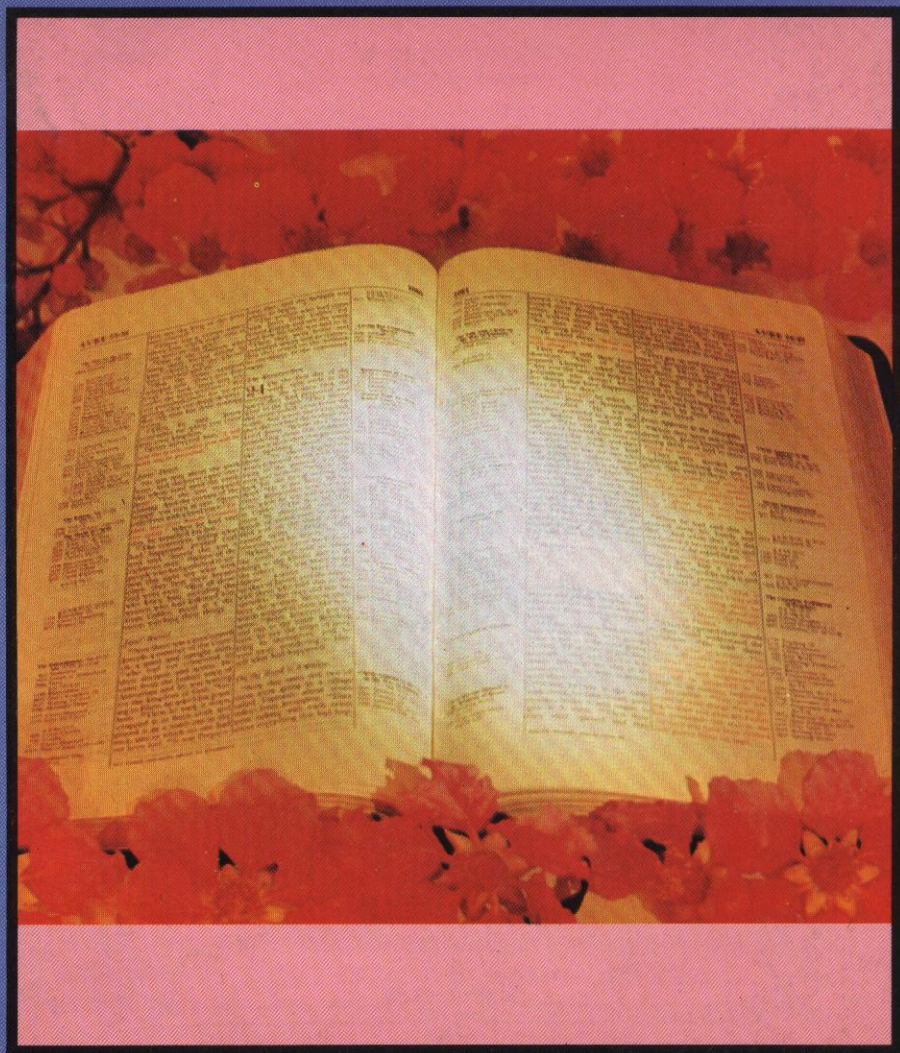


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An Exegesis of Genesis 26

Isaac in Beersheba

Meishi Tsai

Out of the seven sections in Genesis 26 (vv. 1–6: the covenant with Abraham renewed to Isaac; vv. 7–11: Isaac and Rebekah at the court of Abimelech; vv. 12–17: Isaac's prosperity; vv. 18–22: Isaac's wells; vv. 23–25: Isaac at Beersheba; vv. 26–33: Abimelech's covenant with Isaac; vv. 34–35: Esau's Hittite wives), 26:1–6, 18–33 have been selected as a sample of exegetical method as well as an exposition of the importance of faith.

I An Exegetical Method

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: Two things warrant our attention when we look into the historical period of the Patriarchs.¹ Firstly, the history of the tradition of Israel's ancestors had originated from Upper Mesopotamia, to the semi-nomadic population of which area they felt a close kinship. Secondly, the date of Patriarchs falls in the Middle Bronze Age (MB II) between 20th and 7th centuries B.C., although the chronology and extra-Biblical evidence cannot settle the exact dates of the patriarchs.

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL SETTING: During the Patriarchal Age, the forefathers of Israel made their livelihood as herdsmen, moving about only in the hilly and forested regions of the country and along the border. The areas of their activities covered the following three regions: the central region hill country including Hebron (Mamre), Jerusalem and Migdal-eder, Bethel, Shechem and Dothan; the Negeb (the south) -- the region from Beersheba to Gerar, from whence the Patriarchs sometimes wandered as far as Kadesh(-barnea) and Shur (Egypt); the region of Gilead--Mizpah, Mahanaim, Penuel and Succoth. In these regions the patriarchs travelled as sojourners ("foreigners") without real estate holdings, acquiring resident privileges from the local rulers in return for various services. Their livelihood and cattle depend on the pasture and the living spring as a vital source. The nomads were

engaged in corn-growing, when the pasture lasted for an extended period of time (cf. Gen 26:12, 37:7). The dispute over the wells of living water occurred not only among the rival groups of herding nomads, but also among the city dwellers whose flocks would vie for water. That is why controversies took place between Abraham and the lord of Hebron, between the herdsmen of Lot and those of Abraham (Gen 13), and between Isaac and Abimelech.

RELIGIOUS LIFE: "Building the altar" goes side by side with "pitching the tent" (Gen 12:7-8; 13:3-4, 18; 26:23-25; 35:1, 6-8). Each patriarch is represented as undertaking the worship of his God with a variation of the term Elohim: The God of Abraham (elohe Abraham, Gen 28:13; 31:42, 53), the "Fear" of Isaac (Pahad yishoq: Gen 31:42, 53), and the Champion/Mighty One of Jacob (abir ya'qob Gen 49:24). God was the patron deity of the clan: hence in Gen 31:36-55 Jacob swore by the "Fear" of Isaac, and Laban by the God of Nahor, i.e., each by the God of his father's God.

The personal and divine names attest that the Hebrew ancestors worshipped God under the name "El". Not only Ishmael (May God hear), Jacob-el (May God protect) appeared in the extrabiblical documents of the second millennium and other personal names, but terms like El Shaddai, El Elyon, El Olam, and El Ro'i occurred in connection with ancient shrines: El Olam with Beersheba (Gen 21:33), El Elyon with Jerusalem (Gen 14:17-24).

LEXICAL ANALYSIS: The key words which comprise the characters and major events are Isaac, Gerar, the Philistines, Abimelech, divine promise, Abrahamic covenant, "Esek", "Sitnah", "Rehoboth", Sheba, and Beersheba. Some important words are listed as follows:

1. **Isaac:** The name Isaac derives from the verb *shq* "he laughs" or "he will laugh".² Its variant is *shhq* (Ps 105:9; Jer 33:26; Amos 7:9, 16). In connection with the birth of Isaac, as conveyed in the popular etymology (Volksetymologien), the thought of laughter recurs: see 17:17 where Abraham falls upon his face and laughs at the idea of the birth of the promised heir. Here the incredulous laughter of Abraham must be reckoned as the joy of the assurance that the promise of a son shall be fulfilled.

In Gen 18:12-15 Sarah laughs in derision at Yahweh's promise of a son, because Abraham and she have passed the possible age of conception (Gen 18:12-15).

Gen 21:6-7 (Consequence of Isaac's birth), 8-21 (Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael) renders the etymon Isaac into (1) Sarah becoming an object of laughter at the birth of her son (21:6), or (2) her rejoices at his birth (AV).

A third derivative meaning of Isaac is "mocking" "laughing at". It is how Ishmael is "sporting" with Isaac in Gen 21:9 (so ASV; cf. Judg 16:25; Ps 2:4). Elsewhere, "laughing" connotes "laughing with" in the sense of sexual play

(Gen 26:8 [RSV "fondling"]; Ex 32:6). In Galatians 4:22-31, the allegory of Abraham's two sons, Paul refers to the two covenants: Hagar, Ishmael and Sinai represent the Old Testament, whereas Sarah and Isaac point to the Jerusalem above, the spiritual grace and truth given by the gospel of Christ. Paul refers to "teasing" and "persecution" when he mentions the carnal (Ishmael), or the Jews, persecuting the spiritual (the promised heir Isaac), or the Christians.

