (Barnett 234-235).

I believe that the apostle's point becomes clear when we recognize that he is alluding to what God declared in the beginning to the serpent and to the woman. According to Genesis 3, the eternal salvation of the female sex is dependent upon the female ability to bear children — not individually, but corporately. Though woman was relegated to a child-bearing role, a role that fell under a curse, that role would prove to be the means of salvation. One should note that a singular form of *sozo* is used here; the verse literally says, "*she* [i.e., woman corporately] will be saved through child-bearing."<sup>37</sup> In the garden Satan used woman as a pawn to destroy man, but God's plan was for woman to be the means of the serpent's defeat, for the female sex would give birth to offspring who would trod Satan underfoot. These offspring, as we noted above, comprise both Christ and His people. In the latter part of verse 15, Paul shifts from a corporate view of woman to a distributive view, saying, "*if they* continue in faith..." The apostle is saying that the child-bearing role is the means of woman's salvation so long as individual women live lives of submission and respectable decorum. Paul's words may appear puzzling on the surface, but he is merely giving a succinct recounting of what Genesis 3 teaches.<sup>38</sup>

### Final Thoughts

As Christians we have a tendency to think of God's eternal plan only in terms of its benefit to us, as if we were the ultimate focus of Scripture, rather than God himself. Thinking anthropocentrically rather than theocentrically, we talk about the Scheme of Redemption as God's way of forgiving our sins, perhaps overlooking the fact that "redemption is about God's rule as much as about man's need" (Kidner 70). It is God who has been spurned by His creation from the beginning of human history — indeed, even

before human history. Preceded by rebellious spiritual beings and spurred on by their instigation, the nations of men have rebelled against the authority of God throughout every generation. God's eternal plan is the rectification of this disorder. Human salvation is but one aspect of a divine undertaking that ultimately seeks the full restoration of all creation (heaven and earth) to the purpose and will of a sovereign Creator (Acts 3:21).

Scripture is a record of God's promises concerning this great plan. The first of these promises was made to the serpent in the garden and it stated in vague terms what the rest of the ~~Old Testament~~ fulfill God's ~~The Seed of Woman~~ <sup>the seed of Abraham</sup> who would be led in the last days by the seed of David. Thus, the promise to David (2 Samuel 7:14) fulfills the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), and the promise to Abraham fulfills the curse upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

The New Testament provides the final piece of the puzzle: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ overcomes the sin of man and makes certain the final victory over the forces of Satan. As the redeemed people of Christ, it is our duty to take up our spiritual arsenal and wage a war of faith against the enemies of God (2 Cor. 10:4-5). We must be diligent in carrying out our mission. Let us "tread down the wicked where they stand, hide them in the dust together" (Job 40:12). Let us "tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy" (Luke 10:19). God will soon crush Satan under our feet!

### Notes

1. In this paper my discussions of ancient Jewish exegesis of the Old Testament are not offered as proofs of what the Old Testament must be saying. That authoritative posture is reserved for the inspired authors of the New Testament. However, I believe that there is great benefit in studying how ancient readers read the Scriptures. Sometimes it can open our modern eyes to possible interpretations that we do not readily think of because of our remote perspective. It also can help us to understand better what the New Testament writers are saying when they use common terms and allusions in their exegesis of the Old Testament. The study of contemporaneous Jewish literature helps reveal the hermeneutic and religious milieu of the New Testament books, allowing us to read them within their historical context.

2. The structure of Genesis is demarcated by the recurring phrase '*elleh toledot*, which can be translated, "These are the generations of. ." or "this is the story of .." In its ten usages the phrase seems to function as an introduction to a new section of material, though some scholars argue that at times (perhaps in 2:4) it may conclude a section. See Hamilton, *Genesis* 2-10; LaSor 68-70.

3. It is interesting that when Moses introduces the talking serpent in 3: 1, he does so without any explanation as to why this creature can speak and reason, as if he expects his readers not to be surprised by the figure at all. This is probably an indicator that the story of Genesis 3 had been told for generations among the children of Abraham and so was quite familiar to them.

4. Part of the translators' difficulty is in trying to be consistent in the two usages of *shuph*; it would seem that whatever the woman's seed does to the serpent, the serpent does to the woman's seed (Hamilton, *Genesis* 198). Yet we are dealing here with Hebrew poetry, and the potential for wordplay should caution us against thinking that the two usages of the verb must have precisely the same sense. A snake's attack of a man's heel may not constitute the same type of assault as a man's treading upon a snake's head.

5. The Septuagint's use of the Greek verb *term* ("to watch, keep") is particularly curious. But it possibly carries the sense here of "watch in order to attack," "he in wait" (Lust, et al.). In Romans 16.20 Paul uses the verb *suntribo* ("crush, shatter") when he alludes to Genesis 3.15.

6. It is commonly suggested that the image is that of a man injuring his heel when he stamps on a serpent's head. The point, then, is that a hurt heel is only a minor injury for a man compared to the mortal wound a snake suffers if its head is trampled I have doubts about this being the picture that the verse intends to convey. (Ancient readers of Genesis apparently did not take it that way. They instead saw the injury upon the woman's seed occurring as a result of the serpent's bite; e.g., *Targum Neofiti, Life of Adam and Eve* 37: 1-3.) I suspect that the common view of the passage arises from the tendency of Christians to apply the prophecy in an exclusively messianic sense, i.e., to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the occasion when Jesus defeated Satan by means of His own suffering. As I argue later in this paper, the prophecy should be understood more broadly than this, as encompassing the conflict between Satan and all of God's people (At the risk of being accused of talking out of both sides of my mouth, however, I do acknowledge that we are dealing here with prophecy and poetry, and thus there may be some fluidity in how the wording could be interpreted from application to application.)

7 Blenkinsopp (58, 86) argues that the account of the serpent and the fall is paralleled by the story of Ham's sin against Noah during Noah's state of nakedness.

