

# **Bible Characters**

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Troy, Michigan  
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## Preface

In 1930, the Reverend James Black, minister of St. George's West at Edinburgh, published a book entitled *Rogues of the Bible* (Harper & Row, 1930). In it he offered a psychological apology for many the "bad folk" in the Bible: Cain, Esau, Korah, Balaam, Saul, Jezebel, Gehazi, Pilate, Ananias and Demas. To his credit, he does not minimize their sins, but he does argue for the reasonableness of their actions, given the psychological makeup of each individual.

The present volume contains both villains and heroes. The Bible, unlike the epic tales in ancient literature, does not minimize human weaknesses nor unduly exalt human strengths. As Christians read of the biblical women and men, they find powerful examples to imitate as well as patterns to shun--and sometimes within the same personality there are traits to imitate as well as traits to shun. What little boy has not thrilled at Samson's feats of strength, only to discover that later in life Samson terribly failed to maintain faithfulness. Similarly, in spite of all the wonderful qualities of leadership displayed by Samuel, the last judge and first prophet, one must still grieve over his failure to control the actions of his own sons as priests of the Lord.

So, biblical characters are real people, people capable of great faith, but people with human flaws, too. They are not demi-gods, but creatures of Adam's race infected by sin and standing in deep need of God's redeeming grace. As you study their lives, may it dawn upon you that every man and every woman is capable of great evil and great faithfulness. May God grant that none of you will "fail the test." And as Paul also said, "I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test."

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Bible Characters</b> .....                       | 1  |
| Preface.....  | 2  |
| Sarah, Mother of a Nation.....                      | 5  |
| Woman Of Initiative, Courage and Faith .....        | 5  |
| Deborah, A Mother In Israel.....                    | 8  |
| Judge, Warrior and Poet.....                        | 8  |
| Jephthah, The Valiant, but, Foolish Warrior .....   | 12 |
| Outlaw, Deliverer and Murderer.....                 | 12 |
| Samson, The Judge .....                             | 15 |
| Spirit-Empowered, Tragically Flawed.....            | 15 |
| Hannah and A Mother's Heart.....                    | 18 |
| Wife, Intercessor and Poet-Theologian .....         | 18 |
| Samuel, The Last Judge and First Prophet .....      | 21 |
| Intercessor, Magistrate and Troubler of Kings ..... | 21 |
| Saul, Man of Triumph and Tragedy.....               | 24 |
| King, Warrior, Psychopath .....                     | 24 |
| Jezebel, Wife of Ahab.....                          | 28 |
| Pagan, Queen, Antagonist.....                       | 28 |
| Elisha, The Prophet.....                            | 31 |
| Farmer, Servant, Visionary.....                     | 31 |
| Josiah of Judah .....                               | 34 |
| King, Reformer, Tragic Warrior .....                | 34 |
| Baruch, Scribe to Jeremiah .....                    | 37 |
| Secretary, Faithful Friend, Companion In Exile..... | 37 |
| Esther and The Hidden Hand of God.....              | 40 |
| Orphan, Queen and Intercessor.....                  | 40 |
| John The Baptizer .....                             | 43 |
| Prophet, Forerunner and Martyr .....                | 43 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| The Virgin Mary .....                        | 46 |
| Mother and Disciple of the Lord.....         | 46 |
| James and John, Sons of Thunder.....         | 49 |
| Fishermen, Disciples and Apostles.....       | 49 |
| Judas Iscariot.....                          | 52 |
| Apostle, Thief, Betrayer.....                | 52 |
| Stephen, The Hellenist Deacon.....           | 55 |
| Spiritual Christian, Leader, Martyr.....     | 55 |
| Barnabas, The Apostolic Diplomat.....        | 58 |
| Diaspora Jew, Ambassador and Missionary..... | 58 |
| Silas, Companion To Paul And Peter .....     | 62 |
| Diplomat, Missionary, Amanuensis.....        | 62 |
| James, Half-Brother Of The Lord .....        | 65 |
| Leader, Mediator and Martyr .....            | 65 |

## **Sarah, Mother of a Nation**

### **Woman Of Initiative, Courage and Faith**

Few women in history have achieved a status to match that of Sarah. She was blessed with striking beauty, she married a very rich nomad, and four millennia after her death she is still remembered as the mother of the nation which God chose for special service. We first meet her as Sarai,<sup>1</sup> where she is introduced as the wife of Abram, a woman who could have no children (Ge. 11:29-30; cf. Ro. 4:19b). Later, we find out that she was also Abram's half-sister (Ge. 20:12). She accompanied her husband when he left the lower Euphrates Valley for northwest Mesopotamia, traveling up the well-known highway that connected the two regions (Ge. 11:31). Haran,<sup>2</sup> where they lived for a time, was along the caravan route to Palestine from Nineveh, Babylon and Ur. Haran, like Ur, was devoted to the worship of the Moon God, and we may presume that Sarai, like her husband, was originally a worshipper of pagan deities (cf. Jos. 24:2).<sup>3</sup> After Abram's father died, they moved southward into the land of Canaan (Ge. 12:5; cf. Ac. 7:4).

The Abram and Sarai stories in Genesis derive their importance from God's solemn promise that he would give them posterity (Ge. 12:2, 7; 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:2, 5-6, 15-16, 19, 21; 18:10-14). To the casual reader, the theological import of some of the stories may not be immediately clear. Why, for instance, are there the two stories of Sarai being threatened with inclusion into a pagan king's harem? These stories, and others like them, are examples of God's faithfulness to perform his promises, sometimes because of and sometimes in spite of the courses of action taken by Abram and Sarai. During a particularly distressful famine, Abram determined to travel to Egypt in search of food. He required Sarai to pass herself as only his sister (rather than his wife).<sup>4</sup> Although Sarai was now more than sixty-five years old,<sup>5</sup> she was still such a remarkable beauty that Abram was afraid he might be killed if it were known he was her husband. The ruse worked, but in the end, Abram's family was expelled from Egypt (Ge. 12:10-20). Later, the same scenario was repeated in another place (Ge. 20:1-18), and it may have happened more frequently yet (Ge. 20:13). In both these stories, it was the intervention of God that prevented Sarai from not only adultery, but also a possible pregnancy that would violate the covenantal promise. It

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<sup>1</sup>The archaic name Sarai, and its later counterpart Sarah, both mean "princess" or noblewoman.

<sup>2</sup>The name Haran means "road."

<sup>3</sup>C. Pfeiffer, *Old Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 55.

<sup>4</sup>In the New Testament, Sarah is exalted as an example of godly submission (1 Pe. 3:6), but obviously in this case, such submission was made the more difficult because of Abraham's deceit.

<sup>5</sup>Abram was ten years older than Sarai (Ge. 17:17), thus making her sixty-five when they first left Haran for Canaan (Ge. 12:4).

is a common theme in these stories that Yahweh overcame almost every conceivable obstacle to preserve selected heirs and fulfill his covenantal oath. Abram's falsehood not only threw Sarai but the covenant itself into grave danger.

The problem of childlessness was especially distressing to both Sarai and Abram. According to the Nuzi tablets (Akkadian documents uncovered southwest of Nineveh), a man without an heir could adopt a beloved family servant or slave.<sup>6</sup> Abram was prepared to do so until Yahweh stopped him, promising that a natural son would be born to him (Ge. 15:1-4). Similarly, Sarai's willingness to allow her husband to take Hagar as a slave-wife, while inexplicable by modern standards, was morally and legally justifiable according to ancient Near Eastern laws, not only from Nuzi but also the code of Hammurabi (Ge. 16:1-3).<sup>7</sup> Of course, Hagar's success in conceiving a child created considerable tension in the family, augmented by Hagar's one-upmanship and Sarai's jealousy (Ge. 16:4-6). Nevertheless, God specified that the covenantal promise would be fulfilled through a child born to Sarai herself. He changed the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah to signify his divine intention (Ge. 17:3-6, 15-16, 19, 21).<sup>8</sup>

When Sarai was eighty-nine (cf. Ge. 17:24), Yahweh appeared to Abraham promising him that in about a year he and Sarah would have a child (Ge. 18:9-10a; cf. Ro. 9:9). Sarah, who was eavesdropping, could hardly believe her ears, and she laughed in disbelief (Ge. 18:10b-15), just as Abraham had laughed earlier (Ge. 17:17). Nevertheless, in about a year, God overcame Sarah's infertility at the age of ninety,<sup>9</sup> and when their son was born, the laughter of doubt was replaced by the laughter of joy (Ge. 21:1-7). They named the child *Yits'haq* (= he laughs), just as Abraham had been instructed (Ge. 17:19).

The final challenge to Sarah's son was Ishmael, Hagar's son. According to ancient Near Eastern law, if a free wife bore a son subsequent to a slave-wife, the slave-wife's son was forbidden to displace the free son.<sup>10</sup> At Isaac's weaning (probably when he was about three years old and Ishmael was about seventeen), Ishmael mocked his infant half-brother, an act that St. Paul would later call persecution (Ga. 4:29). Sarah demanded the expulsion of the slave-wife and her son, and Abraham complied, although reluctantly since such an expulsion was forbidden

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<sup>6</sup>Pfeiffer, 83.

<sup>7</sup>Pfeiffer, 84.

<sup>8</sup>Abram means "exalted father," while Abraham means "father of a crowd."

<sup>9</sup>In the Book of Hebrews, it states that Sarah's power to have a child was "by faith" (He. 11:11). It also contains the odd statement that she received power to have a *katabole spermatis* (= seminal emission), probably a statement in harmony with the ancient "double-seed" theory of biological conception, cf. P. Horst, "Did Sarah Have A Seminal Emission?" *BR* (Feb. 1992) 34-39.

<sup>10</sup>Pfeiffer, 83; R. Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 1.53.

by ancient Near Eastern law (Ge. 21:8-14). In this way, Abraham and Sarah became the ancestors of the Israelite nation (Is. 51:2).

Sarah lived another thirty-seven years after the birth of Isaac (Ge. 23:1), and when she died, Abraham buried his beloved wife in the cave at Macpelah (Ge. 23:2-20), a site that would become the family burial plot (Ge. 25:9-10; 49:31).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The cave at Macpelah has been located by archaeologists with a fair degree of certainty, cf. E. Blaiklock, *NIDBA* (1983) 296.

## **Deborah, A Mother In Israel**

### **Judge, Warrior and Poet**

The Song of Deborah is one of the most ancient pieces of writing in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>12</sup> The story of Deborah appears in two complimentary accounts, one prose (Jg. 4) and the other poetry (Jg. 5). While our information concerning Deborah is limited to these two accounts, her counterpart, Barak, is listed with the heroes of faith in the New Testament (He. 11:32). This fascinating story about a fascinating woman in a fascinating time of Israel's history is worth a second look.

When Joshua led Israel into the land of Canaan through the Jordan fords near Jericho, his commission was to subdue all the land, dispossessing the Canaanites and occupying their territory (Jos. 1:1-5). The initial victories at Jericho (Jos. 6), Makkedah (Jos. 10) and Lake Merom (Jos. 11) secured for Israel a firm foothold in the mountains of central, southern and northern Palestine respectively. The first stage of the Canaan campaign was completely successful (Jos. 11:23). The second stage of the campaign, more or less described as a mopping up operation (Jos. 13:1-7), was to be continued after Joshua's death (Jg. 1:1). This task proved to be severely problematic. Stubborn enclaves of Canaanite populations successfully resisted Israel, particularly in the plains areas, because the Canaanites had the sophistication of chariotry, a weapon far more mobile and powerful than the Israelite infantry (Jos. 17:18; Jg. 1:19-21, 27-33). Some tribes, such as Judah and Dan, were confined to the mountainous regions (Jg. 1:19, 34). Their failure to complete the conquest earned them the displeasure of Yahweh who appeared at Bokim and declared that he would no longer guarantee their military victories (Jg. 2:1-5;). Yahweh allowed the people to be invaded and oppressed because of their infidelity through religious syncretism (Jg. 2:15). The Canaanite enclaves became a spiritual test for Israel as well as a training ground for holy war (Jg. 2:20-23; 3:1-4).

The unity of the Tribal League was primarily religious, dating back to the

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<sup>12</sup>Evidence of its antiquity is that in the LXX some Hebrew words were simply transcribed from Hebrew letters into Greek letters because the translators did not know how to translate them. In a number of places, the LXX translations are pure speculation. Out of 30 verses, some 22 of them have at least one word at which the meaning can only be guessed, cf. J. Soggin, *Judges [AB]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 92.



redemptive experiences in the exodus. It was maintained by the annual celebrations of passover, covenant renewal and other festivals. There was no statehood, government, capital, administration or standing army. When war was declared, the army was mustered by a call for volunteers issued to each of the twelve clans, usually issued by a *shophet* (judge) anointed with the Holy Spirit to lead in the task of Yahweh war (Jg. 2:16-19).

Deborah (literally, the "bee" or "wasp") was one of the leaders so anointed by the Spirit of Yahweh. She is called both a prophetess and a judge, and her judgeship apparently involved consultation for civil disputes as well as for war (Jg. 4:4-5). Most scholars place the event celebrated in the hymn of victory in the 12th century B.C., though this date is uncertain. After an eighty year period of peace, following the military success of Ehud (Jg. 3:28-30), Israel again fell under the oppression of a Canaanite power. For twenty years the Canaanite king Jabin of Hazor in northern Palestine exerted sovereignty over the Israelite clans in his region.<sup>13</sup> His military edge was chariotry, 900 war machines with which he took full advantage of the flat terrain in the Plain of Esdraelon. Although Shamgar, another hero, had successfully opposed the Philistines in the south coastal plain (Jg. 3:31), he was apparently not successful in halting the Canaanite oppression in the north (5:6-7).