2. **Gerar (10:19; 20:1):** Gerar, the present-day Tel Abu Hureireh, is in Wadi esh-Shari'ah (the Biblical Valley of Gerar).³ It is one of the two major wadies of the western Negeb (the other is Wadi Shallaleh [the Biblical Besor?]). Yohanan Aharoni has suspected that the Negeb is the title for Gerar. Gerar is at the borderline on the southwest toward "Gerar unto Gaza" (Gen 10:19) between Philistia and Judah. That Abraham in Gen 20:1 dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, i.e., Egypt, (For these places see Gen 14:7, 16:7) and sojourned in Gerar presents a difficulty. Gerar is the court of the King Abimelech. In 24:1, Abimelech is king of the Philistines and Gerar has been identified with an area a few miles south of Gaza (Umm Gerar). But Gerar is hardly a place of sojourn "between Kadesh and Shur". The best explanation is that (1) there is a lacuna between the two clauses of Gen 20:1, representing a journey from the Negeb into the Philistine region, or (2) Gerar may be a place southwest of Kadesh (Wadi Gerur), whose king happened to have the same name as the Philistine king of Gerar in Gen 26.⁴

The Hebrew text of Gedor in 1 Chronicles 4:39-40 is Gerar. In LXX records that: "They journeyed to the entrance of Gedor to the east side of the valley, to seek pasture for their flocks, where they found rich, good pasture, and the land was very broad, quiet, and peaceful; for the former inhabitants there belonged to Ham" (1 Chr 4:39-40). The sons of Ham could be Egyptians, Philistines or Canaanites (Gen 10:6-20), thus giving us a much clearer picture how the southern region of Palestine was inhabited by the descendants of Noah's third son. Although the name of Gerar is not mentioned in the Biblical conquest narratives of the book of Joshua and Judges, Gerar is the most important Canaanite city in the western Negeb.⁵ It is connected with the Simeonite expansion towards Gedor (LXX: Gerar) and Mount Seir (1 Chr 4:39-43).

3. **Beersheba:** The Hebrew Beersheba consisting of "Beer" ("well") and "sheba" ("seven", "plenty", "contract") means (1) the plenty of water; (2) well of the seven daemons; (3) well of covenant, contract, or pact. According to the Aramaic Papyri, Beersheba is rendered Bir-es-Sheba.⁶

The occurrence of Beersheba in the Bible can be seen in the following scriptures:

Gen 21:22-32: Beersheba originated in Abraham's covenant with Abimelech, the "well of seven lambs" or "the well of the oath". There, in Beersheba, Abraham worshipped El Olam (the Everlasting God) under a tamarisk tree (Gen 21:33).

Gen 46:1-5: Jacob consulted its oracle before journeying to Egypt.

Amos 8:14: The shrine of Beersheba, one of the most famous places in the land, is equal to Dan and Bethel (sanctuaries with golden calves); Gilgal (the ancient sanctuary founded by Joshua) and Samaria (capital of the Northern Kingdom in the Divided Monarchy).

As the southern limit of Palestine, Beersheba is mentioned with Dan, "from Dan to Beersheba" (Judg 20:1) or "from Beersheba to Dan" (1 Chr 2:12), and refers to the entire nation. 2 Kings 23:8 has the phrase "from Geba to Beersheba" which refers to the territory of the kingdom of Judah.

II An Attempt at Literary Criticism

Here literary criticism specifically refers to the two aspects: (1) From the ideological content, any given place has a message to convey to the reader, and without exception, the Biblical narrative is related to a definite theological purpose; (2) In reading any given passage one must be engaged in a careful and minute scrutiny of all aspects of the text's language, style, images, and the organic relation of one part to another. This "close reading" will bring the text to a sharp focus, so as to evoke a total response on the part of the reader to the "achieved content", form, or art of the work.

It has been a vogue for Bible or literary critics to label a piece of literary work which is oriented toward theological analysis as "narrative theology".⁷ Many narrative theologians have seen the stories as a discourse about God. Robert Roth, for example, has pointed out that the power of great stories and sagas of faith lies in their ability to kindle a universal human hope.⁸ Others like Johann Baptist Metz find in the great stories a cherished fact of suffering and conflict.⁹ Notably, Robert Alter, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at Berkeley, has stressed the role of human decision in the Biblical narrative. He sees that God's purposes are inseparable from history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. The Biblical tale, in Alter's words, "through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive

and ambiguities of character because they are essential aspects of its vision of humanity, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom".¹⁰ In this sense, the Isaac narrative in Gen 26 can be viewed as a decisive image for understanding and interpreting faith. By depicting a mundane and supramundane reality, Isaac, in the land of Gerar is given plot, movement, and climax, centering on the vision of God and His historical relation to the patriarchs.

In the literary analysis of any work, another important component is what we call "structure". A sum of relationships of the parts of a literary whole to one another conveyed either by the recurrent imagery, or thought patterns by means of contrast, intensification, a transitional technique, a reversal of order or value, a parallelism, or a chiasmic structure. A looking into such a conscious structural design of pattern will result in our discovery and evaluation of the meaning of the writer.

In terms of IDEOLOGICAL PATTERN, the structure of Genesis 26 is organized by a theme of "test" to prove whether Isaac is a man of moral and spiritual excellence.¹¹ The theme of "test achieved" of Isaac's worth is seen in two spheres of reality: God and men. In the first part Yahweh's command to stay in the land of promise is a test whether Isaac is a true heir of Abraham, and whether he will trust in God's providence. In the second part, Isaac's moral and spiritual qualities are put to test by a series of difficult situations caused by the vandalizing and threatening Philistines.

Both direct discourse and the narrator's third person account reveal the character's internal psychological and the intended theological purposes. The direct discourse in Genesis 26 has an immediate effect in involving the reader in the divine will and the interreaction among characters. Examples are seen in the following:

26:2-5 (Yahweh's command to dwell in the land of promise); 26:16 (Yahweh's appearance and blessing); 26:22b (Isaac's remark about the board room/space/world for him to live on); 26:24 (The Lord's exhortation not to fear and His blessing); 26:27 (Isaac's question about the motive of Abimelech's visit); 26:28-29 (Abimelech's confession and intention to make a covenant of peace); 26:32b (Dramatic revealing by Isaac's servants that they have found water).

The implied narrator's point of view and the way he communicates to the reader concerning the progress and the aetiological background of the event are reflected in the following reports: Isaac's sojourning in Gerar (26:1-6); Isaac's plowing, fruitfulness and the Philistines' envy and malice (26:12-15); Isaac's departure from Abimelech and settlement in the Valley of Gerar (26:17); the contention over the wells (26:18-22a); an altar and the calling

upon Yahweh (26:25); Abimelech and his aids visiting Isaac (26:26); the feast and the peaceful separation after a covenant (26:30–32); the aetiological naming of Beersheba (26:33).

Structurally speaking, there is a rising and falling pattern. Claus Westermann, emeritus Professor of Old Testament at the University of Heidelberg, has rightly observed how Genesis 26 begins with an increase in prosperity (12–14), falls to a low point (v. 16 Isaac is expelled by Abimelech), and finally rises to a high point (v. 31).¹² As is with any account of characters and events in a plot moving over time and space, Isaac's life story can be viewed as a TWO-ACT MORAL DRAMA, focusing on the ethical principle as one of the vital aspects in the Israelite religion.¹³ By vividly characterizing the progress from famine as a test of Isaac's moral vision to the final climax, the human drama teaches all the believers of God the importance of faith and stoic magnitude. Significantly, psychological and behavioural conflicts in Isaac cumulates in the movement from "esek" (contention/rivalry, 26:20) through a much severer "sitnah" (life-or-death struggle, 26:21) to a totally reversed "rehoboth" (opening a broad way, 26:22). The dispute with its resultant resolution and the divine intervention (26:24) are complicated enough to become dramatic in the imagination of the reader, who can readily visualize how the dialogue takes place between the lines and how the hero proves his fortitude amidst the heightened stress and strain.