8 Von Rad (87-88) could not be more wrong when he says that the serpent is incidental to the Genesis story.

9 This way of reading the Book of Genesis is reflected in the *Life of Adam*

*And Eve*, a late first-century work, the Latin version of which records God's saying the following to Adam: "Because your days are numbered, you have been made to cherish knowledge; therefore, there shall not be abolished from your seed forever those who would serve me" (27:3). This indicates an understanding that the promise of Genesis 3:15 would be fulfilled through the righteous people of Adam and Eve's descendants

10 Paul's statement in 2 Cor. 11:14 about Satan disguising himself as an angel of light parallels what is said in the *Apocalypse of Moses* 17:1. There the serpent (Satan) behaves as an angel of God in order to more effectively persuade Eve to eat of the fruit (cf. 2 Cor 11:3).

11. The idea of the devil as a murderer from the beginning may allude either to the sentence of spiritual death that resulted from Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit, or to their physical death caused by banishment from the tree of life. There may also be an allusion to Cain's act of fratricide in Genesis 4.

12. In *Apocalypse of Moses* 21:3 the devil is said to be speaking through Eve when she induces Adam to eat the forbidden fruit

13 This story was apparently contained in the ancient work *The Assumption of Moses*, for so say several of the post-apostolic Church Fathers. The passage has not survived, however, in any extant witnesses of the work Some scholars assume that Jude is quoting from *The Assumption*, but I think it better to presume that both works recount well-known oral tradition.

14. Unger (33-34) argues that the New Testament concept is very dissimilar to first-century Judaism, but his methodology for drawing this conclusion is to assume that Rabbinic documents (A.D 200-600) necessarily reveal first-century conceptions — a bogus methodology that, unfortunately, has not completely been discarded today.

15. The cosmological debate between first-century Christians and Jews had nothing to do with heaven and hell or Satan and his angels, but only with the nature and identity of the Messiah and his kingdom.

16. Some modern interpreters have claimed that the serpent of Genesis 3 is not portrayed as an opponent of God so much as an enemy of woman (e.g., Von Rad 87-88). But this seems to me to be an absurd conclusion to draw from the text. The serpent's words of beguilement are an affront to the integrity of Yahweh himself. The curse that Yahweh pronounces upon the serpent clearly shows that He views the serpent as having made himself an enemy of God.

17 Cf Luke 10-19 See note 33 below

18 Many people point to a seeming inconsistency in the way that the Old Testament presents these ideas The Book of Job depicts Satan as a spiritual being who acts only within the strict limits permitted by God (cf Luke 22: 31), but elsewhere we read of spiritual beings in overt opposition to God (e.g., Daniel 10-12). We need to realize, though, that when God seeks to portray spiritual realities to man, He must accommodate to the limited, earthly

perspective of human beings. Strict consistency may therefore be an impossibility. The overall message of Scripture is quite clear: God is in control of all things, and His ultimate purpose will never be thwarted.

19 This is the translation provided by the Revised Standard Version. It reflects the reading of Deuteronomy 32.8 found in the Qumran fragment, 4QDeut. Most English versions rely upon the Masoretic Text which reads "sons of Israel;" however the proper reading is most likely that of the translation above, "sons of God." It is supported not only by the Qumran fragment, but by the Septuagint. See the discussion of this textual variant in Abegg 191.

20. This verse is quoted by the Hebrew writer in Hebrews 1.6, following the reading of the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text, due to a scribal error, omits this entire line, but it is found in the Qumran fragment 4QDeut<sup>a</sup> (Skehan 12-14).

21 For a further discussion of this idea of the rebellious angels of God, see my article, "Old Testament Citations In The Gospel Of John," in *God So Loved Studies in the Gospel of John* (Temple Terrace, Fla.: Florida College Press, 2002): 35-39

22. The idea that the Satan-figure of Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 was the leader of the rebellious angels of old may itself have been a similar deduction. It is in the Jewish intertestamental literature that we first see this understanding and it is corroborated by the New Testament Thus, the concept of Satan undergoes development. The Satan of Job and Zechariah is an adversary of God and man, but is not depicted as the kind of arch-enemy that we see later. See note 18 above

23 For a discussion of the pros and cons of the angelic interpretation of the "sons of God" in Genesis 6, see Hamilton, *Genesis* 261-265; Young-blood, *Debate* 184-209; Unger 45-52; Leupold 249-259. I have, somewhat reluctantly, come to accept the angelic interpretation as the most viable view, though there are many questions that it raises that cannot be addressed here. Still, when the statements of the New Testament are compared with contemporaneous Jewish literature, it seems most likely that the New Testament writers also assume the angelic interpretation to be true.

24 Along this line I should also comment on the oracle against Tyre in Ezekiel 28. It is obvious that Ezekiel uses images from Genesis 3 to speak of Tyre's initial grandeur: her king dwelt as (or with) an "anointed cherub" in "Eden, the garden of God " He was blameless from the time of Ins creation until pride led him into rebellion. Though many evangelical interpreters try to see in this text a direct reference to the prehistorical fall of Satan (e. g., Unger 15), that interpretation of the prophecy is generally discounted, the passage seems to denounce human rulers by using highly hyperbolic language (Westermann 246). Nevertheless, this language does at least reflect the familiar cosmology of rebellious angelic powers who lead the nations of the world Jewish readers probably saw some allusion here to the struggle against Satanic powers that Genesis 3 predicted

25 Another example of such an occurrence would be the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Few Christians would fail to see a typological reference to the sacrifice of Jesus, yet no New Testament passage ever explicitly connects the sacrifice of Isaac to Jesus' crucifixion.

26 Fee is grossly mistaken when he says that "nowhere in all of Jewish interpretation was Genesis 3:15 ever understood to mean anything other than the natural enmity between humans and poisonous reptiles" (75)

27 The actual verb that the Septuagint uses here is "watch" (*tereo*), but this difference is not germane to the issue of a messianic understanding of the prophecy. See note 5 above.

28. For more information about this ancient method of interpretation, see James Kugel's *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997), Jacob Neusner, *What is Midrash?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), and Philip Baron, "Rabbinical Interpretation In Shirata," in *The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism-Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1998). Unlike Kugel, I believe that the fundamental basis of this ancient hermeneutic was the Jewish recognition of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

29. This reading is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Abegg 541-542). The fact that this psalm was commonly used in exorcisms helps to explain why Satan quotes it in the temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:11)

30 Many modern scholars deny that Paul could be alluding here to Jesus' virgin conception because they assume that the absence of any explicit discussion of the doctrine in Paul's letters indicates that he was ignorant of it (Brown 519). This unwarranted assumption is the result of a low view of both inspiration and apostleship. It was Luke who recorded an account of Jesus' miraculous birth (Luke 1:26-37). If the apostle Paul's traveling companion knew of this important fact about Jesus, how could the apostle himself have been ignorant of it?