While both the prose and the poetic versions of the battle are given, the poem is surely the older of the two compositions, composed by Deborah evidently very close to the actual battle itself, perhaps as early as the day after.<sup>14</sup> It will be appropriate to use it as the primary account and the prose account as supplementary. The hymn may be divided into eight sections.<sup>15</sup>

### *Introductory Praise (5:2-3)*

The overall purpose of the hymn is clear. The victory achieved was due to Yahweh's intervention, a familiar theme in Israel's concept of holy war (cf. Ex. 15:3; Dt. 20:1-4; 1 Sa. 17:47).

### *Invocation of Yahweh (5:4-5)*

In invoking Yahweh as the victor in battle, the poet recalls the trek which Yahweh made with the Israelites from Sinai, through the desert sojourn by way of Mt.

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<sup>13</sup>It is possible that the name Jabin (= he perceives) is a throne name or a dynastic name inasmuch as years earlier a king by the same name in the same territory was defeated by Joshua and his capital torched by the invading Israelites (Jos. 11).

<sup>14</sup>F. Bruce, "Deborah," *NBD*, ed. J. Douglas (1982) 275.

<sup>15</sup>In the following discussion, virtually all linguistic discussion will be avoided and the NIV translation followed. Should one be interested in the many textual and translation problems, see R. Boling, *Judges [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 101ff.

Seir in the transjordan, and eventually on into Canaan (cf. Ps. 68:7-10). This trek of Yahweh from his ancient mountain in Sinai assumes the journey of the Ark of the Covenant, Israel's palladium for war, upon which the glory of Yahweh rested (Nu. 10:35-36; Jos. 6:2-7).

### *The Oppression (5:6-8)*

Because of their apostasy, Yahweh allowed his people to be oppressed by their enemies. The primary roads could no longer be traveled, and caravan trade had to be abandoned by the Israelites in the hill country. Lesser known paths were the only option if one wanted to avoid the risk of Jabin's soldiers who apparently were watching the main routes. Normal village life could no longer be carried on. A severe paucity of weaponry stifled resistance, perhaps due, as in later times, to a monopoly on smelting iron (cf. 1 Sa. 13:19-22).

### *The Muster of the Clans (5:9-18)*

The call for arms to at least two tribes was issued through Barak, a clan leader of Naphtali (Jg. 4:6). Others were perhaps called surreptitiously at the watering holes by lyre-players who recited Israel's history of Yahweh war, songs which by implication would alert the other clans to the urgent call to arms. Both rich (those riding) and poor (those walking)<sup>16</sup> were summoned to ponder the war songs. The survivors, those men still able to equip themselves for war, began to assemble for the campaign. Ephraimites from the hill country of Amalek, Benjamites from the south, commanders from Makir (western Manasseh) and Zebulun and Issachar all presented themselves. However, clansmen from Reuben, Gilead (perhaps Gad), Dan and Asher decided to sit this one out, and the poet reserves for them contempt. Naphtali and Zebulun, the two clans hardest pressed by Jabin, offered 10,000 warriors for the conflict (4:6-10).

### *The Battle of Kishon (5:19-23)*

When Jabin's general, Sisera, was informed that Israel had mustered its warriors at Mt. Tabor, he quickly deployed his own armies and prepared to overpower this rebellion (4:12-13). The armies engaged each other at Taanach near Megiddo, located on the edge of the Carmel range and near the Kishon River. Barak's troops routed Sisera's armies, and Sisera abandoned his chariot and sought to escape on foot (4:14-16). A tremendous cloudburst caused a flash-flood in the Kishon river bed, sweeping away Sisera's charioteers (5:21). The chariot horses, breaking their

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<sup>16</sup>C. Armerding, "Judges," *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 321.

traces, galloped away from the helpless drivers.<sup>17</sup> It is probable that Sisera fled on foot because his vehicle was mired in the instant quagmire. In a way that is not clear, the stars also figured in the rout of Sisera. Meroz, a town which refused to assist in the battle, came under a curse for failing to respond to the urgency of holy war (5:23).

#### *The Death of Sisera (5:24-27)*

Sisera's route for escape lay through an area inhabited by sympathizers with Israel, a family of Kenites (4:11) who were at least nominally at peace with Jabin's regime. However, Jael, the wife of Heber, received Sisera only to execute him in his sleep of exhaustion by the highly effective method of driving a tent peg through his temples (4:17-21). When the pursuing Barak arrived, Sisera's head was still impaled on the tent floor (4:22-24).

#### *The Taunt Song Toward Sisera's Mother (5:28-30)*

Taunts toward the defeated enemy were commonly a part of ancient victory hymns (cf. 1 Sa. 18:6-7). This one is full of irony, not sympathy. The poet envisions Sisera's mother musing over her son as ruthlessly victorious, detained by his lust to rape and pillage. Not for a moment would she entertain any reason for his late homecoming other than his preoccupation with the plundering of his victims. But Sisera would never come home again. His mother's vigil at the lattice would be in vain.

#### *The Epilogue (5:31)*

The hymn concludes with a curse and a blessing, a curse toward Israel's enemies and a blessing toward God's people.

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<sup>17</sup>L. Wood, *The Distressing Days of the Judges* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 192.

## **Jephthah, The Valiant, but, Foolish Warrior Outlaw, Deliverer and Murderer**

The characters in the Bible, unlike many of the ancient heroes of mythology, were often a strange mixture of striking courage and baffling irresponsibility. Jephthah is such a person. In reading his story, one must keep in mind that the purpose of the historian who compiled the records of the judges was not to exalt human ingenuity, but rather, to explain why the Israelites constantly fell into the vicious cycle of oppression and deliverance. Jephthah's career is a microcosm of the moral confusion typical of the Tribal League.

Jephthah was from Gilead, the highland region of the central transjordan originally allotted to Gad and transjordan Manasseh (Nu. 21, 32). Born to a prostitute mother,<sup>18</sup> he was driven from his ancestral home in a dispute over inheritance rights (Jg. 11:1-2). Moving to the northeast of Gilead, Jephthah soon became the leader of a private army, probably a band of marauders who made their living from periodic raids on merchant caravans (Jg. 11:3).<sup>19</sup> His exploits there made a name for him, and it is due to this notoriety that he was invited to return to Gilead as a warrior-leader (Jg. 11:4-11).

Gilead was in crisis. Because of the Israelites' unfaithfulness to the covenant of Torah and their failure to fulfill the divine commission for Canaan's conquest, God had allowed them to suffer oppression at the hands of the Canaanites (Jg. 2:1-5, 10-23). At this particular time, the Ammonites were the primary threat, not only in the transjordan but also in the heartland of Ephraim (Jg. 10:6-9). Completing the cycle of sin, oppression, and repentance, the Israelites abandoned their fascination with the Canaanite fertility cults and turned to Yahweh (Jg. 10:10-16). The Gileadites mustered their army to wage a war of freedom. All they lacked was a leader (Jg. 10:17-18).

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<sup>18</sup>Jg. 11:1 says that Jephthah's father was Gilead, known from other texts as a descendent of Manasseh (cf. 1 Chr. 2:21, 23; 7:14, 17). Some scholars, however, think this only means that his father was unknown, that is, that he was born to an unnamed Gileadite. In short, the "district of Gilead" was his father, cf. R. Boling, *Judges [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 197.

<sup>19</sup>R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1982) II.983. The RSV renders Jg. 11:3 as "worthless fellows" who "went raiding with him." Other versions use translations such as "rabble" (NAB) or "outlaws" (NRSV).

In this crisis of leadership, Jephthah was summoned with the promise that if he was a successful *qatsi'n* (= leader, commander) in the war effort, he would become the permanent *Ro'sh* (= chief) of all Gilead, quite a reversal from the days when he had been ostracized (Jg. 11:4-11)! At the sacred site of Mizpah,<sup>20</sup> Jephthah was consecrated in a solemn ceremony of holy words (Jg. 11:11).<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Spirit of Yahweh rested upon Jephthah, empowering him for his military task (Jg. 11:29).

The central concern in Jephthah's story is his rash vow and its fulfillment. Before his war of deliverance, Jephthah made a solemn promise that, if victorious, he would offer as a holocaust the first living thing that crossed his threshold upon his return (Jg. 11:30-31). It may be that this vow was part of his "words" in the sacred ritual at Mizpah (Jg. 11:11b). In any case, it is entirely possible that Jephthah fully anticipated that his vow might result in human sacrifice. The Hebrew words can be rendered "*whatever* comes out" (KJV, NASB, NIV) or "*whoever* comes out" (RSV, NAB), but the expression *liqrati* (= to meet me) implies intelligent intent.<sup>22</sup> It may also be that Jephthah was unsure of God's help, and if so, he hoped that the ultimacy of his vow might secure Yahweh's backing.<sup>23</sup> Of course, the burning of sons and daughters was explicitly forbidden by Torah (Dt. 12:30-31; 18:9-12; cf. Lv. 18:21), but Jephthah was apparently willing to take that risk.

The war began with Jephthah's attempt to negotiate peace without conflict (Jg. 11:12-13). The Ammonite contention was that during the exodus Israel had usurped land which was the original holdings of the Ammonites. Jephthah, however, sent a sustained argument that this was not, in fact, the case. He argued that the ancient Ammonite territory was further east, and that the Israelites had a legitimate claim on Gilead in the transjordan (Jg. 11:14-27). The Ammonite king was unconvinced, so war was inevitable (Jg. 11:28). The war is described succinctly in two verses (Jg. 11:32-33), and then the author moves directly to the results of the rash vow.<sup>24</sup>

Triumphantly, Jephthah returned home to the shock that the first living creature to cross his threshold was his own daughter, who came out to celebrate his victory (Jg. 11:34-35). Perhaps Jephthah thought that God might intervene, as he once did for Abraham (cf. Ge. 22), and his bitter cry of despair may have been the dawning

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<sup>20</sup>The *Mizpah* (= lookout, watchpost) was apparently a well-known military elevation.

<sup>21</sup>The installation of a judge is nowhere described, although it is hinted at in other passages (cf. Jg. 5:7; 6:24). The oath formula, "Yahweh will be witnessing between us," places the installation in a cultic context.

<sup>22</sup>J. Soggin, *Judges [OTL]*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 215-216.

<sup>23</sup>"The use of the infinitive absolute, 'If you will *really* give [the Ammonites into my hands]...', may suggest that Jephthah is pushing the bargaining mode of discourse to its limit," P. Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 96.

<sup>24</sup>The geographical aspects of the war can be followed in Y. Aharoni et al., *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 65.

realization that God would not do so.<sup>25</sup> Allowing his daughter two months time (might he also have been allowing God more time?), the narrative abruptly concludes with the chilling words, "He did to her as he had vowed" (Jg. 11:39).

The utterly despicable nature of such an act has troubled not a few readers of the Old Testament. While ancient Jewish authorities agreed that Jephthah did indeed burn his own daughter, later interpreters suggested that perhaps he fulfilled his vow by confining his daughter to solitary confinement or to perpetual virginity or to service at the Tent of Meeting (cf. Ex. 38:8). The statement in Judges 11:39, "And she knew not a man," might possibly suggest perpetual virginity, which in the ancient Near East would have been a "living death."<sup>26</sup> Too, the laws of votary pledge could have been invoked, where a vow equivalent to a human being could be fulfilled by a payment of money (cf. Lv. 27:1-8). In the end, however, most scholars do not concur, but are convinced that Jephthah burned his daughter as a holocaust. The death of the young woman initiated the Israelite custom of four days mourning to remember her (Jg. 11:39b-40).

Jephthah's life after this incident was but a scant six years (Jg. 12:7). During this time he was also involved in a dispute with the Ephraimites in the cisjordan (Jg. 12:1-6). Despite his rash vow, Jephthah was remembered among the military deliverers whom God sent to save Israel (cf. 1 Sa. 12:11), and in the New Testament, he figures in the roll call of the faithful (He. 11:32).

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<sup>25</sup>C. Kraft, *IDB* (1962) II.821.

<sup>26</sup>This is the opinion, for instance, of Solomon Landers, "Did Jephthah Kill His Daughter?" *BR* (Vol. VII No. 4 Aug. '91) 28-42, 42.

## **Samson, The Judge**

### **Spirit-Empowered, Tragically Flawed**

Unlike the epics of some literature from the ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible contains stories that end in failure as well as success. The story of Samson is one such account. It comes from the Book of Judges, a book that details the repeated theological failure of the Israelites after they had entered the land of promise. This failure was remembered for centuries (cf. Ps. 106:34-43). God's charge to the Israelites had been quite clear that they were to annihilate the Canaanites (Dt. 7:1-6; 13:12-16; 20:16-18). They were to serve as God's executioners because of the flagrant wickedness of these people in their fertility religion, child sacrifice and idolatry (Dt. 9:1-6).<sup>27</sup> Clearly, then, the Book of Judges is a book of war. When Joshua died, the book opens with the telling question: who will go up and fight (Jg. 1:1)?

The primary military leaders of Israel during this period are called judges. Altogether, there were twelve of them, six treated with varying detail and six in brief notations. Of the prominent judges, Samson was the last. His story is told in four chapters (13-16). As was true of other judges, Samson was Spirit-empowered (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14) to equip him for his task of advancing Israel's cause against the Philistines (13:1, 5b). The Philistines were an Aegean people group who were relative new-comers to Palestine. They occupied five military cities on the south coastal plain. Samson was called from birth for his task (13). He was consecrated to God by taking a Nazarite vow for life, a vow which set him apart for the special service of God (13:7; cf. Nu. 6:1-12).