ACT I: Relationship between the Divine and the Human

Scene 1: Yahweh's Speech to Isaac and Isaac's Reaction
(Exposition: Natural disaster as challenge to faith)

Scene 2: Isaac in the land of Gerar (Complication: Isaac's labour and plentiful harvest).

In this Act Yahweh appears in the right timing and in the right place, reaffirming twice His divine promise and His gracious dealing with the patriarchs. Whereas on the horizontal human plane Isaac moves along with the Philistines, the contact between Yahweh and Isaac is a vertical axis, along which the divine being reveals Himself in such crucial moments as the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and Jacob's vision of the Heavenly Ladder at Bethel in Genesis 28.

ACT II: Human Relationship between Isaac and the Philistines.

Scene 1: Isaac and the Philistines: The expulsion and

dispute over the Wells (Climax: Reversal of "fate" and Resolution).

Scene 2: Yahweh's Benedictory Speech to Isaac (Interlude: Hero's reward from above after achieving a moral test).

Scene 3: Abimelech's covenant with Isaac (Denouement: Reconciliation of contraries).

Scene 4: "We have found water" (Epilogue: A happy ending. Grace is upon grace).

The command to stay in the land of promise in Act I is followed by another challenge posited by the harassing Philistines. The heightened dispute over the wells are strongly contrasted with Isaac's forbearance, leading to a unity of opposites and reconciliation of contraries. Ashamed, the enemy come for peace covenant. In the coda of the drama the finding of the water, symbolic of natural plenty and a living hope, triumphantly attests Yahweh's blessing upon Isaac's gentleness and endurance. Isaac has proved to be a man of true faith who has won moral victory in the sight of God and men.

III Some Observations on Isaac's Genuine Faith

The Isaac narrative invites us to a reflection of the meaning of faith. First, faith means the fear of the Lord and trust in Him. Fear means not just a simple apprehensiveness or total dread. It is respect, reverence, and submission to God, deriving from an awareness of His almightiness. A perception of God as a creator and author of life (Rom 4:17) has inspired people throughout the ages. First there was Abraham who responded to the divine call and began his journey of life under His guidance. The divine promise concerning the land and the descendants (Gen 17:4–6; 22:17–18) remained unshaken in spite of the vicissitudes of life. Abraham did not weaken in faith even though he was beyond the hope to beget a son. Later, at Mount Moriah a miracle of faith took place when Abraham showed his faith in surrendering his only heir. There he gained an abiding experience of "Yahweh jireh" (the Lord will provide).

Isaac had no less faith than his father. The Lord tested Isaac's faith on the same grounds whether he would adhere to the divine promise at the time of severe famine. It seems comprehensible for Isaac and his family to become famine refugees in the fertile lower Egypt. But from the divine perspective, the sojourning in a foreign land means not only a breach of faith, but also a perilous tendency to become identified with the world. The Lord's command

to stay in the promised land, albeit its temporary setbacks, reminds His people of the importance of trust in His providential care. Analogically, a Christian may from time to time encounter adverse circumstances, even to the point of despair, he must, however, understand that adversity tries one's faith and makes one mature. If he understands the higher purpose of God, he will then come closer to Him and become mature, even if he is in hardships. The command to stay in the promised land in Isaac's case serves as a teaching to Christians that they need to constantly dwell in His grace and love. Our Lord Jesus Christ has told us to abide in His words and be united in Him, the true vine (Jn 15:4-5). Apparently, if one departs from the faith, he would be spiritually endangered, even though he might have the material gain of the world.

Isaac's virtue of temperance as an aspect of the dynamic faith in the Lord has a modern relevancy. A person worthy of the Lord must show wisdom and good conduct towards people. The two wells, "contention" and "enmity", represent the treachery of the hostile world. To overcome the world one needs faith (1 Jn 5:4) and its moral strength. Just as Isaac's gentleness wearied the violence of the Philistines, we need to have the wisdom of quiet spirit and a character of integrity. Isaac's moral strength inspires us to be strong and to yield rather than quarrel. Isaac understood that the Lord would vindicate and that he had to turn his enemies into friends. Indeed, "when a man's ways please the Lord", says the Scripture, "he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov 16:7). In this world people tend to repay evil with evil, but the Lord Jesus Christ teaches His followers to love the enemy and pray for those who persecute the Christians. A wise person knows that meekness and gentleness can even touch a stony heart and convert the haughty. He also knows how to bear with temporary disadvantages and work for a long-term wellbeing. For this reason, he will avoid fretfulness, ill-humour or irrationality, for "with patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone" (Prov 25:15) and "he who is slow to anger is better than the might, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov 16:32). Isaac's moral victory lies not only in his repaying the enemy's evil with good, but also in overcoming evil with superior spiritual and moral splendour. Likewise, we Christians must manifest the fruit of the Holy Spirit in order to declare the wonderful deeds of the Lord and to reform the corrupted world with our moral excellence.

Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security.
Take delight in the Lord,

and He will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in Him, and He will act.
He will bring forth your vindication as the light,
and your right as the noonday.
Be still before the Lord,
and wait patiently for Him.

(Ps 37:3-7)

FOOTNOTES:

1. Roland de Vaux, *EARLY HISTORY OF ISRAEL*, Eng tr. David Smith, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1978, pp. 125-52; see also John Gray, *THE CANAANITES*, London, 1964; John Gray, *THE LEGACY OF CANAAN: THE RAS SHAMRA TEXTS AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO THE OLD TESTAMENT (SVT)*, 1965. Related to the historical background of this period, it is necessary for us to check up such terms as "Philistines" by J.C. Greenfield, in *IDB [Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible]*, Nashville, Tenn., Abingdon Press, 1962, Vol. 3, pp. 790-95, and the chapter on "The Patriarchs" in John Bright's well-acclaimed *A HISTORY OF ISRAEL*, London, SCM, 1982, pp. 67-103.
2. "Isaac", *IDB*, Vol. 2, p. 728.
3. For a good geographical introduction of Gerar, see Y. Aharoni, "The Land of Gerar", *IEJ [ISRAEL EXPLORATION JOURNAL]*, VI (1956), 26-32.
4. Y. Aharoni, *LAND OF THE BIBLE*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1979, p. 157.
5. Herbert E. Ryle, *THE BOOK OF GENESIS*, Cambridge University Press, 1921, p. 222.
6. A.C. Cowley, *ARAMAIC PAPYRI OF THE FIFTH CENTURY B.C.*, London, 1923, pp. 165ff, and A. All, *JOURNAL OF THE PALESTINE ORIENTAL SOCIETY* 15, 320ff. A fuller discussion of the Beersheba appears in Walther Zimmerli, *GESCHICHTE UND TRADITION VON BEESEBA IM AT*, 1932.
7. For an apt summary of this subject, see Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview", *INTERPRETATION*, 37:4 (Oct 83), pp. 340-352.
8. Robert P. Roth, *STORY AND REALITY: AN ESSAY ON TRUTH*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1973.
9. J Baptist Metz, *FAITH IN HISTORY AND SOCIETY*, trans. David Smith, New York, Seabury Press, 1980, pp. 211-12.
10. Robert Alter, *ART OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE*, New York, 1981, pp. 22.
11. The theme of "test" recurs throughout most of the Biblical narratives, e.g., the story of Noah and his ark (Gen 6:5-8, 9-16, 22; 2 Pet 2:5, Ezek 14:14), Abraham on Mount Moriah (Gen 22), and Moses on the Midian wilderness for a period of forty years before the divine call (Ex 2:11 - 3:17). Others like Daniel and his three friends at the Babylonian court (Dan 1:10ff), or facing a mortal threat in their faith in Yahwism (Dan 3). Most of them have been portrayed as men of God who fulfilled the test given by Yahweh.
12. Claus Westermann, *GENESIS 12-36*, Eng tras. John J. Scullion, Minneapolis, Augsburg Press, 1981, p. 423.
13. For a general discussion of the ethical tradition in the Old Testament, see Johannes Hempel (1891-1964), *DAS ETHOS DES ALTEN TESTAMENTS*, Berlin, A. Toepelmann, John Barton, "Approaches to the Ethics in the Old Testament" in *BEGINNING OLD TESTAMENT STUDY*, edited by John Rogerson, London, SPCK, 1983, pp. 113-130; John Barton, "Understanding Old Testament Ethics", *JSOT [JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT]*, 9 (1978), pp. 44-64; Eryl W. Davies, *PROPHECY AND ETHICS: ISAIAH AND THE ETHICAL TRADITION OF ISRAEL*, Sheffield, 1981 (JSOT, 16).