31. Irenaeus is the first of numerous post-apostolic writers to interpret Genesis 3.15 and Galatians 4:4 as references to the virgin conception of Jesus (*Against Heresies* 4.40.3; 5.21.1).

32. Even though the Septuagint implies a messianic understanding of Genesis 3:15, this does not mean that its translators necessarily thought that the prophecy referred exclusively to him.

33 The words of Jesus to his disciples in Luke 10:17-19 should be understood in the same light: "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name.' And he said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.'" Jesus' reference to serpents and scorpions probably reflects the ancient practice of connecting demonic powers with certain kinds of animals

34. To say that the promised seed are the lineage of Abraham is not to say that all the physical descendants of Abraham are reckoned as the promised

seed. The New Testament indicates that they have to be believers like Abraham (Rom. 9:1-9). Nor am I overlooking the New Testament's teaching that Gentile believers may also be recipients of the promise. But the New Testament regards these Gentiles as becoming part of the seed of Abraham; they are "grafted in" (Rom. 11:17-24).

35. I understand in a similar way Paul's comments in Galatians 3 about the promise to Abraham. The promise concerned the seed (singular) of Abraham, not seeds — meaning that the end-time seed of promise consisted of a particular portion of Abraham's descendants, that one group who would be led by the Messiah. In vs. 16 Paul says that the promised seed is "Christ," but notice that in vs. 29 he says that all those who faithfully follow Christ are Abraham's promised seed. Thus, the promise referred to Christ inclusive of His people.

36. See Guthrie (77-79) and Moo (70-73) for succinct overviews of various exegetical suggestions that have been proffered to circumvent this problem.

37. Unfortunately, many translations (e.g., NASB, NIV) obscure the singular number of the verb by interpolating the plural word "women" and loosely rendering vs. 15, "But *women* will be. . . ."

38. The view I present here is essentially the same as that of Moo (71-73), Moss (63-65), and Fee (75-76), yet even these commentators fail to see the full significance of Genesis 3:15-16 and the way that it undergirds Paul's teaching.

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## Good News of Victory

### *Steve Wolfgang*

*Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. (1 Chron. 29:11)*

*He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. (Isa. 25:8).*

The assignment for this lecture, as a part of the overall theme of "The Gospel in the Old Testament," suggests focusing upon the Old Testament promise of victory in the struggle between good and evil, both on a cosmic level and in terms of God's kingdom on earth. Almost immediately, one fundamental problem suggests itself: in many ways, it is difficult to find "good news of victory" in the Old Testament. Obviously there are specific victories recorded for our learning: examples such as the Exodus from Egyptian bondage; God's judgment on the Canaanites in the conquest of the promised land; or the triumph of David, God's anointed, over Philistines and other Canaanites to establish the royal city on Mt. Zion spring quickly to mind.

But perceptive students of the Old Testament also realize that ultimately, the Old Testament chronicle ends ignominiously, with Israel once again captive and expelled, kingless, from the land. If anything, Israel's condition is worse than when they were in bondage in Egypt. The Psalms record the despair of those who, weeping "by the waters of Babylon" wondered how it could ever be possible to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:1, 4).

Of course, looking from a New Testament perspective, we know

that there are messianic glories to come, even though Israel is in Diaspora. Nahum, gloating over the well-deserved demolition of the Assyrians who have destroyed Israel, promises good tidings and proclamations of peace, calling on Judah to celebrate since "never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off" (Nah. 1:15). Understood literally, of course, this is a hollow promise, since the Assyrians are replaced by their conquerors, the Babylonians, who complete Israel's destruction by sacking Jerusalem and destroying the Temple itself. Nahum's prophetic promise, and its parallel in Isaiah 52:7, must be understood in its New Testament fulfillment of the good news of salvation through Christ (Rom. 10:5-17). The promised Messiah does come; he establishes his kingdom, a feat even all Hades could not prevent (Matt. 16:18), and promises even greater things when his kingdom is delivered up to the Father. Other speakers on this lectureship explore such themes in some detail.

But, for all our joy over God's ultimate triumph and the fulfillment of His purpose, let us not be so quick to leave the Old Testament just yet. From it we may learn what were the causes of Israel's demise — and perhaps avoid repetition of the same fate so that we may truly participate in God's ultimate victory.

### **Israel's Warrior: The Battle Belongs to the Lord**

As Jehovah delivered the tribes of Israel out of Egyptian bondage to make them His covenant people, He exhibited His power to protect Israel in decisive fashion. As described in the song of Moses and Miriam, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song unto the LORD, I will sing unto the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea... Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea . . . the floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power ... shattered the enemy. In the greatness of your majesty, you overthrew your adversaries" (Exod. 15:1-7). Indeed, on Israel's defenseless behalf, "God is a warrior" (Exod. 15:3).<sup>1</sup>

The purposes of such deliverance are clear: God is not simply liberating them from the powerlessness and degradation of slavery, but is displaying His miraculous power to protect the weaponless tribes fleeing Pharaoh's domination from any force attempting to

thwart divine purposes. Furthermore, Jehovah is delivering His covenant nation to a place where they may dwell with him: "In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed; you guided them by your strength to your holy abode. . . . You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, where you make your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established. The Lord will reign forever and ever" (Exod. 15:13, 17-18).

Even while Israel is in the wilderness, the Israelites were constantly reminded of God's victorious power to vanquish all enemies. "Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, 'Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you'" (Num. 10:35). Thus, early in its national existence, Israel's experience has taught them that God will deliver them victorious if they will only trust and obey. God's role as warrior, giving Israel victory by His glorious power, is eulogized again during the conquest in the song of Deborah and Barak: "The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel. . . . So perish all your enemies, O Lord!" (Judg. 5:5, 31).