Samson's famous strength was equalled only by his even more famous weakness. His famous strength was physical, though it came not so much from his muscular development as from the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. When the divine Spirit moved him, he performed feats of strength which were astounding. He killed a Judean lion with his bare hands (14:5-6); on one occasion, he exterminated thirty Philistines by himself in a single conflict (14:19); on another, he single-handedly

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<sup>27</sup>Thus, the title "judge" may refer, not so much to a magistrate, but to one who delivered Israel from oppression. The judges were those chosen by God to save Israel and to deliver judgment on the Canaanites.

captured three hundred foxes (15:3-5); he slaughtered many Philistines at various times (15:8), including a thousand on a single occasion with the jawbone of a donkey (15:14-15); he tore the city gates from the walls of the Philistine city Gaza and carried them off (16:3); and, in his final feat of strength, he pulled down the pillars of the Philistine Dagon-temple, which was filled to capacity, killing more Philistines in his death than in all his other feats of war during his life (16:30).<sup>28</sup>

His famous weakness was a fondness for Philistine women, women from among the very people against whom he was supposed to wage a war of judgment (14:1-3, 7; 16:1, 4). To be sure, God used this weakness to create conflict between Samson and the Philistines (14:4), but in the end, Samson's infatuation destroyed him. His first marriage ended in disaster when the riddle he proposed at the marriage festivities was leaked by his new bride to the Philistines (14:8-18). Samson left the wedding feast in a huff, and his bride was given to the best man (14:19-20). This situation led to a feud in which Samson destroyed the Philistines' crops (15:1-5), and later, he slaughtered a thousand Philistines with the donkey's jawbone (15:6-19). For twenty years, this feud continued with the Philistines (15:20; 16:31). His lust for Philistine prostitutes exacerbated the conflict (16:1-3). In the end, it was Samson's weakness for the Philistine Delilah which destroyed him.<sup>29</sup>

While Samson seemed to have moments of sincerity toward Yahweh (cf. 15:18; 16:28), he was essentially a man of his times--times when "everyone did as he saw fit" (17:6; 21:25). He was careless about the terms of his vow, disregarding his contact with corpses (14:8-9; cf. Nu. 6:6) and his pledge to remove himself from intoxicating liquor (14:10-11; cf. Nu. 6:3-4).<sup>30</sup> In his final illicit relationship with Delilah, he had by this time grown so cavalier about the source of his great strength that he was willing to toy with his sacred Nazarite vow. The Philistines offered Delilah a fortune to find the divine source of his strength (16:4-5).<sup>31</sup> Though Samson foiled her repeated schemes (16:6-14), and though he must have known that her game was entirely aimed at his destruction (16:9, 12, 14), he continued to play, edging ever closer to the truth (16:13). At last, his secret was out (16:15-19). It is apparent that he had deceived himself into thinking that his feats of strength were due to his own powers, and when his vow to Yahweh had been broken, he realized too late what he had done (16:20-21). Blinded and shackled, he was reduced to turning the millstone

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<sup>28</sup>A conservative estimate is that he killed about 1,100 in his death (14:19; 15:8, 15), cf. A. Cundall & L. Morris, *Judges & Ruth [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1968) 181.

<sup>29</sup>Delilah is not said to be a prostitute, though she may well have been. Furthermore, she is not said to be a Philistine, but the circumstances of the story strongly suggest that she was.

<sup>30</sup>The NIV "feast" in 14:10 is weak. The Hebrew *mishtteh* literally means "drinking bout" or a "feast with wine," cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 222.

<sup>31</sup>The sum of money may have been as much as \$4,000.00, cf. C. Kraft, *IDB* (1962) IV.199.



in a Philistine prison. In the shame of animal labor, his hair began to grow once again (16:22).

His final act of strength also included his own death. Brought to the Dagon-temple to be ridiculed by the Philistines, he prayed a final desperate pray for the return of his strength. With a mighty effort, he brought down the entire structure, dying in the midst of his enemies (16:23-30). He is mentioned only one other time in the canon of Scripture, where he is listed in the New Testament with the heroes of faith, a daring yet tragic figure (He. 11:32).

## **Hannah and A Mother's Heart Wife, Intercessor and Poet-Theologian**

Part of the richness of the Old Testament books of Samuel and Kings are the glimpses into family life of the ancient Israelites. This wealth of insight is especially to be found in the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Her story is entirely within the first two chapters of 1 Samuel. Her name, drawn from the Hebrew word *hen* (= grace, favor), was an apt description of her status as a wife, for she was deeply loved by Elkanah, her husband (1:5).

The family context of Hannah's marriage merits discussion, for she was one of two wives married to Elkanah. Polygamy, where it was practiced in Israel, generally followed the customs of the ancient Near East.<sup>32</sup> While the most common form of marriage was monogamy, and while this was clearly the theological ideal displayed in the creation of the first two human beings (Ge. 1-2), there were notable exceptions, especially among the wealthy and the kings of the Israelite monarchy. Reasons for this tolerance are not explicit, but surely the desire to have heirs was a prominent one, as well as the fact that at various times, due to wars, the male population was depleted. Single women, whether unmarried, divorced or widowed, were hard pressed to survive alone in a patriarchal culture, so naturally, marriage was expected. Other less noble reasons surely existed also. The Torah did not forbid polygamy but regulated it as an existing social structure (cf. Dt. 21:15-17).<sup>33</sup> Of course, polygamy naturally tended toward tension in the household, and in fact, the Semitic name of "second wife" (*tsarah*) is the same as the word for "distress" or "hostility."<sup>34</sup> Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, is called a *tsarah* (= rival, 1:6).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>In the code of Hammurabi (1700 B.C.), for instance, the husband was allowed to take a second wife if the first was barren. In general, there was a relative monogamy in the ancient Near East, for usually there was not more than one lawful, wedded wife. Concubinage (i.e., cohabitation without marriage) as well as slave wives were permissible, but the concubine or slave wife did not have the same rights as the free wife. Among the Israelites polygamy, bigamy and concubinage are all to be found which, to greater or lesser degrees, followed the customs of the surrounding cultures, cf. R. Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 1.24-25.

<sup>33</sup>See the insightful discussion in R. Harrison, *ISBE* (1986) III.901.

<sup>34</sup>O. Baab, *IDB* (1962) III.280-281.

<sup>35</sup>It may be assumed that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife, but that when she bore no children, Elkanah took a

Hannah did not lack love. Her husband loved her even more than his second wife and showed her preferential treatment. Elkanah, Hannah's husband, was a devout worshiper of Yahweh, and he was conscientious about making the annual pilgrimages to Shiloh for the required festivals (1:3; cf. Dt. 16:16-17). In offering sacrifices, certain portions of the meat were consumed by the worshipers,<sup>36</sup> and to Hannah, he gave as much as he did to all the others combined (1:4-5).<sup>37</sup> Both out of jealousy for Hannah's privilege and as an expression of one-upmanship over Hannah's inability to conceive, the rival wife needled Hannah repeatedly (1:6-7). Though Elkanah tried to console her, she remained deeply distressed.

Determining to seek Yahweh concerning her dilemma, she wept bitterly at the Tent of Meeting, vowing that if God would answer her prayer for a son, then she would give him back to the Lord as a Nazarite for life (1:9-11).<sup>38</sup> Eli, who was sitting nearby, concluded that she was inebriated, and he rebuked her (1:12-14). But after Hannah had explained her desperate situation, he dismissed her with a blessing and the hope for fulfillment (1:15-18).<sup>39</sup> So, in the course of time, Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son, naming him Samuel, or "God hears" (1:19-20). As soon as it was reasonable, she made good her vow and took Samuel back to the Tent of Meeting to deliver him into the care of Eli, the high priest (1:21-28).<sup>40</sup> Afterward, Hannah had five other children as well (2:21). Annually, she made for Samuel a robe, which she took to him on the family's yearly pilgrimages (2:19).

The Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 is rich in theological content as well as lyrical motifs. It begins with a metaphor of triumph and deliverance (2:1), and celebrates the sovereignty of God (2:2) who truly knows the heart (2:3). This God who turns the tables on the strong and favors the disadvantaged (2:4-5a) had responded to the plight of Hannah in her distress of childlessness (2:5b). The lyric rises to even greater heights in extolling the God who controls all life, wealth and status (2:6-7). He is able to reverse the misfortunes of the powerless (2:8a). As the sovereign Lord, he not only created the universe (2:2:8b), he sustains his saints and

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second wife in order to secure an heir.

<sup>36</sup>It is unclear whether this meat was allotted to Elkanah due to his rights as a member of the Levitical family (cf. 1 Chr. 6:26, 33-34; Ex. 29:26; Lv. 7:33; 8:29) or whether it was part of his tithing meal at the Feast of Booths (Dt. 12:17-18; 16:13-14).

<sup>37</sup>While scholars wrangle over the translation of 1:5, there is good argument for the reading that Elkanah gave to Hannah "a single portion equal to theirs," that is, her single portion was equal to that of the several portions of her rival's family, cf. P. McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 51-52.

<sup>38</sup>One of the signs of a Nazarite, one who was dedicated to Yahweh by a vow of separation, was that his hair could not be cut (Nu. 6:1-21; cf. Jg. 13:2-5).

<sup>39</sup>It is difficult to tell whether Eli's words in 1:17b were intended as a promise or a wish, but there seems little doubt that Hannah took them as a promise.

<sup>40</sup>According to 2 Maccabees 7:27, mothers might nurse their children until they were as old as three years.

judges sinners (2:9a). The crescendo of the song is in the triumphant line, "It is not by strength that one prevails" (2:9b)! Success and triumph belong to God alone. Those who oppose him will be shattered, but those who serve him will prevail in the end (2:10).<sup>41</sup> Over a thousand years later, the song of Hannah served as the seed thought for the Magnificat of Mary in the birth narratives of Jesus (cf. Lk. 1:46-55).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>The fact that the Song of Hannah rests between 1:28 and 2:11 in the narrative have led many scholars to conclude that the poem was inserted into the text after the narrative was composed. This conclusion may or may not be true (though it seems plausible enough), but in any case, there is no reason to deny the song to Hannah or to her peculiar circumstance.

<sup>42</sup>For the parallelisms between these two songs, see R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 357-360.

## **Samuel, The Last Judge and First Prophet Intercessor, Magistrate and Troubler of Kings**

Samuel must surely rank as one of the greatest leaders in ancient Israel. Four centuries after Samuel's death, when Josiah celebrated Passover in Jerusalem, the Chronicler commented, "The Passover had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel" (2 Chr. 35:18a). When Jeremiah looked for examples of intercessors who had stood between the people and God, he ranked only one as high as Moses--Samuel (Je. 15:1). In later estimation, Samuel was viewed as the last of the judges and the first of the prophets (cf. Ac. 3:24; 13:20).<sup>43</sup>

The birth and childhood of Samuel is one of the most beloved children's stories in the Bible. His mother, Hannah, was childless, but in her intercession to Yahweh, she promised that if he would give her a son, she would consecrate him to Yahweh for life (1 Sa. 1:1-18). True to her vow, after Samuel was weaned, she took him to the Tent of Meeting at Shiloh where she consecrated him to a life of priestly service (1 Sa. 1:21-28).<sup>44</sup> Though she visited him annually (1 Sa. 2:18-21), he remained with Eli the priest, maturing and gaining in respect (1 Sa. 2:11, 26; 3:1). It was here that Yahweh first called Samuel one night when he was sleeping just outside the curtain of the Most Holy Place (1 Sa. 3:3). From within the darkened Holy of Holies, Yahweh called three times (1 Sa. 3:4-10).<sup>45</sup> That night, Samuel received his first prophetic message. It was an oracle of doom to the family of Eli, the priest (1 Sa. 3:11-18).

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<sup>43</sup>Technically, of course, the title "prophet" is applied to other figures prior to Samuel, notably Abraham (Ge. 20:7), Aaron (Ex. 7:1), Miriam (Ex. 15:20), Moses (Dt. 34:10), Deborah (Jg. 4:4), and an unnamed spokesman (Jg. 6:8). However, Samuel stands at the head of a column of prophetic figures who performed a unique role in the history of Israel, and it is in this sense that he is the "first prophet," cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 60.

<sup>44</sup>According to the Chronicler, Samuel was from the clan of Levi (cf. 1 Chr. 6:26, 33-34) and part of a Kohathite family whose responsibilities were to care for the Ark of the Covenant and other sacred furniture and utensils (cf. Nu. 3:30-31). 1 Samuel, on the other hand, has him in the clan of Ephraim (1 Sa. 1:1). This apparent discrepancy was probably due to the fact that the levitical clan had no tribal inheritance and hence were scattered throughout the tribes (Jos. 21:20). Samuel was a Levite by birth but an Ephraimite by geography. In the Qumran scrolls of 1 Samuel, Samuel is designated a Nazirite (cf. Nu. 6:1-21).

<sup>45</sup>The phrase, "Yahweh came and stood there, calling as at the other times" (3:10), envisions Yahweh getting up from his throne on lid of the ark and walking to the curtain to call Samuel, who was lying down just on the other side.

This was the first of many such oracles, and as a true prophet, none of his predictions failed (1 Sa. 3:19--4:1a).

The times were perilous! The victories of Joshua were long since past, and enclaves of Canaanites periodically asserted themselves to oppress Israel. Even more threatening, the aggressive military aristocracy of the Philistines had infiltrated the mountains from their pentapolis in the coastal plain. They destroyed Shiloh and stole the Ark of God, killing Eli's sons and preempting the stroke that killed Eli himself (1 Sa. 4). In his role as a judge, Samuel served as Israel's primary military leader, calling them to repentance, mustering the clans for war, and interceding for them before Yahweh (1 Sa. 7:3-6). Under his leadership, Israel won a decisive victory at Mizpah, driving the Philistines back onto the plain and recovering lost territory (1 Sa. 7:7-11).<sup>46</sup> To commemorate this victory, Samuel erected a memorial stone, naming it Ebenezer, or "Stone of Help" (1 Sa. 7:12-14). All his life, Samuel served as Israel's spiritual leader (1 Sa. 7:15-17).