The Gospel of Jesus A Call And Invitation of Love

Yenzen Tsai

Anxiety, bewilderment, pain, and despair that characterize the modern man are primarily originated from a loss of self-assurance and an ambiguity of life purpose. Fear is the key word that best summarizes the predicament of our present existence. We remain anxious, because we cannot be sure how long we can maintain our job and position. We are fearful, because our most beloved may leave us for good at any moment. We are also scared, because our physical life may be endangered by any possible accident, either at home or in travel. Life is thus filled with uncertainties. It offers no guarantees. We have nothing substantial or affirmative in our hands. The next moment is always dangling in the air. Life seems a riddle, unsolvable and unpredictable. To many it is not unlike groping in a long, dark tunnel, the experience of which is nothing but an accumulation of hardship and hopelessness.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a language of love, reaching out to those who are perplexed and despondent. It reminds us of the intimate relationship between God and humanity. It reveals the way by which we reach God the Father and, hence, assurance of life (Jn 14:1-5; 15:1-8). It takes away our fear as though lifting us up from a deep ravine and releasing us onto a wide pasture where we can move comfortably. "Take heart, it is I; have no fear" (Mt 14:27). Jesus' calling is most clearly heard whenever we are enshrouded by doubt, disturbance, or even despair. It is like the parent's strong arms which firmly embrace the child who has been lost but found.

To be free from fear presupposes an attentive mind that reacts to Jesus' calling responsively and agilely. Our prolonged suffering in many cases is due to our slow reaction. For some, their sensibility has been so blunted that they would even take their long-term suffering as part of life reality. Apathy thus becomes standard expression. Jesus Christ, however, takes human misfortune to Himself to the greatest extent. He is concerned about us! He cares! He

empathizes His being with human suffering in totality (Mk 9:19). His salvific activities so devotedly carried out are a manifestation of this love (Mk 3:20). To those who are lost and fearful, He cannot but call aloud: "Come to me!" (Jn 7:37).

By coming to Jesus, we may witness how this Son of God devotes Himself into actualizing His love toward humanity, in word as well as in deed. Through Him, we may also unload all the burdens, either spiritual or physical, to enjoy real peace under the tempest of life.

The gospel of Jesus is a call of love. It invites the bewildered and perplexed us to participate in this love. The parables of Jesus are formulated in such a way that enable us to identify with the characters in the stories. This identification is meant to awake us from bewilderment and uncertainty and force us to recognize our true identity as well as to understand God's love. To fulfill this God-humanity intimacy we have to listen carefully to the stories and make wise and immediate decisions upon hearing. Henceforth, you are the very lost sheep in The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:3-7) who have been hopelessly wandering in the wilderness and waiting for the arrival of the shepherd. But, you are also the shepherd himself who, unwilling even to lose the least of his sheep, has been searching desperately for this lost sheep. Again, you are the lost son in The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) who has been allured into worldly entanglement but, at the same time, is looking for absolution. But, you are also the father of this prodigal son who, harbouring unfathomable love, has been waiting at the doorpost for his son's return. Further, you are the fallen victim in The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) who has been beaten up and left in despair. But, you are also the good Samaritan who, urged by pity and compassion, stretches out his hands to aid the wretched victim.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is thus an expression of love. It is a calling for those who are entrapped by fear and uncertainty. It is also an invitation for those who are perplexed and disheartened. It calls, calling us to return. It invites, inviting us to participate.



Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Life comprises a series of yesterdays, todays and tomorrows. Those who live these days meaningfully are those who fear the Lord and keep His commandments, realizing that their lives are entirely in His hands. What should our attitude towards yesterday, today and tomorrow be in order to receive God's blessing?

Let Us Give Thanks for Yesterday

All that we have, life, family and livelihood, come from God. And the world, with all its beauty, is His free gift to us. But most precious of all, the Lord gave up Himself for us. Willingly he died an agonizing death to redeem us. Through Him, we have the hope of salvation. Therefore, let us learn from King David and give thanks to Him.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's." (Ps 103:2-5)

Just as the Lord blessed the leper who returned to thank Him, so will He bless us. And not only that, our heart felt gratitude will act as a constant reminder of the divine providence and motivate us to serve Him all the more.

Let Us Dedicate Today to His Service

Time is life, and while we may, we must make good use of it, to seek spiritual advancement and to propagate the Lord's holy work. It is said that

the way a person organizes his day is indicative of how he will spend his life. The Bible also says, "... and as your days, so shall your strength be." (Deut 33:25)

Many people toil and labour in order to better their standard of living, but is the end result worth the effort? Jesus said, "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" What we must pursue, then, is eternal life, the true life. Jesus Christ is the way to this life. The Apostle Paul recognized this fact and declared, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Throughout his ministerial service, he was true to this affirmation. He lived each day to its fullest by cultivating his spirituality and following God's word. In return, the spiritual food he received from the Lord refreshed him and enabled him to convert many lost souls through his preaching and his miracles. Paul had offered every moment of his life to God, and God delighted in his dedication. When he was near the end of his life, he was able to utter these inspiring words: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness..." (2 Tim 4:7-8)

Let Us Entrust Our Tomorrows to God

We often make extensive plans for the future and hold high hopes for what is to come, neglecting to entrust it all to God. In fact we do not even know what will come to pass tomorrow. Only our heavenly Father can control our destiny. So, as the Apostle James instructed, we should say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this and that." Since tomorrow lies in God's hands, we need to understand His will. The Lord Himself has promised to be our counsellor (Is 9:6), and we need only to trust in Him through prayers and manifest an active faith in our daily living.

While we entrust our future to God, we must also remain spiritually alert, living as we are in the last days. As in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, we must emulate the five wise maidens who are always prepared to meet the Groom, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is because the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. We must be sanctified through prayers and meditation on His words.

If we look back on yesterday with thankfulness, dedicate ourselves to the Lord today, and at the same time, entrust our tomorrows to Him, we can be assured that He will always be with us on our journey to the heavenly Kingdom. He will protect, encourage and strengthen us, until we reach our goal.

The RIGHT Decision

An astute Religious Education pupil once asked his teacher: "Why didn't God stop Adam and Eve from eating the forbidden fruit?" His teacher replied, "Because God made Man in His likeness and gave him the free will to choose what he wanted to do."

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve did not make the correct decision, and as a result, mankind fell into sin, suffering, and death. Today, God has given us the free will to direct the course of our actions. It is essential that we make the right choices in life, because our decisions may not only determine our future but the future of those around us too. Admittedly, making the right decision can be difficult, and people often say, "I just don't know what to do!" However, principles from the Bible can provide guidance; we should follow them in all aspects of our lives, in our religion, our marriage, and our occupation.

Firstly, our decisions must be according to God's will. In other words, His plan for Creation, manifest on earth and in Heaven (Mt 6:10). Jesus exemplified the meaning of following God's will when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "...not as I will, but as Thou wilt." Our Lord also said, "Not every one who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). When seeking God's will, we should rely on the power of the Holy Spirit through sincere and prolonged prayers. God will then reveal His purpose to us through our daily living.

Secondly, our decisions must always be compatible with the Truth. Human tradition, emotion, and partiality often shun our rationality and judgement. We do not always recognize the Truth at once, just as Jesus' compatriots did not see Him as the Messiah. Therefore it is important that we distance ourselves from our personal prejudices and the influences of tradition and emotion, to weigh things objectively. But most important of all we need to appreciate that the Truth lies in Jesus and His words. The Lord said, "... the Scriptures... bear witness to me" (Jn 5:39), and "I am the way, the truth,

and the life" (Jn 14:6). So, in seeking the truth, we must draw near to Jesus, the Word of Life.