With God as a warrior who assures victory for Israel, the citizens of that nation need not worry about the number of its troops or the sophistication of its weapons. Indeed, a huge army and superior weapons are a liability to a nation being taught not to boast in its own strength, but only in the power and might of the Lord, who gives victory in spite of overwhelming odds. Better to go into battle with a small, poorly trained army than with a large, well-trained one — as the incident with Gideon makes abundantly clear. "God has given the army of the Midianites into your hand" (Judg. 7:7,15).

Possibly the best-known instance of God's victory on behalf of his helpless, hapless people, is David's triumph over the Philistine giant, Goliath. Longman and Reid provide an apt description of the stark contrast between the pagan behemoth and the youthful Israelite shepherd:

Goliath was everything an ancient warrior could be: large, powerful, experienced, and armed with the most advanced weapons. On the other hand, David was chosen for lack of an alternative. He was small and inexperienced in war. When he took the field, it was without armor, his only weapon being a simple slingshot.

In this way, he is like Israel in holy war — outnumbered and inferior in weaponry. He also expresses the kind of holy war faith that Israel was called upon to exhibit<sup>2</sup>

David's undaunted courage, and his faithful reliance upon God's power to deliver Israel from its enemies are captured graphically in his response to Goliath's arrogant taunts per 1 Samuel 17:45-47. David's trust and reliance upon the Lord to grant victory — no doubt a large component of his description in both testaments as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14, Acts 13:22) — continues to be seen in texts such as 2 Samuel 22:1-4, 18-19, 47-48. Many have noted the parallels, nearly identical, between this text and Psalm 18, and it is in the Psalms that the sweet singer of Israel (as well as others) lyrically exalts Jehovah as Israel's true warrior-king who enables them to emerge victorious over all enemies. Especially noteworthy are Psalm 144:1, 10, and Psalm 149:6-9, although other examples abound.

One additional example is provided by Psalm 98.<sup>3</sup> Composed of three stanzas, this psalm looks first to the past, thanking God for victory. The second stanza praises Jehovah for his present kingship over Israel, while the third stanza anticipates the future judgment of the Lord. The temporal perspectives of past, present, and future are thus welded to three divine characteristics of God — victorious warrior, majestic king, and righteous judge. These three relationships Jehovah sustains to Israel are not only closely intertwined, as we shall see, they also foreshadow the functions of Christ as warrior, king, and judge in the New Testament.

**"The More I Called Them, the More  
They Went from Me" (Hosea 11:2).**

Yet, despite the many victories Israel experienced under the guidance and protection of Jehovah, students who pursue Old Testament history to its conclusion realize that the story ends disastrously. Despite divine warning and prophetic pleading, Israel plunges headlong down the proverbial slippery slope of apostasy. Perhaps this is nowhere more clearly seen than in the Old Testament psalm book, burned into Israel's collective memory (as many of our well-known hymns are today) by constant singing.

For example, Psalm 44, attributed to the sons of Korah, begins in the first eight-verse stanza a song of praise extolling God's role as a warrior on behalf of his people, Israel. Significantly, however, this very psalm continues in the next stanza (vss 9-13) to describe Israel's condition not as one of victory, but of rejection of and by Jehovah. God is now seen not only as abandoning Israel, but actively fighting against His own people, delivering them into the hands of the very nations from whom He once victoriously saved them.

Several other psalms describe circumstances in which God actually fights against Israel, raising up enemies to punish them rather than leading them to victory. Psalm 74, for instance, plaintively beseeches the Lord regarding the degradation of Israel. Psalm 79 describes similar circumstances in even more graphic terms. Psalm 89:30-37 clearly recites the conditional nature of God's approbation for Israel. God's lovingkindness and victorious defense of Israel, leading them to vanquish their enemies, is not a perpetual guarantee. Indeed, when Israel disobeys and ignores Jehovah, taking for granted their past successes and mistakenly attributing their victorious status to their own power and might, God takes up the sword against them. Psalm 89:38-44 clearly demonstrates

Seen from a strictly Old Testament perspective, then, the history of Israel under the Mosaic covenant is a stunning tragedy, repeated many times. God's own chosen people have disregarded his promises, disobeyed his commands, and disrespected His holy person. Having contemptuously dismissed Jehovah, it is amazing that even a remnant remained. It is difficult to overstate the devastating extent of the effects wrought by the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B. C. Not only is David's capital destroyed and Solomon's marvelous Temple a ruin, but there is no longer a king in Israel. Furthermore, except for a few like Jeremiah, weeping among the rubble of Jerusalem, Israel has been evicted from the land of promise. A bare remnant has been dragged away in chains of humiliation and disgrace to be enslaved in a distant foreign land. Anyone who reads texts such as Psalm 137, or the lamentations of Jeremiah, would be hard pressed to find any hint of a victorious nation, protected by the providence of a divine warrior-king. Israel's path is not the way to victory, but instead is a trajectory of defeat, devastation, and destruction. It is a tragedy.

of staggering proportions, a spiritual bankruptcy paid not only in silver and gold, but in flesh and blood.

### **Victory in Jesus: The Triumphant Messiah**

No doubt many who understand the Old Testament fulfillment in the New Testament are thinking of God's ultimate triumphant victory in Christ and His chosen people in the new Israel. Indeed, the children of God will one day sing a new song in His very presence. We have seen that many of the notable songs embedded in the Old Testament narrative are songs of victory, such as the Song of Moses (Exod. 15), the Song of Deborah and Barak (Judg. 5), and David's song in 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. Similarly, New Testament references to God's people hymning praise to their victorious kings illustrate the nature of God's victory against both earthly and cosmic forces of evil.