Samuel's most famous role, however, was as the transitional figure between the ancient tribal league and the emerging monarchy. The Philistine threat from the west did not diminish (1 Sa. 10:5; cf. 13:3, 19-21). From the east, the transjordan nation of Ammon began to move against Israel as well, wedging the clans into the mountains between the coastal plain on the west and the Jordan rift on the east (1 Sa. 12:12). To make matters worse, Samuel's own abused their offices. They used their appointments as a base for extortion and bribery (1 Sa. 8:1-3). Consequently, the elders of the clans assembled before Samuel to ask for a monarchy. They did not invent the idea, for it had been anticipated in the law of Moses (cf. Dt. 17:14-20). However, their motivation was not faith, but fear, and Samuel took personal offense at the suggestion (1 Sa. 8:6). The issue was bigger than Samuel himself, however. God said that the nation had rejected him as its divine king (1 Sa. 8:7-9; cf. 10:17-19), and he gave the people a sign of thunder to verify that their request sprang from evil motives (1 Sa. 12:16-25)! So, Samuel warned them solemnly (1 Sa. 8:10-22; 12:14-15), while making preparations to fulfil their request.

The new king was Saul ben Kish, and Samuel anointed him as the new military leader over Israel (1 Sa. 9-10), confirming his kingship in a public ceremony (1 Sa. 11:14-15). In a moving farewell speech, the aged Samuel addressed the nation, defending his integrity and admonishing the clans to serve the Lord (1 Sa. 12).

The final acts of Samuel's life were intertwined with the lives of Israel's first two kings. As he had done to Eli when just a lad, Samuel now rebuked Saul for his

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<sup>46</sup>The "thundering" of Yahweh against the Philistines should be understood against the background of Dagon, the Philistine deity, who was believed to be the father of Ba'al, the Canaanite god of storm, cf. J. Gray, *IDB* (1962) I.756. Yahweh's control over the elements was not only a frightening threat, it was a sign that Yahweh, not Dagon or Ba'al, was truly sovereign over all storms, cf. R. Youngblood, *EBC* (1992) III.609.

presumption at usurping the priestly function of offering sacrifice before battle (1 Sa. 13:7b-14). His warning was stern. Because of Saul's impulsiveness, God would now seek another to take his place. Sometime later, Samuel carefully instructed Saul in his responsibility for Yahweh war (1 Sa. 15:1-3). When Saul only partially obeyed (1 Sa. 15:4-9), Samuel confronted him and uttered his now famous dictum, "To obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sa. 15:10-23). Saul attempted to rectify the error, but to no avail. Sternly, Samuel announced that God has rejected Saul as the king (1 Sa. 15:24-31), and then, what Saul would not do the austere judge finished (1 Sa. 15:32-35).

God had one more task for Samuel. The successor to Saul was to be David ben Jesse, and the Lord instructed Samuel to anoint him secretly as the new king (1 Sa. 16:1-13). When Saul's jealous anger drove him to attempt David's murder, Samuel gave David sanctuary (1 Sa. 19:18-24). Samuel died before he saw David installed as the new king (1 Sa. 25:1; 28:3). The only other episode associated with his name was the seance of the medium on the night before Saul's death, when the witch of Endor attempt to conjure up the spirit of Samuel (1 Sa. 28).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Whether she was actually successful or not is beyond the scope of this small study, but I recommend the discussion and sources listed in Youngblood, 779-780.

## **Saul, Man of Triumph and Tragedy**

### **King, Warrior, Psychopath**

Saul ben Kish of the clan of Benjamin, like Shakespeare's Macbeth, was a figure of triumph and tragedy. His potential was enormous, but his death, culminating in a seance with a witch, a disastrous battle with the Philistines, and the exposure of his corpse on the walls of Beth Shan, mark him as the supremely tragic figure in the Old Testament.

The reader first encounters Saul shortly after the clans of Israel begged Samuel for a king (1 Sa. 9). Saul was hunting for lost donkeys, and in the process, decided to solicit the help of the prophet (1 Sa. 9:1-14). Samuel was waiting for him, God having already told the prophet that Saul was marked for kingship (1 Sa. 9:15-17). After they had spent the night in deep conversation, Samuel poured a flask of oil on Saul's head, confirming him as the Spirit-anointed leader of all Israel (1 Sa. 10:1). As Saul was leaving, the Spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him (1 Sa. 10:6, 10),<sup>48</sup> and his heart was changed (1 Sa. 10:6, 9).<sup>49</sup> A series of four signs were fulfilled in a single day to confirm that this kingship was truly directed by the Lord (1 Sa. 10:2-9). At Mizpah, Samuel convened a public assembly where Saul was presented as the new king, and the prophet explained to the people verbally and in writing the nature of the kingship (1 Sa. 10:17-25).<sup>50</sup> There were two reactions. Saul was now joined by a group of valiant soldiers whom God prompted to serve with the new king, but a dissident group voiced their doubts about Saul's ability (1 Sa. 10:26-27).

Given this division of opinions, Saul's first act of war was decisive. Nahash of Ammon had been encroaching into the central hills from the east (1 Sa. 12:12). His threats were vicious, and he laid siege to Jabesh Gilead (1 Sa. 11:1-2). When Saul heard that his fellow-Israelites were under attack, the Spirit of Yahweh again rushed

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<sup>48</sup>The Hebrew verb *tsalah* (= to rush) is used also in the Samson stories to describe the sudden empowerment of the Spirit to enable a human to do special tasks (cf. Jg. 14:6; 14:19; 15:14). Later, it will also be used of David (cf. 1 Sa. 16:13).

<sup>49</sup>The description of Saul's change probably means that he was now ready to accept the role which Samuel had outlined to him.

<sup>50</sup>This document probably included elements such as those mentioned in 1 Sa. 8:11-18 and Dt. 17:14-20.



upon him, and citing Samuel's spiritual support, he mustered the volunteer troops of Israel and attacked the Ammonite army, completely routing it (1 Sa. 11:3-11). Thus, Saul's reputation was quickly and firmly established, and his kingship was reaffirmed in yet another public ceremony (1 Sa. 11:14-15). Magnanimously, Saul chose to overlook the criticisms of his detractors (1 Sa. 11:12-13).

In his second war, Saul turned toward the west (1 Sa. 13:2-4), where the Philistines had encroached in the western hills, depriving the Israelites of their metal industry (1 Sa. 13:19-22). The Philistines reacted immediately, sending considerable forces to put down Saul's open rebellion against Philistine rule (1 Sa. 13:5-7a). Here, Saul made his first serious mistake by breaching the code for Yahweh war. War for Israel was not merely a matter of politics, but of religion. It included a priestly charge (Dt. 20:2-4) and ceremonial purity (Dt. 23:9-14), for the presence of Yahweh moved in and about the bivouac. When an Israelite soldier took up arms, he "stood armed before Yahweh" (Nu. 32:20, 27, 29, 32). In particular, the wars of Israel against the inhabitants of Canaan were a form of divine judgment upon the wickedness of the Canaanites (Dt. 9:1-6). Thus, it is no surprise that Samuel instructed Saul and the army to await his presence before joining battle (1 Sa. 13:7b-8). Alarmed because his men were abandoning him, Saul preempted the priestly role and offered the sacrifice himself (1 Sa. 13:9-10). When Samuel arrived, Saul's excuses seemed feeble against the anger of the prophet (1 Sa. 13:11-14). Samuel sternly warned Saul that God had already chosen his replacement because of his rash act.

The war went on. Certain of an easy victory, the Philistines deployed their forces in three detachments to punish Saul in central Israel (1 Sa. 13:16-18). Jonathan, Saul's son, demonstrated striking bravery in attacking one of these detachments with a single sword (1 Sa. 14:1-14; cf. 13:22), and Saul led the whole Israelite army in a route of the Philistines (1 Sa. 14:15-23).<sup>51</sup>

Following this battle, the biblical narrative describes Saul's unbalanced religious zeal. He prevented his soldiers from violating Torah by eating blood (1 Sa. 14:31-34; cf. Lv. 17:10-14; 19:26; Dt. 12:16, 23-24), and he even built an altar to God (1 Sa. 14:35). However, when his son Jonathan, who had just figured prominently in Israel's victory, innocently ate some honey, Saul was ready to execute him for violating his rash vow (14:24-28, 36-45).<sup>52</sup> Still, Saul continued his task of delivering Israel from her Canaanite enemies, attacking the transjordan nations of Moab,

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<sup>51</sup>Saul's vacillation is evident, however. When he saw the Philistines fleeing, he called for the sacred Ark of the Covenant to seek God's purposes. However, after the sacred action of the priest had already begun, he aborted the oracle before it could be completed so he could pursue the Philistines (cf. 1 Sa. 14:16-19). In the end, his tendency toward impatience would be his undoing.

<sup>52</sup>The LXX actually translates 1 Sa. 14:24, "Saul committed a great trespass of ignorance," and many scholars believe this to be original, cf. P. McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 245. If so, then Saul's oath was more or less on the order of Jephthah's rash vow (cf. Jg. 11:29-40).

Ammon and Edom, the southern kingdom of Amalek, the northern kings of Aram (Zobah), and the Philistines in the coastal plain (14:47-48).

In his war with Amalek, Saul once more committed a serious breach of the war code. This time, he did not follow through with Torah's requirement of the *herem* (= ban), that is, the irrevocable destruction of the Canaanites (cf. Dt. 7:1-2, 16; 13:12-16; 20:16-18; Nu. 21:1-3). Samuel had reiterated the laws of holy war to Saul (1 Sa. 15:1-3), but Saul refused to fully comply (1 Sa. 15:4-9). Samuel arrived at the war camp within a day of Saul's disobedience to pronounce judgment on the king (1 Sa. 15:10-35). For Samuel, Saul was now as good as dead (1 Sa. 16:1).<sup>53</sup>

From this time on, Saul's mental condition deteriorated rapidly. A tormenting spirit terrorized Saul repeatedly (1 Sa. 16:14-16).<sup>54</sup> Samuel's fateful words to Saul that Yahweh had rejected him completely unnerved him. David entered Saul's service as a musician whose skill on the harp helped to sooth the erratic and paranoid Saul (1 Sa. 16:16-23). Soon, however, David's heroism in battle would drive Saul toward deeper insanity spurred on by jealousy and suspicion (1 Sa. 18:5-9). Twice he attempted to murder David directly (1 Sa. 18:10-11), and three times indirectly (1 Sa. 18:12-27). When his mood was better, he was inclined to lay aside his mad jealousy (1 Sa. 19:6-7), but when the black depression was upon him, he attempted to murder David again (1 Sa. 19:8-10). He tried to ambush him (1 Sa. 19:11-17), and he sent troops to apprehend him (1 Sa. 19:18-24). Jonathan's friendship with David nearly cost him his life at the hand of Saul (1 Sa. 20:18-33). Finally, giving up all pretense at fighting Israel's enemies, Saul took the army in pursuit of David. He slaughtered the priests of the Lord, because they aided David (1 Sa. 22:6-19). Back and forth over the central mountains he chased the object of his obsessive hatred and fear, and twice David spared Saul's life when he could have killed him easily (1 Sa. 23:7-22; 26:1-25).

Saul's end came when the Philistines mobilized their forces in the Esdraelon to invade Israel from the north (1 Sa. 28:1a, 4).<sup>55</sup> Saul and his army were camped further south on the slopes of Mt. Gilboa. Filled with terror at the overwhelming size of the Philistine force and alienated from Yahweh (1 Sa. 28:5-6), Saul determined to find some reassurance from the spiritual realm, even if it meant consulting a witch. In the seance, Saul heard his own death sentence from the apparition which the witch conjured up as Samuel (1 Sa. 28:7-25).<sup>56</sup> By the next evening, Saul and his sons were

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<sup>53</sup>The term "mourn" is the one usually used for the dead, cf. R. Youngblood, *EBC* (1992) III.679.

<sup>54</sup>A similar incident happened in the life of Abimelech when he attempted to usurp power over the clans during the tribal league (Jg. 9:23). The absence of Yahweh's Spirit left a vacuum, and into this vacuum God permitted an evil spirit to invade Saul's state of mind.

<sup>55</sup>Shunem is in the Esdraelon at the foot of the Hill of Moreh, cf. Y. Aharoni et al., *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 75.

<sup>56</sup>It seems that Saul did not himself see the apparition, but only the witch, for he asked her what she saw, and she described the apparition to Saul (cf. 28:13-14). Nevertheless, the communication of the apparition was directly to

dead, Saul finally falling on his own sword after being mortally wounded (1 Sa. 31:1-6). The Philistines beheaded him and hung his corpse on the walls of the fortress at Beth Shan (1 Sa. 31:8-10).

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Saul. Whether or not the apparition was truly Samuel has been debated at length without much success. If one says the witch raised Samuel, it begs the question as to why a righteous prophet could be disturbed from the realm of death. If one says that the apparition was only a trick, then it remains to explain how the apparition knew so accurately what would happen on the next day. Though ingenious, textual support is rather thin for the suggestion that the seance was interrupted by a genuine word from Samuel whom God raised up (thus causing the witch to be terrified).

## **Jezebel, Wife of Ahab Pagan, Queen, Antagonist**

Jezebel was famous for all the wrong reasons. She was an idolatress, a manipulator, a liar and a political despot. The biblical historian wrote of her influence: *There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, urged on by Jezebel his wife* (1 Kg.21:25). Who was this woman, and why did she earn such a scathing denunciation?