Everybody must, from time to time, be expected to discern between good and evil and decide on a particular course of action by relying upon his moral conscience. However, this measuring rod of moral standards is sometimes questionable. For example, when a person first sins, he may be pricked by the voice of his conscience, but on committing the same sin repeatedly, he becomes increasingly unaffected. His conscience is already "seared," as the Bible says. What remains reliable is the Word of God (Mt 24:35). We can depend on them, and our deeds will be judged by them (Jn 12:48). Therefore before making a decision, we should study the words of Jesus. If He were in our situation, what would He do? What does the Bible say?

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecc 3:1). We find, throughout the Bible, that God fulfills His plans at the appointed time: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law" (Gal 4:4). When He was preaching, Jesus often indicated that His time had "not yet come" (Jn 2:4; 7:6-8). On occasions, we may feel that our decision-making has met with all the requirements mentioned above. The final test remains: is this the time? If it is, God will move us to act.

In conclusion, we can see that God Himself will help us in making important decisions. As long as we rely on Him through prayer and Bible study, He will always be there for us, and we will make the right decision.

The Last Adam in Romans

This essay deals with a specific motif of Paul's Christology: Christ, the Last Adam. Detailed comparison and contrast as found in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-47, are related to the theological significance of this Pauline doctrine.

To Paul, Adam is a historical figure representing mankind. In an anthropological term, Adam stands for some primordial impulse in man which

goes beyond the prohibition of "epithumia" (desire). This epithumia is awakened in Adam and representatively in every man, the longing for all kinds of things (Rom 7:8). The deed of Adam is marked by self-seeking and self-centred desire, resulting in disobedience. It is in this way that Man (Adam) turns his back on God and the way of life God created for him. In Romans 5:12-21 Paul emphasizes the universal consequences of Adam's transgression: sin and death is transmitted to all humanity. Even the creation is subjected to "mataiotes" (futility) and "douleia tes phthoras: (bondage to decay. Rom 8:20, cf Gen 3:17).

The concept that Christ is "the Last Adam" plays a considerable part in Paul's thinking, although the name "Adam" is not specifically mentioned in Romans. Whereas in Philippians 2:5-11, Paul compares Adam and Christ, the analysis between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21 is given in a series of contrasts: the transgression of man as opposed to the gift of God in Christ. The result of the transgression is contrasted with the result of the gift of God in the redemption of Christ: "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22). Theologically speaking, the coming of Christ as the last Adam is to regain the lost paradise and the lost sonship of God. Christ is to restore a true and full humanity, a theme which occurs in the apocalyptic vision of Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah and other Jewish writings.

The work of Christ is to create a new humanity, one which Christians "put on" His nature like a robe in their baptism (Gal 3:27, Rom 6:3-6). To put on Christ in baptism means the eradication of the old and corrupt human nature. Though in baptism this putting on of the new humanity has taken place eschatologically, Christians still need to be exhorted to what they already are: to put away .. the old man, and put on the new created in righteousness and holiness of truth (Eph 4:22-24). If any person is in Christ and keeps himself holy and worthy, he is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17, Gal 5:16-23, 6:15).

In conclusion, the term "Last Adam" which occurs only once in 1 Cor 15:45ff is related to Paul's eschatology. Paul speaks of Adamic Christology in terms of antithesis: earthly versus heavenly, death versus life, carnal versus spiritual. Behind the Last Adam doctrine lies the divine "glory" and "image" and the concept of the eschatological community as a new creation in Christ.



Lily among Thorns

As the lily among thorns,
so is my love among the daughters
(Song 2:2).

A lily is a beautiful flower loved by all. Thorns on the other hand, are hated and considered abominable. Many even regard them as symbols of wickedness and sin. Genesis 3:18 indicated how thorns and brambles appear after man sinned and fell. Therefore they are said to be present when a person sinned, when a home is iniquitous, and when the church is full of dissension and strife. Indeed, these spiritual thorns are widespread. Yet a lily, the symbol of a true believer, can still flourish, blossom and emit its pleasing fragrance in the midst of the brambles. The thorns will not endanger its survival. The lily is simple and pure. This is the reason why the Lord loves this simple, and yet elegant plant. In fact, being pure and sanctified is also the most important virtue required of a Christian. The Bible has clearly said, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Because of Adam, man had lost his purity and lived in sin and darkness. There was no hope at all. But Jesus came, and through His sacrifice on the cross men were again reconciled with God, sanctified and irreproachable (Col 1:22). As Isaiah has prophesied, "Though your sins be like scarlet; they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson; they shall become like wool." (Is 1:18) After we repent and believe in the Lord, our sins are washed away by His blood and we are justified. But salvation does not end here. We must continue to work for it. Evil inclinations from the past, thoughts of wickedness, and the sin in the world can easily induce us to fall back into iniquity. Therefore, we must resolutely keep our hearts and minds free from evil thoughts, and our conduct pure from actions that may pollute our spirituality. The Lord warned us that our speech reflects what is in our heart, and this can defile a man because the heart is the source of evil thought,

murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slanders (Mt 15:18-19). Hence Peter wrote and stressed the importance of holiness to his readers, "... be holy yourselves in all your conduct" (1 Pet 1:15).

Furthermore in our pursuit of holiness, we must not fall into the trap of the Pharisee, who prayed to God by extolling himself and all his virtues. He mistakenly thought that his deeds have made him pure and righteous, when they, in fact, did not carry any power of justification before the Lord (Lk 18:11-14). Inwardly, he was selfish and egotistic, apparently giving the glory to God, but in reality, praising himself.

The second characteristic of the lily that is beloved by God is its fragrance. Every believer too must be filled with and emit the fragrance of Christ, which is His love, manifested in charity, hospitality, almsgiving, peace making, counselling, preaching, prayers, and more. This is why Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were the aroma of Christ, to emit their scent among those who were being saved and those who were perishing (2 Cor 2:15). As true Christians, we must keep this love within our hearts and give it freely to whom we encounter. Only then, will we be worthy of the Lord.

Finally, the significance of the lily among thorns can be explained in two ways. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining our purity in this defiled world (Jas 1:27). Secondly, it represents our ability to overcome all adversity in the course of our faith. Paul told Timothy, "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12). Yet a lily, gentle and beautiful, is able to thrive even among thorns. This simple illustration comforts the believers in the end time in that, we too, with the grace of God, can grow in the Faith even under the most adverse circumstances.

We live in a wicked world full of dangers. The Church may from time to time encounter difficulties. But the teaching from the lily tells us that we need not despair, because we shall overcome all things with love, forbearance, and the power of Christ. The grace of God is indeed sufficient, and we will grow strong and survive, as a lily among thorns.



Some Thoughts on FAITH

Church member: Dear Preacher,
what did you preach just now?
Preacher: Faith, faith, faith.

- 1 -

An abiding religious experience lies in the dedication of the individual's conscience to God and distinct ritual observances. Strictly speaking, the former is far more important than the latter, for religious practice would lose its intended meaning when devoid of "worship" in the spirit and in truth. The communal liturgical hymn-singing, reading of the scriptures, or congregational prayer provides the individual with the necessary force and learning required in order to cope with the world which does not live according to pious standards. The underlying meaning of worship is to give the members a sense of immediacy in sharing with the faith of the righteous and the faithful people of God in the past. This "sharing" of the commendable, if not "great", faith is not conducted in any abstract definition or in a high-flown oratory, but in the individual's awareness for a need to emulate and commit to the faith provided by the exemplary Biblical characters in our daily living.

- 2 -

Religious sensitivity for what is good and what should be done is itself a moral obligation, valid through commitment to its fruition. What is precious in the sight of God is a faith described not as a verbal reality, but as a matter of cognition. Jesus Christ used to teach people about the right way acceptable to the Kingdom of God. One of the first and foremost ethical principles is the commandment to love. But this is related to a simple statement which evokes a response and demands a verdict. "What do you think?" Jesus sometimes begins, and where the words are not found, the question is implied. Our Lord Jesus then continued in parables relating a true-to-life story or the

description of something familiar to every ordinary person. Once Jesus related a parable to a Judaic lawyer:

A man from Jerusalem on his way to Jericho was beaten, robbed, and left on the roadside half conscious...Three persons, a priest, a Levite, and a much-hated Samaritan passed by. Ironically, the first two who had God, the Levitical priesthood and the Temple as the objects of their ritual observance, turned away from the man. The motives are not given in the parable, but their action betrays a humanitarian course. Then, the despised Samaritan with whom the Jews refused to associate, came to the rescue and took care of him even covering the minute details.