The Biblical phrase "new song" . . . occurs in three biblical books, Isaiah (e.g., 42:10, 13), Psalms (40:3; 96:1; 98:1,3; 144: 9; 149:1), and Revelation (5:5, 14:3). The close connection with warfare may also be seen by quoting Psalm 144:9-10 (see also Ps. 149)... It appears that 'new song' is a technical term for victory song. These songs celebrate the new situation brought about by God's warring activity\_\_\_The term "new song" occurs also in Revelation 5:9 and 14:3, and in both cases the ethos of divine warfare is close at hand. In Revelation 5, the words of the song are recited (5:9-10) and celebrate the worthiness of the slain but reigning Lamb, who will open the seals and initiate the eschatological warfare. In Revelation 14, the song is sung by the 144,000 on Mount Zion who, like holy warriors, "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (14:4).<sup>4</sup>

The victorious Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, also removes the sting of death (1 Cor. 15:55-58). As Christians, we are called to follow our victorious redeemer into battle. However, we no longer war "after the flesh," nor are our enemies Amorites or Philistines. We live not in an earthly theocracy where Jehovah himself is our warrior king, but in a spiritual kingdom ruled by the Prince of Peace, who told Peter to put away his sword

(Matt. 26:52-56) rather than use carnal means to vanquish evil and accomplish His purpose. Our warfare is the more deadly and our battles more dangerous than any earthly conflict, for "We fight not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). This passage, bristling with military metaphor, and reminiscent of God's victorious warfare on behalf of Israel (cf. Isa. 59:17-18), is amplified in texts which instruct us that "we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful" so that we may destroy "speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" ( 2 Cor. 10:3-5).

While our victory does not depend upon our own proficiency or success in any earthly sense, even so we are summoned to duty and instructed to deploy the weapons of our warfare with all the skill and power we can muster. As God's people, we depend upon His instructions, not our own wisdom, wielding spiritual weaponry and finding strength "in the Lord and in his mighty power" (Eph. 6:10). By following precisely the Lord's instructions — and in no other way — will we find ourselves victorious (1 John 5:3-4). By mimicking the obedience of Jesus, who "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in likeness to men. And being found in the form of a slave, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father forever and ever." (Phil. 2:6-11) "Death is not the end of the line, it is the beginning of the Good News of Victory, where is your sting?" and joyfully give thanks to God, "who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" if we remain "steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:55-58 NASB).

### **God Will Lead to Victory — But Will We Follow?**

That God ultimately will triumph, that He will lead His people to victory, is not at issue — it is indisputable. The real question is, will "we," (more personally, will I?) be a part of that great throng of Revelation 4 that ultimately hymn God's praise before the Lord's majestic throne?

Everyone, it seems, answers such questions affirmatively. Despite the old song which warns, "Not everybody talking 'bout heaven goin' there," surveying the literature published on this topic reveals that nearly everyone believes they will be part of

the victorious throng Titles focusing on the topic "Victory" are ubiquitous, ranging from Hindus to Catholics and Lutherans to Quakers,<sup>5</sup> Anglicans to Christian reconstructionists, feminists, evangelicals, and miscellaneous religionists of almost limitless variety<sup>6</sup>

But a survey of the current religious landscape produces grave doubt about the outcome and ultimate destiny of those who claim to be God's people As examples, consider some of the obvious trends one can easily detect around us in three different venues of the modern American religious panorama the "evangelical" world of modern mega-churches and smaller congregations of conservative denominations with Reformation roots, our own "institutional" brethren from whom "we" are separated by events of the not-so-distant past, many of whom seek or enjoy fellowship with that broader world of evangelicalism, and signs of disquieting tendencies among "us" in more "conservative" churches of the Lord's people<sup>7</sup>

### **Victory Over the World, or Fighting Against God?**

Consider, for instance, a recent trenchant critique, by one of its leading scholars, of modern day evangelicals who proclaim faith in Christ and claim to believe the Bible

[T]he sense of embattlement with the world is rapidly evaporating among many evangelicals, especially evangelical elites, among them those who belong to the "knowledge industry " In the last half century they have enjoyed increasing success in the world of biblical and theological scholarship They reacted against the separatism of the fundamentalist forebears, who precisely in their separation from the world knew they had a sure word from God for the world with the consequent whetting of our appetite for academic, political, and broadly cultural power and influence are coming the dangers of accommodation, of dulling the sharp edges of the gospel, of blurring the distinction between believers and the world, of softening — or not issuing at all — the warning that God's wrath abides on unbelievers (John 3:36), in short, of only whispering the word instead of shouting him, speaking him boldly, as the Word himself did.<sup>8</sup>

Historians and others who study social movements have long recognized that significant changes occur in the doctrinal beliefs and practices of religious groups as their social status rises. Often, as Gundry notes above, a key factor producing the changes within a group relates to increased levels of formal education. As one study of the evangelical movement observed, increasing to advanced education, and the adoption of worldly perspectives which often accompany such achievements, may carry the seeds of the movement's own decline. "Increased levels of tolerance have been clearly related to greater educational achievement [higher] education may prove counterproductive to the survival of Protestant orthodoxy in America in the long run."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in the words of one of the most frequently-cited recent studies of American religion,

as denominations have modernized their doctrines and embraced temporal values, they have gone into decline the message becomes more worldly, and is held with less certainty as religion becomes the focus of scholarly critique and attention [the decline starts when they] begin to lift restrictions on behavior and to soften doctrines that had served to set the sect apart from its social environment as the general affluence and social standing of a group rises, otherworldliness — as expressed through tension with the environment — becomes perceived as increasingly costly *religious organizations are stronger to the degree that they impose significant costs in terms of sacrifice and even stigma upon their members*<sup>10</sup>

Among evangelicals, increasing education and social sophistication has produced enough toleration of worldly behaviors and modification in the standards of moral conduct to make many profoundly uncomfortable. As Gundry observes, "By worldliness I mean not merely the disregard of fundamentalist taboos against smoking, drinking, dancing, movie-going, gambling, and the like, but more expansively such matters as materialism, pleasure-seeking, indiscriminate enjoyment of salacious and violent entertainment, immodesty of dress, voyeurism, sexual laxity, and divorce."<sup>11</sup> While many evangelicals seem quite comfortable with the evolving accommodation to worldliness Gundry describes, others are increasingly disturbed by such trends and willing to protest them.