In the first place, Jezebel was neither an Israelite nor a proselyte. She was a Phoenician princess born into the family of Ethbaal of Sidon (1 Kg. 16:31).<sup>57</sup> David and Solomon both had followed the ancient Near Eastern custom of marrying foreign princesses for diplomatic reasons (2 Sa. 3:3b; 1 Kg. 11:1-3), and Ahab followed suit. Political marriages were a means of establishing peaceful relations between countries. With Ethbaal's control of both Tyre and Sidon and its extensive sea-trade, Ahab's marriage to the Sidonian princess would have served to strengthen his economy as well as his military security.

When Jezebel moved to Samaria, Israel's new capital (1 Kg. 16:23-24), she began an aggressive policy of subverting Yahwehism in preference for her native Ba'al fertility cult. Phoenicia and the northern Levant had long been a center for the worship of Ba'al and Astarte, where the fertility of the land and even the people depended on the union of the two deities and its cultic imitation by the people in sacred prostitution.<sup>58</sup> The patron god of Tyre was Ba'al Melqart (= Lord of the city), where he was worshipped on high escarpments. In his temple burned a perpetual flame.<sup>59</sup> In Israel, Ahab erected an altar and temple for Ba'al in Samaria along with an Asherah pole in honor of his new queen (1 Kg. 16:32-33). Though the building of

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<sup>57</sup> Her royal status is contained in her name, since the trilateral root *z-b-l* is Phoenician for "prince". The phonetics do not stop there, however, since the same trilateral root with different vocalization can also mean dung. This pun was not lost on the Hebrew biblical writer, who used it in the statement, "Jezebel's body will be like dung on the ground..." (2 Kg. 9:37), cf. E. Johnston, *ISBE* (1982) 2.1057. According to Josephus (who references Menander of Ephesus), Jezebel's father, Ethbaal, was a priest of Astarte who usurped the throne of Tyre after murdering Pheles, the former king, cf. *ISBE* (1982) 2.164 ( *Against Apion*, 1.18.123).

<sup>58</sup> P. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 61-66.

<sup>59</sup> H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), pp. 138-139.

such shrines was probably expected protocol, Ahab enthusiastically participated in the Ba'al cult himself.

It is against the background of Jezebel's Ba'al cult that Elijah confronted Ahab with the prediction of a dire drought (1 Kg. 17:1). Since Ba'al was the lord of storm and rain, Elijah's challenge to Ahab was equally a challenge to Jezebel's deity. The faith of Yahweh was fundamentally incompatible with the religion of Ba'al, and during the drought, Jezebel took her anger out on the prophets of the Lord (1 Kg. 18:4, 13). Her execution of Israel's prophets was probably on the grounds that the drought was their fault. Elijah, Yahweh's spokesman, represented them all, so Jezebel's solution was to kill as many as possible. With a world-view dominated by imitative magic, the continual effort to placate the gods and goddesses, and the belief that patron deities of different countries were perpetually at war with each other, her actions seemed appropriate. Above all, the search was on to find Elijah himself, and Jezebel's husband sent emissaries to all the neighboring kingdoms to apprehend him (1 Kg. 18:10).

In the end, the contest at Mt. Carmel was a confrontation between Ba'al and Yahweh as much as it was between Jezebel and Elijah (1 Kg. 18:19). Elijah's challenge, "The god who answers by fire—he is God," was aimed squarely at Ba'al's claims. Both the perpetual flame in Tyre's temple as well as the lightning that accompanied storm and rain were purportedly Ba'al's provenance. Now, Elijah intended to put these claims to an acid test. In the end, it was not the priests of Ba'al, but rather, Yahweh who answered by fire, storm and rain (1 Kg. 18:38, 45). When Ahab told Jezebel how Elijah had defeated her entire coterie of prophets (1 Kg. 19:1), she took solemn oath to have his life within 24 hours (1 Kg. 19:2).<sup>60</sup>

The next episode in which Jezebel figures prominently concerned Ahab's eagerness to add to his royal properties (1 Kg. 21:1-3). With Samaria as the new capital, the expansion of royal grounds by encroachment into neighboring farms was predictable. Nevertheless, the ancient Torah forbade farmers from selling their farmland permanently (Lv. 25:23-31). Ahab was hardly interested in a land contract, which was the only option open to Naboth as a vineyard farmer, so Jezebel determined to take matters into her own hands (1 Kg. 21:4-7). The ancient Mosaic code she ignored outright, and in fact, in her scheme to take over the vineyard, she broke several of the commandments. By her plot of perjury<sup>61</sup> and murder, she

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<sup>60</sup> The LXX offers a variant wording of Jezebel's threat, which if anything, is even more ominous than the text in the Hebrew Bible. She said, "If you are Elijah, I am Jezebel! May the gods so do to me and more besides if I do not make your life as the life of one of them [the slain Ba'al prophets] by this time tomorrow" (1 Kg. 19:2)!

<sup>61</sup> Jezebel manipulated Israelite law in her plot, since the Torah required two witnesses for a death penalty, though in this case the witnesses were perjurers (cf. Nu. 35:30; Dt. 17:6). Furthermore, blasphemy was a capital crime (Lv. 24:10-16), and while Jezebel was herself an idolater, she was not above using this aspect of the Torah to her advantage.

managed the forced annexation of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kg. 21:8-16). The property of executed blasphemers was under a ban, so it was easy for Jezebel to secure the vineyard for her husband after Naboth's death (Dt. 13:12-18).

When Ahab went to see his new acquisition, who should he meet between the trellises but Elijah! Because of Jezebel's act of murder and larceny, Elijah pronounced doom on the royal family, a judgment that was overheard by Ahab's attendants (cf. 2 Kg. 9:25-26). Both Ahab and Jezebel now were under God's terrible retribution. As for Jezebel and her offspring, the dogs and vultures would eat her and her children (1 Kg. 21:17-24).

Elijah's words were not empty threats! Though the kingship of Ahab would continue for some years, Ahab finally died in battle. Dogs licked his blood as it was washed from his chariot at the pool in Samaria (1 Kg. 21:34-38). Jezebel, for her part, continued to influence the nation through her son, Ahaziah, who still pursued the Ba'al fertility cult (1 Kg. 22:51-53), as well as through Joram, another son, who ascended the throne after Ahaziah's premature death (2 Kg. 1:17b; cf. 8:16). She even managed to export her brand of religion to the south, for her daughter, Athaliah, married the crown prince of Judah (2 Kg. 8:16-18).

Jezebel's death came at the hands of the zealous reformer Jehu, who was ordered by a prophet to purge the land of Ahab's family (2 Kg. 9:1-10). First, Jehu executed King Joram, Jezebel's son, and threw his corpse on the plot of ground once belonging to Naboth (2 Kg. 9:14-26). Though Jezebel tried to put on a bold front by darkening her eyes and adorning herself with formal wig and jewelry as both priestess and queen mother, Jehu had her thrown from a second floor window, and he rode her down with his chariot (2 Kg. 9:30-33). Later, they found that the pariah dogs had eaten her corpse, leaving only the skull, feet and hands (2 Kg. 9:34-37). Like her name, she was abandoned as dung on the ground. Athaliah, Jezebel's daughter to the south, usurped the throne of Judah for half a dozen years upon the death of her son, attempting to destroy the entire royal family of Judah in her mad lust for power (2 Kg. 11:1-3), but in the end, she, too, was executed (2 Kg. 11:12-16, 20).

In the end, the epithet, "She is a Jezebel," was confined to a woman leader in the Christian community of Thyatira who practiced false prophecy, sexual immorality and pagan syncretism (Rv. 2:20-23).

## **Elisha, The Prophet Farmer, Servant, Visionary**

Elisha was one of the earlier, non-writing prophets which God raised up to confront the rebellion of his kings and his people against their God and their covenant. Such prophets included Samuel (who confronted Saul), Nathan and Gad (who confronted David), the unnamed prophet from Judah and Ahijah (who confronted Jeroboam), Jehu ben Hanani (who confronted Baasha), and Elijah and Micaiah (who confronted Ahab). Such "troublers of Israel" were God's spokesmen to augment, and in many cases to oppose, the institutional authorities of kingship and priesthood. Their messages rang with authority that could shake nations, for they delivered their oracles, not as opinion, but as: "Thus says Yahweh!" They were zealous champions of the covenant of Torah, and each called his own generation to account for failing to maintain covenant loyalty. When the nation divided after the death of Solomon, such prophets are to be found in both Judah, the southern nation, and Ephraim, the northern nation. Elisha was one of the prophets in the north.

The reader first meets Elisha as the selected understudy of Elijah (1 Kg. 19:16). When called, he literally burned behind him his bridges to his rich farming life in order to follow the prophet of God (1 Kg. 19:19-21).<sup>62</sup> His ministry, which occupied about half a century (c. 850-800 B.C.), is told in 2 Kings 2-9, 13. Altogether, there are some eighteen episodes recounted about his life, many of them notable miracles. The most famous of Elisha's miracles were the multiplication of the widow's oil (2 Kg. 4:1-7), the raising of the Shunammite's son from death (2 Kg. 4:8-37), and the healing of Naaman's leprosy (2 Kg. 5:1-27).<sup>63</sup>

It is of more than passing interest that Elisha began his prophetic career as the

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<sup>62</sup>That Elisha was a wealthy farmer is deduced from the fact that he plowed with twelve yoke of oxen, a prodigious team, cf. *IDB* (1962) II.91.

<sup>63</sup>The other episodes in Elisha's life were the taking up of Elijah into heaven (2:1-18), the healing of the spring (2:19-22), the judgment on Bethel's hooligans (2:23-25), the war with Moab (3:11-15), the healing of the poison stew (4:38-41), the feeding of one hundred men (4:42-44), the floating axehead (6:1-7), the trapping of the Arameans (6:8-23), the siege of Samaria (6:24--7:20), the restoration of the Shunammite's land (8:1-6), the prophecy about Ben-Hadad and Hazael (8:7-15), the anointing of Jehu (9:1-13), Elisha's death (13:14-20a), and the post-humous miracle of resuscitation (13:20b-21).

servant of Elijah, a period during which he "poured water on the hands" of the famous prophet (cf. 2 Kg. 3:11). Undoubtedly, this period of apprenticeship was extremely valuable. A considerable number of these prophetic understudies formed guilds, called the "sons of the prophets" (cf. 2 Kg. 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1).<sup>64</sup> Elisha towered over his fellows in this regard, and instinctively they all seemed to know that he was to step into the role of his famous predecessor (2 Kg. 2:3, 5, 15).<sup>65</sup> Just as Elisha had served as an understudy to Elijah, he later served as a mentor to the "sons of the prophets" in order to encourage them in prophetic ministry (cf. 2 Kg. 4:38; 6:1).

The events in Elisha's life largely fall into two categories, his miracles of compassion for common folks and his political involvement which directed the course of Israel's history. Elisha's miracles were often performed in the context of everyday life. These circumstances include bad water from a spring, a widow whose creditors were going to take her children as slaves, a well-to-do couple who had the misfortune to be childless, the problem of an accidentally poisoned stew, insufficient food for a large group, a foreign military officer suffering from leprosy, a borrowed axehead lost in the river, and a plot of land which need to be restored to its rightful owner--these were the kinds of circumstances in which the power of God flowed through the prophet.

As to his political involvement, it seems clear that Elisha understood his calling to include the direction of Israelite history. Several stories occur in the context of war, such as the triple alliance between Israel, Judah and Edom against the Moabites and the wars between Israel and Aram. So potent was Elisha's ministry that he was considered to be the equivalent of the whole Israelite army all by himself (2 Kg. 13:14)! Elisha's influence was so well known that foreign potentates were not bashful about seeking his counsel (2 Kg. 8:7-8). He even predicted the *coup d'etat* of a foreign usurper (2 Kg. 8:11-15). However, Elisha's influence on the politics of Israel lay not only in his nation's conflict with foreigners, but also in regard to the internal affairs at home. He anointed Jehu as the destroyer of the dynasty of Omri and Ahab, an event which resulted in a bloodbath for both Israel and Judah. Even on his deathbed, Elisha's prophetic spirit had not dimmed (2 Kg. 13:14-20a).

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<sup>64</sup>Such groups appear as early as the time of Samuel (cf. 1 Sa. 10:5; 19:20), and they seem to have been characterized by ecstasy and music, sometimes combined with a sacred dance, see discussion in W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) I.309ff.; W. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) 214-216. Such prophetic guilds were associated with sacred places, such as Bethel and Jericho.

<sup>65</sup>Elisha himself, of course, wanted to follow in the footsteps of Elijah, as is evident from his request for a "double portion" of his spirit (2 Kg. 2:9). This phrase indicated that he wanted what was his rightful spiritual inheritance, and in terms of the laws of inheritance, it meant twice as much as any other heir (not necessarily twice as much as Elijah himself had, though some have attempted to interpret it in this way), cf. Dt. 21:17.



Later Jewish tradition honors Elisha by saying of him, "He did not tremble before any ruler, and no one brought him into subjection. Nothing was too hard for him, and when he was dead, his body prophesied. As in life he did wonders, so in death his deeds were marvelous" (Sirach 48:12-14). The events of his life are mentioned clearly only once in the New Testament, when Jesus reminded his contemporaries that while there were doubtless many lepers in Israel, Elisha healed only a foreigner (Lk. 4:27).<sup>66</sup> In some ways, the ministry of Jesus had striking parallels with that of Elisha. Just as Elisha followed in the footsteps of Elijah, Jesus followed the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. Like Elisha, Jesus' miracles were often among common people, and they included similar circumstances, such as, the affliction of leprosy, the multiplication of bread, and the raising of a widow's son.