The question Jesus asks at the end of the parable of "the Good Samaritan" is: "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers?" (Lk 10:36). Jesus does not appeal to the cognitive level of the doctor of the law or of the hearers of the parable. He is appealing to the urgent issue of the Judaic or Christian faith: This is not just an interesting story. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Let him hear with an inner ear and with a mind and strength to work it out for himself. The blessing of God is given to those who hear and out of love do according to His words (Mt 7:24-26).

- 3 -

Every one in Christ must show that his faith is alive and active. Without such an endeavour, workers of God and general membership can neither demonstrate nor enjoy the love of God and favour of men. Persons holding a sacred office must be careful about what they have taught (1 Tim 4:16). Their faith and their service of the Lord can be reduced to a mechanical, ritualistic and Pharisaic fashion, if they suffer from delusions of grandeur or self-importance. Likewise, church goers may easily miss the important connection between hearing and doing Christ's words, if they are inclined more to material gain than to spiritual illumination. Under such circumstances, faith for the ministers and members will become something that stands outside the ordinary daily living. Such words of God as the command to love and the need to be worthy of Him become a sounding cymbal. Human beings are endowed with the faculty of hearing and are given the same opportunity to think and to act. Jesus makes all his teaching about the entry to the Kingdom of God depend upon the doing of His own words. Such religious elites as the Pharisees and the scribes failed the righteousness of God and their knowledge of the Law could not prevent them from becoming religious hypocrites.

- 4 -

Faith requires human endeavour to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real, between the mind and the heart. I have often heard sermons urging members to be persons of great faith. Indeed, I would like to become a Joseph, a Moses, a Daniel, or a Paul. These are my ideals. But pomposity and furor produce either illusion or frustration. Illusion, because the ideals are somehow removed from the stark reality of one's circumstances. Frustration, because they are too intangible and too high to reach instantaneously. An emotionally-charged exhortation causes temporary agitation, as it appeals not to reason. The atmospheric fervency lasts only momentary. Many people have been moved by the stirring message during spiritual convocations or fervent prayer sessions but they do not hold on to their zeal. It is clear that faith is a combination of reason and faith, divine power and wisdom, belief and action.

We have often been encouraged to learn from Moses "meeting" with God on the top of Mountain Sinai. This means that if I were now at Mount Sinai, I would strive to become the leader of the congregation and to be qualified so that I would ascend the summit, leaving behind me the multitudes on the plain, and the seventy elders, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu halfway in the mountain. Certainly, if the Lord chose to manifest Himself in the same way, I could be at the top. But at a turn of thought, I realize that there is one Moses and numerous members, and that Moses' leadership means humble service and stoic magnitude. The Lord's command for faith starts with an awareness, a determination to remain humble, to act upon even a minute and ordinary situation, instead of being a solitary figure climbing an empyrean height. Admittedly, I could bear with false persecution like the young Joseph enduring the infamous slander of his master's wife, or like the three friends of Daniel defying King Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace. Indeed, I can retain my integrity like Joseph, when I am confronted with a sensual attraction or something spiritually damaging. I will have to look within before I can look towards the "clouds above the mountain". I am aware that I must deal with an inner struggle in me, before I presumably talk about the spiritual height. This is an empirical reality spoken of by the apostle Paul concerning everyman's mental journey:

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me...For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self. but I see in my members (flesh) another

law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members...

I might be expecting an angel to appear in the furnace to keep me alive by reversing the natural law that material will be consumed by fire, were I to be cast in the fiery kiln. My faith would dictate me to die for the Lord as a martyr. What is taken into account is that I win the battle over the law of the flesh. Jesus has laid down the principles of actions which I must not neglect at my eternal peril. With this understanding I will first rely on Jesus Christ to overcome my own inadequacies, and then remaining lowly and gentle, I will confirm my faith by a moral and spiritual vitality in my daily life amidst the human world. After all, it is from the human plane that I build up my faith, love, and hope, and not until then will I begin to climb the spiritual ascent with my fellow Christians. The Lord will graciously lead those who have fulfilled the basic moral obligations and by His guiding hand we will reach the summit.

A New Bowl of Salt

A passage in the Bible tells how Elisha treated bad water with a bowl of salt:

"Now the men of the city said to Elisha, 'Behold, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad, and the land is unfruitful.' He said, 'Bring me a new bowl, and put salt in it.' So they brought it to him. Then he went out to the spring of water and threw salt in it, and said, 'Thus says the Lord, I have made this water wholesome; henceforth neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.' So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word which Elisha spoke." (2 Kgs 2:19-22)

The land of Canaan was, in the beginning, a land of hills and valleys, nurtured by rains from heaven. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of abundance and prosperity. God wanted his people to dwell in Canaan, to love Him and follow His commandments. If they would do so, their days would be prolonged and they would receive material and spiritual blessings from the Lord (Deut 11:9-17; 30:15-20). The chosen people were not alone in the Promised Land, however. There dwelt also seven Gentile tribes who worshipped pagan gods and practised evil. They often lured the Israelites into iniquity, and were a severe test of the Jewish nation's faith.

The nature and location of the city of Jericho is also significant. Jericho was a great center of commerce, due to its geographical proximity to the Transjordan, or "outside" world. As such, it was a magnificent, prosperous city, with caravans coming to and fro carrying traders and goods from far-off lands. Metaphorically, Jericho's bad water and its treatment hold much spiritual meaning.

After the people of Israel conquered Jericho through the mighty power of God, they took an oath declaring that they would not relay the foundations of the city. The Lord further placed a curse on anyone who dared to do so (Josh 6:1-21, 26). The city was seen as a place to be abhorred. This portrayal of the city is continued in the New Testament as well. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a man was nearly beaten to death on his way from the Holy City down to Jericho. From a spiritual standpoint, Jerusalem may be taken to represent the church, and the journey down to Jericho as a decline in faith. Furthermore, the robbers can be seen as the evil one. Jericho is thus a symbol for wickedness and the corrupt world (Jas 4:4-5; 1 Jn 2:15).

Although Jericho seemed a pleasant land, its appearance may be likened to the prosperous cities of Sodom, Babylon, and other worldly cities that misled people into seeking temporary pleasures and gains. Jericho was, in the eyes of God, full of sin and evil (Gen 13:10-13; Mt 4:8-9; Rev 18:1-3, 7, 12, 13, 16). The comment that the situation of the land seemed pleasant can also be linked to the spirituality of the people there, "a form of godliness in outward appearance only and without any real substance" (2 Tim 3:5), similar to the "white-washed tombs" to which Jesus likened the Pharisees. This is a very dangerous situation.

In the Promised Land, the children of God were able to reap in abundance and enjoy plentiful wine and oil (Deut 11: 14; 28:11). Christians today likewise enjoy the grace of God, and receive the living water of the Holy Spirit (Is 32:15; Jn 4:13-14; 3:34; 7:37-39; Eph 5:18). They receive abundant showers of blessing and the downpour of the Holy Spirit. In contrast to this, those who do not know the true God and who rebuild the foundations of Jericho,

conforming to the world and indulging the flesh, will suffer "bad water" and famine, both physically and spiritually. Their life is full of sorrow, and they ultimately reap corruption and death (Rom 8:5-8; Gal 6:7-8; Jer 17:5-6; Heb 6:3-8; 10:38).

Just as Elisha and other prophets and disciples lived in the city of Jericho, so Christians live in the midst of this crooked world. It is not possible to physically live apart from the world, but it is possible to avoid conforming to it. A Christian must be resolved to transform the world through the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 10:4-5). Elisha's method of treating the bad water is significant to a believer's spiritual refinement and preaching. Three things in particular merit consideration - the salt, the new bowl, and the pouring of the salt into the spring.