— even at the expense of being labeled with uncomplimentary terminology such as "sectarian." For dissenters like Gundry, the more conservative "sectarian" viewpoint seems preferable to compromise with secularism: "it is sectarians — those who have separated from the world, who see only in black and white — it is they, rather than reformers, accommodationists, and assimilationists who speak with the most controlling authority. Sectarians know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; and they know it most assuredly."<sup>12</sup>

### **Instant Replay: Israel's Shortcomings Reproduced Today**

Nearer in proximity have been the changes observed by many among our kinsmen of the recent past — our "institutional" brethren.<sup>13</sup> Various prominent spokespersons within those churches seem quite willing to use the "sect-to-denomination" transition to explain the increasing accommodation of denominational doctrines and behaviors evident among those churches.<sup>14</sup> A leading spokesman among such brethren describes the evolution to denominationalism this way: "Just when churches up and down the street are re-evaluating their denominational status and seeking to be more nondenominational, many among us are abandoning the goal of nondenominational Christianity and seeking to be more like other denominational churches.... *That we have become what we once despised is undeniable*" (emphasis mine, jsw).<sup>15</sup>

Without question, the most obvious such alteration among "institutional" Churches of Christ is the tremendously divisive controversy now raging among such churches over "worship styles" and the increasing demand for professional-quality music, including the instrumental variety. But, as many have observed, this issue is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. In the words of a widely respected older preacher among such churches, "instrumental music only lets the cat out of the bag.... After they bring in the instrument, baptism is no longer essential, and the church is just another denomination among denominations."<sup>16</sup>

The unabashed, even welcome, acceptance of newfound denominational status among a younger generation of "Church of Christ preachers" is too evident to be denied by anyone with eyes to see

or ears to hear. In particular, the attraction of evangelical "mega-churches" for the younger preachers among the "institutional" Churches of Christ is especially strong, as acknowledged by the current lecturership director at Abilene Christian University: "Given the impressive results of seeker churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback, the pull to mimic their direction is nearly irresistible.... One need only read the classified ads of churches looking for ministers in the *Christian Chronicle* to see the influence of seeker models on our thinking about evangelism."<sup>17</sup>

The concerns of the rapidly-vanishing older generation of leaders among "institutional" brethren is nowhere more cogently expressed than in a recent *Christian Chronicle* interview with Abraham Malherbe, Buckingham Professor Emeritus of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale University. Malherbe, a native South African converted under the preaching of Eldred Echols, came to Abilene Christian College in the 1950s, and thence to Harvard University for graduate study. He returned to teach at Abilene from 1963 to 1969 before moving to Yale University in 1970. When Yale recently sought to hire a senior scholar in religion, three of the six finalists, and the person ultimately selected, were ACU graduates and Malherbe's former Yale students. His credentials to address these issues are impeccable, and his comments arresting:

Q: What are some of your concerns for our fellowship?

A: My major concern is our cozying up to those evangelicals who put a premium on feeling at the expense of reason. This is not an indictment of all evangelicals, for there are differences among them. . . . Evangelical priorities and language have come to suffuse much of the preaching in our fellowship. That, combined with the style of preaching, common in all churches these days, that is narratival and anecdotal rather than expository, results in sermons that are as theologically thin gruel as are many of the so-called praise songs we sing. It seems that the goal of many services is to achieve an emotional response without imparting biblical knowledge. When the same, non-expository approach is followed in a church's Bible classes, any Restorationist nuance easily disappears.<sup>18</sup>

### **A Modern Jeremiad: Becoming Like the Nations Around Us**

But how does this analysis of the current religious landscape relate to the topic of this lecture: the "Good News of Victory" from the perspective of the "Gospel in the Old Testament?" While I hope the answer is evident, since we are expressly taught to learn from Israel's errors as well as their victories (Rom. 15:4, 1 Cor. 10: 1-12), let me be explicit. One might well classify this concluding section as a "Jeremiad" — a common occurrence in American history and literature.<sup>19</sup> While obviously negative in character, jeremiads often end, as this one shall, with a fervent expression of hope for salvation and the Good News of Victory to come.

David Lipscomb reputedly said, "Apostasies come, and will come, where there is an untaught, ease-loving, and self-serving generation."<sup>20</sup> From all indicators, it appears we have raised a generation — or two — which increasingly fits Lipscomb's description. Not only does Biblical illiteracy abound, but many Christians — alas, older as well as younger — not only seem quite comfortable with the easy convenience of modernity, but also are extremely allergic to controversy in any form. The results of such a combination can only be disastrous: if you educate a generation immersed in the tolerance of this non-controversial mentality, and then ship them off for graduate study in religion, or other subjects, to Vanderbilt or Emory or some state university, one can issue a gold-plated, money-back guarantee of the outcome: apostasy (as our "institutional" brethren have learned to the dismay of many). Of course, the trends pointing in the direction of such apostasy may not become manifest so long as others of stronger conviction are making decisions in a congregation, or in some human institution. The evidence of such trends to apostasy will become most apparent when those trained to value tolerance as their chief virtue, and avoid controversy at all costs, bob to the surface in decision-making capacities or influential roles in those congregations or institutions.

But I would not single out education as the only culprit in what many, including myself, see as the obvious signs of declension surrounding us today. While this institution — my alma mater and that of my wife and children — has provided a forum for these

remarks, I wish to address those who may hear or read them in the wider context of various congregations of the Lord's people across the country or in other places.<sup>21</sup> For all the criticism of this institution — and I have long been among its critics as well as its friends, communicating my concerns directly to its administration — most of the problems faced by brethren in many places did not originate here, or in any one place. Students who come to this institution do not develop a taste for alcohol, or pornography, or mixed-gender swimming or other worldly behaviors when they cross the Temple Terrace city limits. They develop these traits and behaviors in "Christian" homes and in "faithful" congregations. Of course, those who accept the responsibility of educating young Christians should not be exonerated from egregious errors and should be held accountable by their clientele, but neither are they to blame for every crisis among modern Christians.<sup>22</sup> The problems of which I speak are reflected in hundreds of congregations across this land, and are too frequently un-addressed, or worse, tolerated without reproof, in far too many churches.

In many places today, not only do we differ over issues like divorce and remarriage, social drinking, modest apparel, mixed-gender swimming, dancing, and other such matters — in far too many instances these subjects are not even open for discussion. If you don't think so, try preaching — specifically and pointedly, rather than with platitudinous exhortations to "be good now, y'all" — on such topics, and see what sort of reaction you get. Or ask yourself this: how long has it been since you heard such plain and unambiguous preaching on such topics, or the systematic exposure and reproof of denominational false doctrines and practices, where you worship? If such topics are rarely if ever addressed, perhaps an appeal might appropriately be addressed to the elders of the congregation concerning the need for such preaching. Should not preachers plainly address such subjects frequently? Should not "sound" congregations expect such preaching? Should not watchful shepherds demand it on behalf of the flock?