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<sup>66</sup>There is also the more indirect reference in He. 11:35a.

## **Josiah of Judah**

### **King, Reformer, Tragic Warrior**

Only two kings of the nation of Judah were give unqualified commendation by the biblical historian, Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kg. 18:1-6; 22:2; 23:25). Josiah, the great grandson of Hezekiah, was the last spiritual hope for Judah. After his death, there would be no more good kings until the exile. He came to the throne at only eight years of age when his father, who had reigned only two years, was assassinated by his own officials (2 Kg. 21:23-24//2 Chr. 33:24-25).<sup>67</sup> Josiah's death can be fixed in 609 BC by extra-biblical records. His reign lasted thirty-one years, so the year of his ascension would have been about 640 BC.

Politically, the time of Josiah's ascension coincided with the golden age of Assyrian dominance in the ancient Near East. Ashurbanipal (ca. 669-627 BC), the Assyrian emperor, recently had sacked Thebes in the west (653 BC), conquered Babylon (648 BC) and Susa (640 BC) in the east, and reasserted Assyrian authority in Palestine. Manasseh, Josiah's grandfather, had suffered shameful exile to Mesopotamia at the hands of Ashurbanipal, but later, he had been restored to Jerusalem, probably as a kind of buffer for the Assyrians near the Egyptian frontier (2 Chr. 33:10-13).<sup>68</sup> Given his young age, Josiah's early regnal years likely were directed by regents, similar to what happened in the reign of Joash (2 Chr. 23-24).<sup>69</sup> However, providential circumstances were in Josiah's favor. Ashurbanipal died in about 627 BC, and the rulers following him were weak. A series of crippling defeats brought the Assyrian Empire from glory to near extinction, and Judah was left free by default.

At the age of sixteen, Josiah began an earnest spiritual quest for his true religious roots in the faith of Israel (2 Chr. 34:3a). By the age of twenty, he initiated sweeping reforms, purging both the capital and the country of the pagan implements that had so fascinated his grandfather (2 Chr. 34:3b-7). He pushed his reforms even

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<sup>67</sup> The biblical record that Amon was twenty-two when he became king, reigned for two years before his assassination, and then was succeeded by his eight year old son, Josiah, means that Amon fathered a child when he was only sixteen years old!

<sup>68</sup> J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 313.

<sup>69</sup> M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988), p. 281.

into the former holdings of the northern nation Israel (2 Kg. 23:15-20), and in doing so, fulfilled a prediction made by an unnamed prophet of Judah nearly 300 years earlier (cf. 1 Kg. 13:1-3). In about 621 BC, Josiah broke his vassalship with Assyria (assuming his political freedom is to be coordinated with his religious reforms). During the early years of Josiah (Zep. 1:1), the prophet Zephaniah denounced the shocking idolatrous practices in Jerusalem (Zep. 1:4-6, 9; 3:1-4). It is hard to believe that this fiery-eyed preacher was not a major influence on the young king, spurring him toward reform.

The highlight of Josiah's reforms came in his eighteenth regnal year with the discovery of a lost Torah scroll when workers were refurbishing the temple (2 Kg. 22:3-10//2 Chr. 34:14-18).<sup>70</sup> The deep consternation of Josiah when he heard it read, and especially the dire warning of Huldah, the prophetess, that the sworn curses of the book were very much a living threat (2 Kg. 22:15-17; 2 Chr. 34:23-25; cf. Dt. 28), have led most interpreters to conclude that the Torah scroll was either part or all of the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>71</sup> Regardless of which Torah scroll was discovered, Josiah was energized to lead the reform movement by deposing pagan priests, destroying pagan shrines, purging the temple's defilement, and presiding over the first Passover to be celebrated to this degree in more than 400 years (2 Kg. 23:21-23; 2 Chr. 35).<sup>72</sup> By the time of the reform movement, Zephaniah had been joined in his fiery call for repentance by a junior colleague, the young Jeremiah (Je. 1:1-3). The biblical historian concluded: *Neither before nor after Josiah was a there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did--with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses* (2 Kg. 23:25).

As great as was Josiah's reform, it was not enough. The sins of Manasseh had been so egregious, and the long history of Judah so marked with religious syncretism, that God only postponed the coming judgment out of deference to Josiah's piety (2 Kg. 23:26-27). Unfortunately, after Josiah's death, the nation quickly resumed its

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<sup>70</sup> It is of interest that a seal ring bearing the name of Hilkiah, the priest who made the discovery of the Torah scroll, has been recovered and resides in a private collection, J. Elayi, "Name of Deuteronomy's Author Found on a Seal Ring," *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1987), p. 54.

<sup>71</sup> Other factors that argue in favor of Deuteronomy include the fact that portions of Deuteronomy specifically call for the abolition of the *bamot* (= high places), maintaining the temple in Jerusalem as the only place where proper sacrifice can be offered, and observing the *haggim* (pilgrim feasts) each year (Dt. 12:1-7, 13-14; 16:1-6; 18:1-8). All these features were prominent in Josiah's reforms (2 Kg. 23:4-15, 19-20; 2 Chr. 34:3-8, 33; 35:1-19). Hence, since the time of the early church fathers, Josiah's reforms have been judged to be based on the Deuteronomic code, cf. B. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 309-310.

<sup>72</sup> Some interpreters take 2 Kg. 23:22 to mean that the Passover had not be celebrated at all for about four centuries, cf. S. LaSor et al., *Old Testament Survey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 217. This conclusion, however, is overstated, since Hezekiah, Josiah's great grandfather, celebrated the Passover (cf. 2 Chr. 30:1ff.). Nevertheless, Josiah made the Passover a national festival rather than a local one, cf. T. Hobbs, *2 Kings [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), p. 337.

fascination with paganism, and Judah's final kings went from bad to worse until 586 BC, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Yahweh's word to Jeremiah was that if even Moses and Samuel interceded for the nation it would be too little, too late (Je. 15:1-4). Josiah was spared from seeing this demise by his untimely death.

The king's death came in an effort to thwart the Egyptian army from supporting the refugee government of the Assyrians. By this time, the major Assyrian capitals of Asshur and Nineveh had succumbed to the power of Nebuchadnezzar. What was left of the Assyrian court had been routed from Haran in northwest Mesopotamia. Pharaoh Neco II (610-594 BC) of Egypt determined to march northward to prop up the tottering Assyrians under Asshur-uballit and help them retake Haran. Josiah determined to stop this support. Whether he was in alliance with Babylon as once Hezekiah was (2 Kg. 20:12ff//Is. 39) or whether he simply wished to avoid an Egyptian-Assyrian resurgence is unclear. What is clear is that his efforts were wasted. Josiah was shot by an archer near Megiddo, and he died shortly thereafter in Jerusalem (2 Kg. 23:29-30//2 Chr. 35:20-24). Jeremiah was left to compose funeral dirges for his beloved king (2 Chr. 35:25).

## **Baruch, Scribe to Jeremiah** **Secretary, Faithful Friend, Companion In Exile**

It is rare to find an archaeological artifact that can be specifically tied to an ancient person in the Bible, but the late 1970s discovery of a hoard of bullae<sup>73</sup> did just that! One bullae contained the seal impression of Baruch, son of Neriah, or more specifically לְבִרְכִיָּהוּ בֶן נְרִיָּהוּ הַסֹּפֵר (*le-berekhyahu ben neriyahu ha-sepher* = [belonging] to Berekhyahu, son of Neriyahu, the scribe).<sup>74</sup> This man, who was amanuensis to the prophet Jeremiah, lived in the closing days of the kingdom of Judah (shortly before 586 BC). The Babylonian army under Nebuchadnezzar, easily the most powerful king in the ancient Near East, was threatening Jerusalem and Judah. Jeremiah had been railing against Judah's covenant unfaithfulness for some time, and he named Babylon as the instrument of Yahweh's disciplining wrath (Je. 4:5-8; 19:14--20:6).

The Babylonians already had dispatched the Assyrians in a series of campaigns. By 620 BC, the Assyrians were driven out of Babylon. In 614 BC, Asshur, the southern capital of Assyria fell. In 612 BC, Nineveh, the northern capital of Assyria fell. By 609 BC, the refugee government of the Assyrians in Haran had collapsed, and in 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar marched northward and crushed the Egyptians at Carchemish, Assyria's last significant ally. It was easily apparent that the kingdom of Judah was next in line! Judah was certainly not up to facing such a formidable foe, and for a long time her kings trusted in their alliance with Egypt to save them (Je. 2:36-37; cf. Is. 36:6).

The same year the Babylonians crushed the Egyptians at Carchemish, Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to write out his prophecies on a scroll (Je. 36:1-3). The oracles were dictated to Baruch, who penned the words just as they were given to him (Je. 36:4). Since Jeremiah was under gag orders restricting him from public preaching,<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> A bulla (pl. bullae) is an ova-shaped lump of clay once used to secure important documents. They often bear a seal impression containing a personal name.

<sup>74</sup> H. Shanks, "Jeremiah's Scribe and Confidant Speaks from a Hoard of Clay Bullae," *BAR* (Sept/Oct 1987), pp. 58-65.

<sup>75</sup> The danger to Jeremiah was real! After his scathing temple sermon, he was nearly executed (Je. 26:11), and one

he instructed Baruch to read the prophecies to the citizens of Jerusalem when they came to the temple (Je. 36:5-10). News of this stratagem soon reached the ears of Jehoiakim's officials, and Baruch's scroll was taken to the palace to be read aloud there (Je. 36:11-18). In the meantime, Baruch and Jeremiah were warned that they must hide for fear of their lives (Je. 36:19). As the columns of Jeremiah's dictated scroll were read, King Jehoiakim carved them off and burned them in a brazier (Je. 36:20-24). At the end of the reading, Jehoiakim gave an imperial order to arrest Baruch and Jeremiah, but God protected their hiding place (Je. 36:25-26).<sup>76</sup> After the burning of the scroll, Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to record his oracles yet again, along with a pronounced judgment on Jehoiakim and Jerusalem (Je. 36:27-31). As before, Jeremiah dictated his sermons, and Baruch recorded them. (36:32).

The last line in Jeremiah 36 has the intriguing statement, "Many similar words were added to them [i.e., Jeremiah's dictated oracles]. The passive voice (Hebrew niph'al form) leaves some ambiguity as to who did the adding, but presumably it was Baruch. In any case, because the major section of Jeremiah 26-45 is written about Jeremiah in the third person, most scholars believe it was set down by Baruch."<sup>77</sup> For what must have been an exhausting editorial task in assisting the prophet, God gave a blessing to Baruch, promising that even though the nation would fall, Baruch's life would be spared (Je. 45).

The reader also encounters Baruch in the account of Jeremiah's purchase of a piece of property from his cousin, a symbolic act that even though the citizens of Judah would be exiled from the land, they would eventually come back to settle there (Je. 32:6-8, 15; 33:36-41). Even then, Jerusalem was under siege from the Babylonians (Je. 32:2), a siege that Jeremiah knew would end in the destruction of the city (Je. 32:24-29). Nevertheless, at Yahweh's word, Jeremiah bought the field. After the transaction, he instructed Baruch to preserve a double deed<sup>78</sup> of the purchase in a clay jar so it would be safe until the future restoration (Je. 32:9-14). Given Baruch's expertise as a scribe, it seems likely that the purchase deed was drawn up by him.

How much influence did Baruch have on the prophet Jeremiah? Apparently enough so that Jeremiah's detractors believed Baruch to be capable of shaping Jeremiah's opinions. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the assassination of

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of his colleagues, who fled the country, was extradited and executed (Je. 26:20-23).

<sup>76</sup> It is of some interest that the hoard of bullae containing the seal impression of Baruch also contained the seal impressions of two other characters in this story, Jehoiakim's son, Jerahmeel, who was sent as a member of the arresting party, and Elishama, the scribe. Jerahmeel's seal impression reads, "[Belonging] to Yerahme'el, son of the king," while Elishama's reads "[Belonging] to 'Elishama, servant of the king," cf. Shanks, p. 61.

<sup>77</sup> J. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 33-34.

<sup>78</sup> A double deed, in which part was sealed and part open, contained the original deed and possibly an abstract. The original deed was sealed and would only be opened if there was a dispute. The unsealed abstract was available for easy access, cf. Shanks, pp. 64-65.

Gedaliah (Je. 39-41), some of the Judeans wanted to flee to Egypt to escape any possible reprisals. Jeremiah advised against it (Je. 42), but the Judeans accused him of being too heavily influenced by Baruch. While this may have been an empty retort, the relationship between Jeremiah and Baruch had been long and close.

Baruch's name does not disappear with the completion of his editorial work on Jeremiah's sermons. Flavius Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, repeats the narrative that Baruch was taken to Egypt along with the prophet (cf. Je. 43:4-7).<sup>79</sup> He adds the interesting biographical note that Baruch was born into an eminent Judean family.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps this is why God's word to Baruch through Jeremiah was that he should decline to "seek great things" for himself (Je. 45:5), but instead, be content to serve the prophet. The circumstances of Baruch's death are unclear. St. Jerome, in the Christian era, preserved a tradition that he died in Egypt, but other traditions say that he was taken to Babylon after being taken to Egypt.<sup>81</sup>

His name and reputation became larger than life in the intertestamental period and later, when no less than half a dozen works were composed and circulated under his name.<sup>82</sup> The most important of them was the Book of Baruch in the Apocrypha, a work accepted into the canon of Scripture by the Roman Catholic Church. This work purports to be a composition by Baruch after he was deported to Babylon. Supposedly it was to be sent to Jerusalem and used in the liturgy at the site of the burned temple. However, as with other apocryphal books, the various historical discrepancies figured significantly in its rejection by both Jews and Protestants as appropriate for the canon.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Antiquities*, 10.9.6 (179).