Salt is often taken for granted and seen as a mundane part of life, but it possesses many good characteristics. It is used as a disinfectant, flavouring, seasoning, and other properties. In this unbelieving, perverse, and crooked generation (Mk 8:38), Jesus wants his disciples to be the salt of the earth (Mt 5:13). In order to do this, they must become gentle and humble like Him (Mt 11:29) and bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). As the salt of the earth a Christian must season those around him with love and peace, and must love his brothers and sisters (Mk 9:50; Jn 15:12-17; Php 2:1-5; 1 Pet 3:8-9; Rom 12:10-16). The true believer must act with gentleness and with wisdom (Col 4:5-6). Like the four living creatures in Revelations who had eyes facing in all directions, he must be able to know and discern between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood. With wisdom it is possible to understand God's will (Eph 5:18) and rely on Him to lead the way to victory in Christ (2 Cor 2:14). As the salt of the world, the believer is able to facilitate peace between God and man and between man and man. This he does through the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18) and the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15). With God's help, the spiritual salt extends the righteousness of God's kingdom, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17), and transforms the toil and sorrow of mankind into joy and contentment (2 Cor 6:9-10; Php 4:13; Ex 15:22-25; Mk 4:35-41; Ac 16:22-34).

Elisha's request for a new bowl to be filled with salt may be compared to Jesus' teaching that new wine be contained in new wineskins. The truth that Jesus brought into the world strengthened the spirit and principles of the Mosaic Law (Rom 3:31). But the human traditions of the old Jewish law are incompatible with the spiritual principles of God's kingdom. New wine must be contained in new wineskins. In the same way, outward actions must be

matched by the inward faith, for the old, sinful self cannot inherit the new life in Christ (1 Cor 15:50; 1 Pet 3:10-13).

The new bowl represents a Christ-like transformation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). For it is God's will to grant "a new heart" to His chosen ones so that they may keep His commandments and walk in His ways (Ezk 36:26; Jer 32:39). This spiritual transformation comes through the washing of regeneration, or baptism, and then through the washing of the Holy Spirit and through living each day according to the Word of God. Then, when a person is purified, he will be a worthy vessel of the Lord (2 Tim 2:21).

After Elisha received the salt in the bowl, he poured it into the spring, and henceforth the water became sweet and the land fruitful. This is a metaphor for the believers' task today - to transform spiritual land, or men's souls. The first step to take is to become upright and holy himself, to be able to manage his own household (1 Cor 9:26-27; 1 Tim 3:3, 4, 13) and build up a good foundation in the Lord (Eph 6:14-18; 3:16-19) through faith, godliness, wisdom, and love. These are attributes that can be developed gradually through prayer and meditation on the Word. Through the power of God, a Christian will be able to live out his faith through his good deeds in his community, and in this way transform it.

Besides environmental transformation, a most important task for a believer is to transform his heart and the hearts of those around him, for this is the key to God's blessing. The heart is often full of wickedness in this sinful age, and so the first step is to transform his own heart. In the same way as Elisha treated the spring, the believer must go forth and treat the source of wickedness in others - the heart. Then, he will be able to lead unbelievers to God, who searches, tries, and refines the hearts of men (Jer 17:10; 1 Sam 16:7; Job 23:10). God's Word can indeed cleanse a person's heart (Ps 19:7-14; Eph 5:26; Rom 15:4), and the Holy Spirit can renew him and lead him to holiness (Tit 3:5; 2 Thess 2:13).

Just as the land of Jericho became fruitful, so can the souls of those who accept Christ. God's children will enjoy His grace upon earth, and receive eternal inheritance in heaven.





Ten Articles of a Happy Marriage

Husbands and wives are one of the most fundamental organization to society. God has a high regard to such a union. Furthermore, it is almost certain that a happy marriage will bring forth a blissful home. However, such a goal cannot be achieved overnight. It takes time for a married couple to establish a contented home. Listed below are ten articles which may contribute to a happy marriage.

1. Acknowledge our life partner as a gift of God.
2. Accept the other half totally as Christ has accepted us.
3. Converse freely with each another. Express our feelings adequately.
4. Be able to appreciate the virtues and tolerate the shortcomings of our spouse.
5. Do not ask for the impossible.
6. Always respect each other.
7. Be faithful to each other and develop the kind of love that should exist between a husband and wife.
8. Pursue common interest and share our life experience with our spouse.
9. Express our love by way of thankfulness.
10. Do not always consider our self-interests in decision making but be willing to discuss and accept each other's opinion before undertaking any project.



A Sketch of Jewish History

Israel, to which special sanctity attaches, is the name by which the people is known in the Bible. "Hebrews" and "Jews" are the other names commonly in use, and rich in historical and emotional connotations. Abraham and the prophet Jonah are called "a Hebrew", whereas Mordecai in the Book of Esther is called a Jew. "Hebrew" has remained important as the name of the language which Jews often call "the holy tongue", the language of the Bible and liturgy, as well as of the modern state of Israel. The word "Jews" is derived from Judah, the ancient territory of which Jerusalem was the capital, and which Jews in ancient times looked to as their homeland.

It is important for us to learn the background of Judaism. Let us start with a historical sketch of the Jewish people so as to deepen our knowledge of the land and the people of the Bible. The long and complex history of the people of Israel can easily be divided into three periods, ancient, medieval, and modern. The ancient period can be further subdivided into three: extending from the Biblical period, the Greek period, to the Early Arabic period, which saw the establishment of the political power of Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries and of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. This is the period in which the foundation of Judaism was laid, and its classical literature, the Bible and Talmud, was written.

- 1 -

1.1 The Biblical period encompasses the remote beginnings of the Jewish people as nomads, the settlement in the Land of Israel and the establishment of the monarchy. David (1004-965 BC) conquered a new capital, Jerusalem, and made it an effective center by installing there the Ark of the Covenant, the religious symbol to which all gave allegiance. Solomon (965-928 BC) consolidated the victories of his father but his tight bureaucratic control and heavy taxes proved too much for his people. After his death the northern portion of his realm became a separate kingdom of Israel. After a series of bloody uprisings as a means of succession to the throne, it was destroyed

by the Assyrians (721 BC). Like its northern neighbour, the Southern Kingdom of Judah could not escape the same fate of destruction by the Babylonians (587–86 BC). The traumatic experience of the Exile lasted a period of seventy years until they were permitted to return to their homeland (538 BC) to rebuild Jerusalem in 516 BC under the Persian rule (538–332 BC).

1.2 The Greek period (332–63 BC) extends from the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great of Macedonia (331 BC) until the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD. After the death of Alexander, the land of Israel became the battleground of his two generals. Ptolemy acquired Egypt and Seleucus had Syria and Babylonia under his control. The Ptolemies held Palestine until 200 BC when it passed into the hands of the Seleucidae. The Seleucidae displaced the traditional Zadokite high priesthood and imposed the Hellenistic culture upon the Jewish ways of life and religion. Eventually the three Maccabean brothers revolted in 167 BC, struggling for religious freedom and political independence. The Maccabees succeeded to establish the Hasmonaean dynasty which extended the Jewish dominance to the whole of Palestine, the Golan and the east bank of the Jordan, almost the extent of the empire of David and Solomon.

The Jewish world widened its frontiers throughout the Middle East and the Eastern Roman Empire and as far to the west as Spain. This dispersion (Greek "diaspora") is an encounter with Greek culture, which was in turn countered by Pharisaism and nascent Christianity.

1.3 Following the Grecian period is the Roman period (63 BC – 324 AD). Herod the Great (40 BC – 4 AD), who received some autonomy and some added territories from the Romans, undertook the project of renovating the Temple and expanding its areas. His sons, Antipas, Philip, and Archelaus lacked the qualities of their father, forcing the Romans to resume direct control. Political authority was vested in a Procurator who resided in Caesaria. This Roman witnessed the ministry of Jesus Christ (AD 27 – 30) whose crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension destined to have such tremendous consequences for the world. Under the Roman mismanagement, the First Jewish Revolt broke out in 66 AD. In reprisal Titus and Vespasian laid waste the land. The destruction of the Temple in 70 precipitated a major shift within Judaism. The sacrificial worship no longer existed and old priestly aristocracy gave way to the legalists. Later, when the nationalist aspirations became more and more active and defiant, the Roman emperor Hadrian resolved to raze it completely. This provoked the Second Revolt (132 – 135) led by Bar Kokhba. The Roman victory permitted Hadrian to carry out his plans. Aelia Capitolina was built on the levelled ruins of Jerusalem. Being refused entrance to Jerusalem and harassed in Judaea, Jews began to move northward and built

villages and synagogues in Galilee and the Golan.