I have listened to more than enough preaching myself, and heard too many reports from others with the same experiences, which matches exactly the kind described above by Abraham Malherbe. Such preaching seems to have as an object verbal fluency, emotional catharsis, or even mere entertainment, rather than any

Biblical instruction. I do not wish to be hypercritical of my preaching brothers, but Scripture warns that it is easy to succumb to the temptation to preach what audiences want rather than what they need, tickling the itching ear (2 Tim. 4:3). Preachers, of course, are accountable for how and what they proclaim, but audiences bear responsibility for how they hear and react. Too often preachers simply satisfy what audiences demand and delight in: to be captivated and held spellbound by some enthralling emotional story or other fascinating tale. Listen to such preaching and observe the audience interaction. Ask yourself when the audience is in its most rapt attention: during the reading of Scripture? As the word of God is being expounded? While the unfruitful works of darkness are being exposed and reprovved? Or during the recitation of some emotional story which is often the centerpiece or the climax of such homilies?

For all my reservations about becoming a preaching critic, there seems no shortage of critics of the critic. We can easily find ourselves in a situation, as with the premillennial controversy in the 1920s and 1930s, where we extend the olive branch of brotherly "toleration" to someone who teaches rank false doctrine, but display only derision or even hostility toward those who dare criticize such a teacher or the congregations and institutions which provide such teachers a safe haven. One need not necessarily visit the brotherhood internet lists to find abundant instances of those who proclaim the virtues of toleration and love — but then seem quite willing to shred any brother who dares criticize some person or issue they personally hold dear. "Watching the watchdogs" is not limited to one particular domain, and intolerance seems to ooze fairly evenly across the religious landscape.

It is also unquestionably true that when individual Christians develop greater comfort levels and toleration for things in the world, the institutions they support often reflect such an evolution.<sup>23</sup> As institutions change, they frequently succumb to the temptation to exchange the devotion of a generation that sacrificed to help build it for the adoration and approval of generations that will have increasingly less use for its services and appreciation for its distinctive character (as opposed to the more generic brand of "Christian colleges" which dot the landscape). Many an institution has discovered, far too late and much to its chagrin, that it

"leans on a broken reed" (Isa. 36:6) which ultimately will not support it and will in fact cause harm when it collapses.

Not all will agree with my assessments of where "we" are in our quest to share in the great victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil. But those who cannot abide such criticism or those who dare "cry aloud and spare not" (Isa. 58:1), must surely beware that they do not join past disciples who are "so thoroughly captured by the world that they have neither the desire nor the ability to judge it" — to borrow one historian's description.<sup>24</sup> Modern, well-educated Christians, sometimes dismissive of those who have not attained such an elevated understanding, may discover too late that they know much more about the world, but much less of how to escape it. If we allow our own emotionalism, our loyalty to brotherhood traditions or personalities, our craving for the approbation of the world, or the results (tentative or "assured") of modern science or any other human intellectual construct, to supersede our devotion to Christ and His revelation in the teachings of Scripture, we exchange the truth of God for a lie.

### **Faith Is the Victory**

It need not be so. God has clearly shown us the way to victory. The Old Testament provides us not only with instances of how God will deliver His people but provides abundant examples of the Old Testament promises fulfilled in the God-prophesied Messiah, Jesus Christ, who goes forth conquering and to conquer. Not only is victory readily achievable, but we need not accomplish it ourselves, in our own blundering and misguided ways. Our task is simply to believe that God will lead us if we will but follow, trusting Him for instruction and salvation, and obeying His orders without question, regardless of earthly consequences. May God grant us the strength and conviction to overcome, attaining the victory purchased by the blood of the conquering Lamb.

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus! Stand in His strength alone;  
The arm of flesh will fail you; Ye dare not trust your own.  
Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer  
Where duty calls, or danger, be never wanting there.*

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus! The strife will not be long.  
This day the noise of battle, The next the victor's song  
To him that overcometh, a crown of life shall be;  
He with the King of glory Shall live eternally.*<sup>25</sup>

### Notes

1. For many of the concepts in this section, I am indebted to Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); and Longman, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif." *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982): 290-307.

2. Longman and Reid, *God Is A Warrior*, 38.

3. For an informative analysis of the study of Psalms see Tremper Longman III, *How To Read the Psalms* (Downer's Grove, 111.: InterVarsity, 1988). For an analysis of God as warrior in Psalm 98 specifically, see pp. 125-131.

4. Longman and Reid, *God Is A Warrior*, 45, 191.

5. See, for instance, Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989); *The Woman Shall Conquer: The Story of the Blessed Virgin in the Modern World* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1952); Lennart Pinomaa (trans. Walter J. Kukkonen), *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963); and E. Stanley Jones, *Victory Through Surrender* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966). This list could easily be extended.

6. Examples include Austin Farrar, *The Triple Victory: The Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book* (London: The Faith Press, 1965); Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory* (Tyler, Tex.: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983); Nicholas John Ansell, *The Woman Will Overcome the Warrior: A Dialogue with the Christian/Feminist Theology of Rosemary Radford Reuther* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994). Evangelicals seem less decisive about their status; see Russell Chandler, *The Overcomers* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1978), compared to Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986).

7. I trust readers will understand that I use such terms as "we," or "conservative" or "institutional," etc., accommodatively, as "shorthand" to prevent this essay from becoming overly verbose. I do not wish to contribute to any sense of "we-consciousness" or nascent denominational conceptualization, which I abhor as much as anyone. By "we" here, I simply mean those striving to be first-century Christians in the 21st century.

8. Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus The Word According to John the Sectarian: A Paleo-fundamentalist Manifesto for Contemporary Evangelicalism, Especially its Elites, in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 73-74.

9. James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion*

and the *Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 132.

10. Roger Finke and Rodney Starke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 18, 84, 150, 169, 238; cf. 249-55. While many scholars have criticized various specific features of Finke and Starke's work, the general conclusions they document here seem too clear to dispute.