<sup>80</sup> *Antiquities*, 10.9.1 (158).

<sup>81</sup> T. Davies, *ISBE* (1979) I.433.

<sup>82</sup> These include the Book of Baruch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Rest of the Words of Baruch, the gnostic Book of Baruch, the Latin Book of Baruch, a Greek Apocalypse of Baruch (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) and another Book of Baruch (4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century AD), cf. T. Davies, I.433.

<sup>83</sup> In fact, even Roman Catholic scholars now freely recognize these discrepancies, cf. F. Fitzgerald, F.S.C., "Baruch," *NJBC* (1990), p. 563.

## **Esther and The Hidden Hand of God**

### **Orphan, Queen and Intercessor**

The Book of Esther<sup>84</sup> is the only document in the Old Testament which describes life in the Jewish Diaspora between the captivity and the return from exile. The book is relatively unknown to Christians.<sup>85</sup> The story takes place in Susa, the winter residence of the Persian king, Xerxes I (1:1-2).<sup>86</sup> The opening scene is a lavish banquet, in which Xerxes deposes Vashti, his queen, because she slighted him (1:3-22). A search for a new queen was initiated (2:1-4), and Mordecai,<sup>87</sup> a Jewish exile from Jerusalem (2:6), offered his orphaned niece Esther<sup>88</sup> as a candidate (2:5-11, 15). Esther's Jewish nationality, however, was kept a secret (2:10, 20). Upon joining the king's harem, Esther was given a full year of beauty treatment to prepare her for the review by Xerxes (2:12). Of all the candidates, Xerxes chose Esther as the new queen (2:17-18). Some time afterwards, Mordecai discovered a plot against the life of Xerxes concocted by two of his bodyguards. Through Esther, Mordecai informed Xerxes, and the plot was foiled with the assassins being hung (2:21-23).

The next episode of the book describes the appointment of Haman as Xerxes' prime minister (3:1). Haman was furious with Mordecai, because he refused to bow down to him and honor his new appointment (3:2-4).<sup>89</sup> When Haman discovered that

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<sup>84</sup>Esther is the last of the five books of the Jewish *Megilloth*, the five scrolls that are read at the Jewish festivals of Pentecost (Ruth), Passover (Song of Songs), Booths (Ecclesiastes), the anniversary of Jerusalem's destruction (Lamentations), and Purim (Esther). It is the only book in the Hebrew Bible of which no portion was found at Qumran, nor is it mentioned in the New Testament.

<sup>85</sup>Several factors underlie this neglect. The book does not mention God, its nationalistic and vengeful spirit have offended many (not the least of which was Martin Luther), it is unknown in the New Testament, and it has a considerable number of historical problems.

<sup>86</sup>While there has been some debate, it is reasonably certain that the Ahasuerus of the book is Xerxes I, who ruled from 485-465 B.C. True, the LXX takes Ahasuerus to be Artaxerxes II, but a cuneiform text has been unearthed which identifies Ahasuerus with Xerxes I, and in addition, mentions a courtier named Marduka (Mordecai), cf. D. Payne, *ISBE* (1982) II.159.

<sup>87</sup>Later records will list Mordecai as one of the exiles who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel after the edict of repatriation by Cyrus the Great (cf. Ezr. 2:2; Ne. 7:7).

<sup>88</sup>Esther is the Akkadian-Babylonian name for the goddess Ishtar. Her Hebrew name, Hadassah (2:7), means "myrtle," cf. D. Harvey, *IDB* (1962) II.149.

<sup>89</sup>However, if Mordecai was an *orosange* (= Benefactor of the King), he had the privilege of not prostrating himself



Mordecai was a Jew, he persuaded Xerxes to allow a pogrom against all the Jews in the entire Persian kingdom (3:5-15). A day was selected for the pogrom,<sup>90</sup> and an official edict drawn up and sealed with the king's signet. In the meantime, Mordecai communicated with Esther that she alone stood between the king and the extermination of her own people, not to mention herself as well (4). His words to Esther are perhaps the best known from the whole book, "And who knows but that you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14). Of course, for Esther to appear before Xerxes without a summons held great risk. She might be executed if the king did not extend to her the royal scepter (4:11). However, fortified by her uncle's words, she determined to take the chance. She was received by Xerxes, and her invitation was accepted for the king and Haman to attend a special banquet at which she would pose a special request to the king (5:1-8). Little did Haman realize how ominous for him this invitation was to be!

Still seething over Mordecai's stubbornness, yet elated at his good fortune to be invited to the queen's banquet, Haman constructed a special seventy-five feet high gallows on which to hang Esther's uncle (5:9-14). That night, however, Xerxes was plagued with insomnia. Calling for a reading of the court records, he was reminded of the plot which Mordecai had uncovered earlier and that Mordecai had never been honored for his loyalty (6:1-3). About that time, Haman arrived, and Xerxes asked him what should be done for the man whom the king delighted to honor. Thinking that the honor was for himself, Haman suggested royal robes, a royal horse, and a parade through Susa with an advance crier proclaiming the status of high honor (6:4-9). With bitter chagrin, Haman listened as Xerxes ordered him to do these very things for Mordecai--and Haman himself was to be the advance crier (6:10-11)!

Later that day, at the banquet, the queen revealed to Xerxes Haman's plot as well as her own Jewish nationality (7:1-6). Haman, realizing his plot was discovered, fell upon Esther to plead for mercy, and Xerxes thought he was attempting to molest the queen in his very presence (7:7-8). So, Haman was hanged on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai (7:9-10). Mordecai, meanwhile, became the prime minister instead of Haman (8:1-2). The deadly pogrom against the Jews was countered by another edict, this one empowering the Jews to protect themselves against their enemies with armed resistance (8:7--9:17).<sup>91</sup> In the end, the Jews were saved by a woman's bravery.

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to anyone except the king alone, cf. M. Heltzer, "The Book of Esther," *BR* (Vol. VIII, Nu. 1 Feb. 1992) 29-30.

<sup>90</sup>The 13th day of Adar (the 12th month) was selected by casting lots, and since the Hebrew-Old Assyrian word for lot is *pur*, the name of the Jewish festival, Purim, means "lots" (3:7; 9:24, 26-28).

<sup>91</sup>It may be wondered why a second edict was commissioned rather than simply a repeal of the first one. However, as the book makes clear, an edict sealed with the king's ring was not reversible, even by the king himself (1:19; 8:8; cf. Da. 6:8, 15).

While there are several problematic issues regarding the Book of Esther, none is more significant than the fact that it contains neither the personal name *Yahweh* nor the more general word for God, *Elohim*. This absence has been addressed in several ways. Some suggest that since the book was to be read during a Jewish festival, the name of God was omitted lest it be uttered profanely during festivities which included heavy drinking.<sup>92</sup> Some scribes claim to have found the tetragrammaton YHWH in initial and final letters of phrases in 1:20; 5:4, 13 and 7:7.<sup>93</sup> Still others propose that the absence of God's name implies that Mordecai and Esther acted without consulting God, and their ethical deviations (i.e., deceit over nationality, marriage to a Gentile, vengeance against Jewish detractors, lack of mercy toward Haman or his family) merited his displeasure which was expressed by divine silence.<sup>94</sup> One of the most ingenious explanations has been offered by exegetes who noticed that the Hebrew spelling of the word "Jews" in the book is spelled six times with an extra *yod* (4:7; 8:1, 7, 13; 9:15, 18). The letter *yod* or *yad* means "a hand," but whose hand? The suggestion is that the extra letters represent the "hand of God," hidden in this book, but powerfully evident in the providential salvation of the Jewish people. There are six separate occasions where divine intervention rescues either a Jew or the Jewish nation as a whole.<sup>95</sup> As such, even though he is not mentioned by name, God was there all along.

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<sup>92</sup>The Mishnah stated that in celebrating *Purim*, a man was obligated to drink until he was "unable to distinguish between 'Blessed be Mordecai' and 'Cursed be Haman,'" cf. F. Huey, Jr., "Esther," *EBC* (1988) IV.784.

<sup>93</sup>R. Sabua, "The Hidden Hand of God," *BR* (Vol. VIII No. 1 Feb. 1992) 31-32.

<sup>94</sup>Huey, Jr., 784-786.

<sup>95</sup>Sabua, 32-33.

## **John The Baptizer**

### **Prophet, Forerunner and Martyr**

No greater commendation can be given than the one which Jesus gave for John the Baptizer,<sup>96</sup> "Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Mt. 11:11//Lk. 7:28). John was born into a priestly family about six months before the birth of Jesus (Lk. 1:26). His father, Zechariah, was fulfilling his temple service in Jerusalem when the coming birth of his son was announced to him by the angel Gabriel (Lk. 1:5-13, 19). Unlike Jonah, his namesake in the Hebrew Bible, this John would not flee from God's call but would boldly minister in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk. 1:14-17). He would be Spirit-filled from conception (Lk. 1:15; cf. 1:44). At his birth and circumcision, his parents named him *Yohanan*, just as the angel had instructed (Lk. 1:13, 57-63).

Nothing definite is known of John's youth except Luke's intriguing statement, "He lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Lk. 1:80). Since his family home was in the Judean hills (Lk. 1:39), only a few miles from the commune at Qumran, there has been much speculation as to whether John may have spent time with this desert sect.<sup>97</sup> In the desert until God's call for him to preach (Lk. 3:1-2), and wearing the garb of the ancient prophets (Mk. 1:6; cf. 2 Kg. 1:8; Zec. 13:4), John began preaching in the bottom-lands of the Jordan River.

The heart of John's preaching was the advent of the kingdom of God (Mt. 3:2). In his message, the coming kingdom was inseparable from the coming Messiah, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Mt. 3:11-12//Mk. 1:7-8//Lk. 3:15-18//Jn. 1:24-28). The imagery of Spirit and fire in this twofold baptism speak of

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<sup>96</sup>Mark's Gospel uses the more colorful substantival participle "John the Baptizer," while the other gospels have "John the Baptist."

<sup>97</sup>It is of interest that the text of Is. 40:3, which John used to describe himself (cf. Mt. 3:3//Mk. 1:3//Lk. 3:3-6//Jn. 1:23), was used in the *Manual of Discipline* at Qumran to explain why the Qumran community chose to live in the desert (1QS 8:12-16). Also, the Qumran community practiced ritual washings for spiritual purification, a ritual not unlike John's baptisms in the Jordan. The connection between "water, Spirit and fire" (Lk. 3:16) was also made in the Qumran *Manual of Discipline*, which read that "God will purge...refining [by fire]...some of mankind...to cleanse them with a holy Spirit...and to sprinkle them with a spirit of truth like purifying water" (1QS 4:20-21), cf. J. Fitzmyer, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 106-108.

blessings to the righteous and divine judgment upon the wicked. Later in the New Testament, the aspect of baptism with the Spirit was described as fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Ac. 1:5; 2:1-4; 11:15-17). The judgment of fire, which has not yet been fulfilled, will come at the end of the age. John, however, did not provide such a close interpretation for his eschatological message. Rather, he simply preached that the kingdom of God was near and called his listeners to repentance and water baptism for the forgiveness of their sins (Mt. 3:5-6//Mk. 1:4-5//Lk. 3:3).

The prospect of coming wrath, in which the chaff would be burned with unquenchable fire, deeply stirred John's listeners. John bluntly refused to acknowledge all notions of nationalistic or legalistic righteousness. His message of repentance was to all, rich or poor, great or small. No one was to assume his or her own righteousness, not even the members of pious religious sects or native citizens of the house of Israel (Mt. 3:7-10//Lk. 3:7-9; 7:30). An ethnic lineage from Abraham was pointless without a deep, moral turning toward God! John's sermons contained a practical social message of altruism. Those who had food should share it! Those who had clothes should share them! He had advice for collaborators, like toll officers, as well as for soldiers (Lk. 3:10-14).<sup>98</sup> When a delegation from Jerusalem came to interrogate him, John was short and to the point. He disclaimed being the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet like Moses. He would only define himself as a voice in the desert calling for people to prepare themselves for the Coming One (Jn. 1:19-28).

During his desert ministry, Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John. Initially John was reluctant, but in the end, he capitulated (Mt. 3:13-15//Mk. 1:9). John saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus like a dove, which was a sign that God had designated Jesus as the Coming One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mt. 3:16-17//Mk. 1:10-11//Lk. 3:21-22//Jn. 1:29-34). From then on, John recognized Jesus as the Passover Lamb, God's own Son, who would take away the sins of the world.

The appearance of Jesus marked a definite transition in the ministry of John. While John did not stop preaching and baptizing (Jn. 3:22-23), his open recognition of Jesus as the Coming One meant that many of his own disciples began to follow Jesus (Jn. 1:35-39; 3:26). Yet, John was content to remain in his role as the forerunner of the Messiah. In explaining his role to his friends, John said he was like the friend of the bridegroom whose duty is to draw attention to the bridegroom himself (Jn. 3:27-29). His famous words, "He must become greater; I must become less," pointed to his role as an earthly voice as compared to Jesus' role as a heavenly

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<sup>98</sup>The "soldiers" were hardly Romans, since no legions were stationed in Palestine at this time. Thus, they must have been either Jewish men enlisted in the service of Herod Antipas, or else Jewish zealots who were part of an organized resistance to Rome, cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) I.470; W. Farmer, *IDB* (1962) II.960-961.

one (Jn. 3:30-36).