1.4 The Byzantine period (324 – 640) started with the transfer of the capital of the empire from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium which was renamed Constantinople (330). As one of the most important political events, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 and fostered its development. His consecration of the sites associated with Christ's birth, death-resurrection, and ascension awakened interest in the Holy Places which became the centers of the pilgrims. Churches were established everywhere and monasteries flourished in the desert. During these centuries, Palestine suffered theological controversy and was troubled only twice: the Samaritan revolt (529) and the Persian invasion (614). Both were short-lived but proved extremely destructive.

1.5 The Early Arabic Period (640 – 1009). By the seventh century, the Byzantine Empire was infested with internal intrigues and struggles against Persia. Mohammad (570 – 632) preached the new faith of Islam which soon swept over the Arabian desert. The battle of the Yarmuk on 20 August 636 marked the end of Palestine for the Christians. In 638, caliph Omar, successor to Mohammad, accepted the surrender of Jerusalem. From this time onwards, the holy city had been protected and embellished by the successive dynasties until 1009, when the mad caliph Hakim savagely persecuted Christians and destroyed many churches.

During the ancient period, following the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire in the early fourth century and the consolidation of Christian influence in the fifth century, the opportunities open to the Jews became progressively reduced. Access to political power and to the educational institutions of the majority culture were deprived and their economic and social life was circumscribed. Often they suffered physical attacks by Christian mobs, and harsh and arbitrary decrees, including expulsion from Christian cities and states. Meanwhile, the conquest of the Middle East and North Africa by Muslim Arabs in the seventh century led to similar, if less oppressive, conditions to the Jews. Religious persecution and massacres were frequent.

But this third phase of the ancient period was also the Talmudic period in which Judaism in Palestine and Babylon developed under guidance of rabbis. The learned doctors of the law were the heirs of the priests and scribes of the previous period. They undertook the codification of Jewish law and embodied their discussions and decisions in the Talmudic literature. Rabbinic Judaism was to retain its dominance for most Jews throughout the subsequent long Middle Ages.

2.1 The Crusader Period (1009-1291). Seeing that the Holy Land and Christendom in the East were under the domain of the Arabs, Pope Urban II called for a crusade to liberate the Holy Places in 1095 and the great religious enterprise thus began. On 15 July 1099 the Crusaders occupied the Holy City, massacred all the Muslim inhabitants (From this act of atrocity was born the inflexibility of Islam). Baldwin I (1100 - 18) became the first king over the new territory. The Crusaders introduced their European feudal system and governed effectively. Castles, abbeys and manor houses were built all over the land. But the era of the Crusaders did not last long when in 1187 Saladin finally defeated them at the Horns of Hattin. In 1250, the Bahri Mamelukes toppled the Ayyubid dynasty of Saladin and began a series of campaigns which culminated in the capture of the last Crusader stronghold, Acre (Akko) in 1291.

2.2 In the Mameluke Period (1250 - 1517), the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople in 1453, bringing an end to the Eastern Roman Empire and established the beginning the Ottoman Empire (1517 - 1918). The first two sultans of the Ottoman Empire were effective administrators. Constantinople and Salonica emerged as the prominent cities. On the part of Palestine, Suliman the Magnificent rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, the spectacular appearance of which remains until today. But, subsequent incompetent sultans, local chieftains, and raiding Bedouins resulted in a population decline in Palestine. Villages and fields were abandoned, and parts of Jerusalem fell into ruins.

During the above-mentioned medieval period, the heads of the main Talmudic academies (called "Geonism") were responsible for elaborating the teachings of the Talmud and spreading them to other parts of the Jewish world. In the eleventh century the Geonic academies declined, and the center of gravity shifted to North Africa, Spain, and northwestern Europe. Jewish philosophy, Bible commentary and Hebrew poetry, both sacred and profaned flourished. Moses Maimonides, the philosopher, poets Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Judah ha-Levi, the commentators Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra and David Kimhi are just a few among many great names.

The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, coinciding with the completion of the Christian reconquest of the country, marks the end of an era. Many of those expelled from Spain found their refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Amsterdam, Hamburg, London, and the New World began to see the Jewish communities. Among the Jewish population in Europe there were two main notable groups, Sephardim (a word deriving from Hebrew "Sephard" for Spain) and Ashkenazim, Jews of German origin. The expulsions from France

and the central European states had pushed the Ashkenazim eastwards into Poland. They contributed to the prosperity and cultural flourishing of the country in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As a result of the turmoil of the Cossack rebellion (1648), Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim migrated westward to settle in the Rhineland where their ancestors had originated.

These upheavals brought changes to the character of the Jewish life. The Jews tended to retreat from the real world and pursue esoteric speculation and instant salvation, as evidenced by a mystical school in a small town Safed of Galilee had influence abroad in the sixteenth century. As a contrast, the humanism of the European Renaissance, the spread of printing and other broadening aspects of cultural life stimulated Jewish cultural and scholarly activity. among the culturally active groups, the Crypto-Jews returned to the Judaic faith from the Christian belief which had been imposed on their forefathers centuries ago in Portugal. It was a time when the Jews were emancipated from the condition of segregation and subjection.

The Modern Period of the Jewish history began with the French Revolution of 1789. From then until the Russian Revolution in 1917, it is characterized by a period of renewed vitality. This is the age of Haskalah (enlightenment) movement which enabled the Jews to adapt the new influence of European culture. Religious reforms emerged from the new ways of thought and life. But along with the process of emancipation there came anti-Semitism in central and eastern Europe. Because of economic hardship, more than two millions Jews left Europe for the United States.

The Revolution of 1917 in Russia, a country with the largest Jewish population, cast a spell of darkness and terror on religion. The communal structure of schools and synagogues were abolished and rabbis were arrested. Religious practice was outlawed and driven underground.

Another decisive historical event in this period was the First World War in which the Turks sided with the Germans. The victors dismembered their empire, and the British troops advanced into Palestine. The Balfour Declaration was issued on 2 December 1917, supporting the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine. A series of treaties between 1920 and 1923 subdivided the Holy Land, for 400 years. Part of the Ottoman Empire (1517 - 1918), was created the British Mandate of Palestine and Transjordan, and the French Mandate of the Levant States. Increased immigration led to racial strife which grew in intensity to a point where the British turned the problem over to the United Nations. In 1947 U.N. recommended that Palestine be

partitioned between Arab and Jew. War broke out when the British withdrew on 14 May 1948. The same day came the declaration of an independent state of Israel. An armistice was accepted on 18 July 1948 leaving Jordan in possession of the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem while the new state of Israel had control of the western part of Jerusalem and the rest of the country. In June 1967 Israel was victorious in the war and since then it has occupied the Old City of Jerusalem and the West Bank.

In 1917 the American intervention in the First World War was accompanied by an assumption of responsibility by American Jews for the struggle for civil rights of their brethren in Europe. The severe tribulation suffered by Russian Jews was followed by the "Jewish" question in Germany which led to the brutal murder of half of the Jews in Europe. The holocaust, in which six million Jews were annihilated by the Nazis and their collaborators, was a haunting psychological blow to the Jewish memory for many generations to come.

Since 1948 the state of the Israel has become a symbol of national revival and hope for all Jews in the world. Warfare in 1948 split Jerusalem between Israel and Jordan. After the Six Day War in June (5 - 10), victorious Israel annexed the Arab sector, took Golan from Syria and the West Bank from Jordan. During this period most Jews in North Africa and Asia emigrated to Israel. Whereas the American Jews reaches 44% of the world Jewish population, Israel has 25% and USSR, 13%. In France, Great Britain, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa and elsewhere one can find a significant number of Jews.

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