11. Gundry, *Jesus the Word According to John the Sectarian*, 77, n. 18. Gundry is here using terms like "sectarian" in the commonly-accepted language of religious sociology, that is, describing the beliefs and practices of a religious group as it relates to their social development with reference to the broader culture. One need not accept all of Gundry's conclusions, nor use his language, to acknowledge that his insider perspective on American evangelicalism has the ring of truth.

12. Gundry, 66. Of course, the language of the commonly used "sect-to-denomination" social process has long been applied to the so-called "Restoration Movement," most notably by David Edwin Harrell, Jr. Some of the more significant historical essays regarding such issues are included in the recent work edited by Michael A. Casey and Douglas A. Foster, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An International Religious Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002). For an analysis of the relationship of Churches of Christ to Fundamentalism and broader evangelicalism, see James Stephen Wolfgang, "Fundamentalism and Churches of Christ, 1910-1930," M.A. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1990.

13. A recent work analyzing the relationship of "restorationists" to evangelicalism is the collection of essays by William R. Baker, *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Downer's Grove, 111.: InterVarsity, 2002).

14. See, for example, Leonard Allen, "The Transforming of a Tradition," in Allen and Lynn Anderson, eds., *The Transforming of a Tradition: Churches of Christ in the New Millennium* (Orange, Cal.: New Leaf Books, 2001), 17-18; and Tim Woodruff, "How Do You Spell Restoration?", 37-38 (a chapter adapted from Woodruff's *A Church That Flies: A New Call to Restoration in the Churches of Christ* (Orange, Cal.: New Leaf Books, 2000).

15. Rob McRay, "The Last Will and Testament of the Churches of Christ," in Allen and Anderson, eds., *The Transforming of a Tradition: Churches of Christ in the New Millennium*, 44. The irony of the title will be evident to any student of "Restorationist" history.

16. Charles Hodge, "Facing the Instrumental Music Question Again," *Gospel Advocate* 140 (February 1998): 24. See also LaGard Smith, *Who Is My Brother? Facing a Crisis of Identity and Fellowship* (Malibu, Cal.: Cotswold, 1997), and the reaction in Wayne Jackson, *A Friendly Review of LaGard Smith's Who Is My Brother?* (Stockton, Cal.: Courier Publications, 1998). Note pp. 20-21.

17. Mark Love, "The Church that Connects at Calvary," in Allen and Anderson, eds., *The Transforming of a Tradition: Churches of Christ in the New Millennium*,

144. Some of the generational conflicts between older and younger preachers in "institutional" churches are documented in Douglas A. Foster, Mel E. Hailey, and Thomas L. Winter, *Ministers at the Millennium: A Survey of Preachers in Churches of Christ* (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Press, 2000).

18. "A Conversation with Abraham Malherbe," *Christian Chronicle* 59 (February 2002): 20. Admittedly, hearing voices of concern and observing the hand-wringing of an older generation over how far a younger generation has taken the logical conclusions of the seeds of their own liberalism is astounding, if not bizarre.

19. Taken from the model of Old Testament prophets, a jeremiad is a lament over what historians have called "declension" — a spiritual decline of religious fervor, piety, morality, and commitment to original ideals. See Sacvan Berkovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). Emory Elliott, *Cambridge History of American Literature*, I: 201, 257.

20. This was a favorite quotation of my wife's father, William C. Ashworth, Sr., of blessed memory. I once asked him where he had read this from Lipscomb, but he could not recall, nor have I been able to document it among Lipscomb's voluminous writings. However, as one historian remarked in another context, "If he didn't say it, he should have." I would be indebted to any reader who knows the citation for this quotation.

21. One should perhaps note the obvious truism that, for all the discussion lately about "centers of brotherhood power and influence" with respect to religious journals, this lectureship has long been, and remains, the largest mass meeting — physical and geographic assembly — of "conservative" brethren anywhere on earth. It is this "clientele," and those to whom they may speak upon returning home, that I wish to address here.

22. See Earl West's remarks on the relative influence of colleges, and of brotherhood journals, in *Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement, 1849-1906* (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950), 461-463.

23. As a recent example of the tendency of religious colleges to depart from their original purposes (only one in a large genre of such writing), see James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Examples of how educational institutions have evolved, and affected churches of Christ, can be seen in Ed Harrell's *Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 101-103, 105-106, 265-272, 280-293, and elsewhere.

24. David Edwin Harrell, Jr., "Epilogue," in Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1988), 244.

25. George Duffield, 1858.

The "seed of the woman" and the "seed of the serpent" have opposed each other continuously across the centuries. The struggle continues to this present hour. Not a Popularity Contest. Jesus the "seed of the woman" who would one day make his entrance into this world in a most unlikely fashion. As the centuries rolled on, Satan kept winning victories and God kept raising up men and women who would continue the godly line on the earth. I like to think of this verse as the top of a wide funnel. When the promise was given, no one could have imagined the coming Jesus Christ. The "seed of the woman" simply meant that he must be member of the human race. The Seed of the woman is a singular seed by "it"; the seed of the serpent is he himself. By comparing pronouns "note the "his" " we can see the woman's seed is masculine. Therefore, the serpent and the woman's Seed would be at war against each other. The bruises or wounds described in a figure signify a nuisance and a mortal blow. We know that the serpent is no other than the devil and Satan (Revelation 20:2). As Paul promised, the saints of God, with and by the great Seed of the woman, shall bruise Satan under their feet shortly (Romans 16:20 cp Luke 10:19 cp Revelation 20:10). Conclusion: Do you believe the woman's seed is Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Son of God? Do you believe the woman's seed has defeated the devil, sin, death, and the grave? Jesus Christ is that promised seed of the woman who delivered His people from the destruction of their sins. First, I want you to see that Jesus is the seed of the woman; and secondly, I want you to see why God sent Him. For those of you who know Jesus as your Savior this morning, may this story delight your heart again. For those of you who do not, may you be found by Him. But the strange thing is that He is called the seed of a woman, not of a man, which is usually the case. c. But here the Deliverer is called the seed of a woman, because He would be One who was conceived, not of the seed of a human father, but of the divine Father. That is, the woman was to possess this seed by the Holy Spirit.