John's moral preaching finally culminated in his arrest after he denounced Herod Antipas for marrying the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip (Mt. 14:3-4//Mk. 6:17-18//Lk. 3:19-20), a clear violation of Torah (Lv. 18:16; 20:21).<sup>99</sup> Josephus also adds that Antipas feared John might stir up a revolt, so he imprisoned him at Machaerus to the east of the Dead Sea. During John's arrest, he sent some of his loyal followers to ask Jesus directly if he were the Coming One. This question might imply that John was having second thoughts, or perhaps more likely, it was simply a call for help. He wanted to remind Jesus of his faithful forerunner who was now suffering in Herod's dungeon. In any case, Jesus gave convincing signs to John's followers that he was truly the Coming One, attested by the power of God. But while it seemed that everyone else was privileged to receive a miracle of deliverance, this was not to be God's will for John. Rather, he must be content with God's decision for his martyrdom, and he must not be offended that Jesus did not offer any alternative (Mt. 11:2-6//Lk. 7:18-23). Herod, for his part, wanted John dead (as did Herodias), but he was afraid due to John's popularity. Eventually, however, Herodias prevailed, and John was beheaded (Mt. 14:5-11//Mk. 6:19-28). John's disciples were left to bury the decapitated corpse of their beloved leader (Mt. 14:12//Mk. 6:29).

Not only did John see himself in a transitional role, Jesus also pointed out that John's ministry was the connecting link between the "law and the prophets" on one hand and the inauguration of the "kingdom of God" on the other (Mt. 11:7-15//Lk. 7:24-28). John's influence did not cease with his death. Years later, there were still "Baptist" groups who knew and followed the righteous preaching of this desert prophet (Ac. 18:24--19:7).

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<sup>99</sup>Josephus explains that on a trip to Rome, Antipas had stopped to visit Philip and became infatuated with Herodias, Philip's wife. Secretly, they agreed to marry when Antipas returned, provided he divorce his first wife. However, Antipas' wife discovered the plot and fled to her father, cf. *Antiquities*, XVIII.v.i. Antipas married Herodias anyway, and John denounced him for it.

## **The Virgin Mary**

### **Mother and Disciple of the Lord**

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has received a rather mixed response by the Christian community. By some she has been venerated above all other Christians in the history of the church, while by others she has been virtually ignored. Her role and status in Christian history is probably somewhere in between these extremes.

Biblical information about Mary is almost entirely confined to the four Gospels.<sup>100</sup> She apparently was from the family of David (Lk. 3:23-38; cf. Ro. 1:3; 2 Ti. 2:8).<sup>101</sup> Her espousal to Joseph more than likely occurred when she was still quite young, perhaps as young as twelve years old.<sup>102</sup> Tradition, admittedly not very reliable, depicts Joseph as a widower with children.<sup>103</sup> To Mary the angel Gabriel came to announce the birth of Jesus (Lk. 1:26-38). The emphasis in both Luke and Matthew is that this was a virginal conception (Lk. 1:27, 34-35; Mt. 1:16, 18, 20, 25), hence her traditional title, "The Virgin Mary." That she may have had other children by Joseph after the birth of Jesus is probable (Mt. 12:46//Mk. 3:31//Lk. 8:19; Mk. 6:3; Jn. 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10; Ac. 1:14).<sup>104</sup>

One cannot help but admire her courage and faith in responding to the troubling content of the annunciation with the obedient words, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Lk. 1:38). *The Magnificat*, given when she met her relative Elizabeth, stands unparalleled as a song of praise in celebration of God's concern for the poor and powerless (Lk. 1:46-55). Equally, her endurance

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<sup>100</sup>Elsewhere, she is mentioned by name only in Ac. 1:14, and by implication in Ga. 4:4.

<sup>101</sup>There is some discussion as to whether or not the phrase "of the house of David" (Lk. 1:27) should be attached to the "virgin" or to "Joseph." It has long been an opinion that the Lukan genealogy is of Mary, and this is supported by the Talmud, which cites Mary as the daughter of Heli, cf. L. Sweet, *ISBE* (1943) II.1198. However, the text does not explicitly say so.

<sup>102</sup>Most betrothals occurred prior to the girl being twelve and a half years of age, since after that time she could not be betrothed against her wishes, cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. F. and C. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 363-364.

<sup>103</sup>E. Blair, *IDB* (1962) II.980.

<sup>104</sup>While later efforts to substantiate Mary's perpetual virginity held that the term *adelphos* (= brother) could be used of "cousins," a uterine brother is the more natural meaning in these passages, cf. G. Bromiley, *ISBE* (1986) III.269.

during what must have been the most trying circumstances for a birth merits deep respect (Lk. 2:1-7). The midnight flight to Egypt must have been harrowing (Mt. 2:13-14). From the beginning, she demonstrated a reflective faith that obediently preserved difficult revelations from God in a context of deep respect (Lk. 2:19, 51). The solemn oracle by Simeon that Mary's future held for her a very deep wound must have been daunting (Lk. 2:35). Thus, the honorable title given to Mary by the early Christian fathers, *Theotokos* (= God-bearer), is not objectionable so long as it is used to describe Mary's role in the nativity and the full deity of Jesus from his conception.<sup>105</sup>

The biblical record provides only a single story about Mary and Jesus between Jesus' birth and ministry. In this account, already there is to be noted a subtle tension in which Mary was to experience separation from her divine-human son (Lk. 2:48-51). This separation became even more apparent when Jesus began his public ministry. At the Cana wedding, Jesus made it clear that Mary could no longer exercise parental control (Jn. 2:3-4). The same separation was necessary from the larger family as well (Mt. 12:46-50//Mk. 3:31-35//Lk. 8:19-21). How much Mary may have concurred with Jesus' brothers that he may have been insane is unclear (Mk. 3:21), and in any case, his brothers did not at this time accept his claim to messiahship (Jn. 7:3-5). Mary, however, stood faithfully near the cross when her son was executed, and Jesus tenderly committed her into the care of his "beloved disciple" (Jn. 19:25-27).

Whether or not Mary was with the women who first saw the empty tomb on Easter is not stated in the gospels. However, according to Luke, she was among the disciples who waited in the upper room for the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost (Ac. 1:14). She, like all other humans, was a fallible creature who needed the salvation provided by Christ Jesus. By the time of Pentecost, she had fulfilled her task of bearing the Messiah and had made the transition from mother to disciple. For her privileged role in salvation-history, she shall always be called "blessed" (Lk. 1:48b)!

The traditions about Mary which arose in the subsequent history of the church are varied. By the late 2nd century, a growing emphasis on ascetic life and celibacy led to the suggestion that Mary was perpetually a virgin. This conclusion betrayed an unhealthy view of human sexuality, as though all sexual intercourse, even within a lawful marriage, was somehow tainted. By the end of the 4th century, the perpetual virginity of Mary had become the common opinion. By the Middle Ages, yet further accretions were added to Mary's profile. The notion that she was a conduit of divine

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<sup>105</sup>The title was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) as well as by Luther and other Reformers. It is not the same as the Latin *Dei Genetrix* (= mother of God) or *co-redemptrix* (= co-redeemer), which are rightly to be rejected, V. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 242; D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) I.196-197.

grace, based on the Latin Vulgate's *Ave Maria* (Lk. 1:28), became common.<sup>106</sup> A growing emphasis on her as a mediator between humans on earth and her risen Son in heaven, especially in light of post-baptismal sin, led to the belief that any severity on the part of the Son could be mitigated by the gentleness of his mother. As the "mother of God," she was to be venerated as the Lady of Heaven, and the same forms of speech in prayers and hymns which were used to address God himself were now being used in prayers to Mary. By the 19th century, Pope Pius IX declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, that is, the teaching that Mary was sinless from birth. In the 20th century, the Assumption of Mary became dogma in the Roman Church--the belief that Mary was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. These speculations have no biblical warrant.<sup>107</sup> The whole collection of traditions and beliefs about Mary, called Mariology, may very well have received much of its impetus from the mother-goddess figures of paganism.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>This position cannot be supported from the Greek text, however, where Mary is the object of grace, not the dispenser of grace.

<sup>107</sup>See the following articles: W. Kerr, "Mary, Assumption of," T. German, "Immaculate Conception," T. Finger, "Mariology," W. Proctor, "Mother of God," *EDT* (1984) 696.

<sup>108</sup>Bromiley, 271-273.



## **James and John, Sons of Thunder Fishermen, Disciples and Apostles**

There are only a few places in the New Testament where the language is Aramaic rather than Greek, and most of those occasions report sayings of Jesus.<sup>109</sup> One passage describes a nickname that Jesus gave to two brothers, *Boanerges*, which means "Sons of Thunder" (Mk. 3:17). It is not entirely clear whether the nickname owed more to the fiery temperament of James and John themselves (Lk. 9:51-54) or to the bombastic displeasure of old "Thunder" as he watched his sons leave the family fishing business to follow the carpenter from Nazareth (Mk. 1:19-20). Since both men were partners with Peter and Andrew in the same fishing business (cf. Lk. 5:10), it is likely that they were natives of Bethsaida near the entrance of the Jordan into the Sea of Galilee (cf. Jn. 1:44).<sup>110</sup> Since James is usually mentioned first, he was probably the older of the two.<sup>111</sup> Their mother was Salome (cf. Mt. 27:56; Mk. 15:40).

In Galilee, Jesus called James and John to become his disciples (Mt. 4:21-22//Mk. 1:19-20//Lk. 5:1-11). From among the many disciples that followed Jesus, twelve were chosen as apostles (Mt. 10:2-4//Mk. 3:14-19//Lk. 6:13-16), and among these, James and John, along with Peter, composed an inner circle of three which were privileged to be with Jesus more intimately than the others (Mk. 5:37//Lk. 8:51; Mat. 17:1//Mk. 9:2//Lk. 9:28; Mt. 26:37//Mk. 14:33). This closeness to Jesus did not prevent them from attitudes which needed changing, however. On one occasion, James and John were ready to call down the fire of judgment on a Samaritan village, because they were not allowed to stay the night there (Lk. 9:52-56). John, on one occasion, rebuked a man who was not a part of their circle for casting out demons in Jesus' name, and John in turn was rebuked by the Lord (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 9:49-50). That the brothers were ambitious is clear enough: they, along with their mother, had the impertinence to ask for the highest ranks in the coming kingdom of God, the

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<sup>109</sup>All scholars agree that the native language of Jesus was Aramaic, even though the gospels and other New Testament documents were written in Greek.

<sup>110</sup>Peter also owned a house in Capernaum (cf. Mt. 8:5, 14), so James and John could conceivably have lived there as well.

<sup>111</sup>Also, John is sometimes referred to as the "brother of James" (cf. Mk. 3:17; 5:37; Mt. 10:2; 17:1).

implications of which they could hardly even understand themselves (Mt. 20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-44). Both James and John helped pose the question to Jesus about the coming judgment at the end of the age (Mk. 13:3). John, along with Peter, were chosen by the Lord to prepare the upper room for the last supper (Lk. 22:8). So, as disciples and apostles, James and John were with Jesus throughout his entire public ministry. They were divinely chosen witnesses to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (Mt. 28:16ff; Mk. 16:14; Lk. 24:33ff.; Jn. 20:19ff., 26ff.; 21:1ff.; Ac. 1:21-22; 10:41).

Some special comment should be made about John, since he is quite possibly the unnamed follower of Jesus which the Fourth Gospel describes as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Beginning in the passion narratives, a certain disciple is regularly referred to as one whom Jesus especially loved. He was reclining next to Jesus' at the last supper (Jn. 13:23). He is probably the "other disciple" through whom Peter gained access into the palace of Caiaphas on the night of Jesus' arrest (Jn. 18:15-16). The next afternoon, the reader finds this same disciple standing near the cross of the Lord, and it was into this disciple's care that Jesus committed his own mother (Jn. 19:26-27). It is probably this same disciple who witnessed the spear being thrust into Jesus' side (Jn. 19:34-35). The same unnamed disciple ran with Peter to see the empty tomb after hearing Mary Magdalene's report (Jn. 20:2-9). He was with half a dozen other disciples fishing in Galilee at one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (Jn. 20:1-7), and later that same morning, Jesus made a comment which many took to mean that this disciple would not die before the second coming of the Lord (Jn. 21:20-23). In fact, the final lines of the Fourth Gospel attribute the Fourth Gospel, or at least the last chapter, to this same disciple (Jn. 21:24). This recurring anonymous designation implies a deliberate avoidance of his personal name. So, who is this enigmatic figure? The traditional opinion is that the beloved disciple is John bar Zebedee. Some scholars doubt this tradition for various reasons, though others defend it. We shall probably never know with certainty, but John bar Zebedee has perhaps the best claim, given our insufficient data.<sup>112</sup>

Once we pass the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, information about James becomes increasingly scarce.<sup>113</sup> He and John were in the upper room at Pentecost (Ac. 1:13), and he was certainly one of the apostolic leaders in the Jerusalem church (Ac. 2:37, 43; 4:2, 33; 5:12, etc.). However, the only other specific mention of him is at his martyrdom, when Herod Agrippa I had him executed (Ac. 12:1-2). Jesus had told him, "You will indeed drink from my cup," and so it was.

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<sup>112</sup>For brief but insightful discussions on this issue, see L. Morris, *ISBE* (1982) II.1098-1100; F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 1-6.

<sup>113</sup>All scholars agree that James bar Zebedee was not the author of the Book of James nor is he to be confused with James "the Less," whose prominence in Jerusalem was well after James bar Zebedee's death.

The fact that he was singled out for martyrdom implies his status in the Jerusalem church.

John, on the other hand, is closely associated with Peter in several stories of the early Jerusalem church. He and Peter still observed the Jewish prayer hours, and on one of their trips to the temple, they healed a cripple (Ac. 3:1ff.). As a consequence, they were arrested and examined by the Sanhedrin, which forbade them to speak in the name of Jesus (Ac. 4:1-22). Later, Peter and John represented the Jerusalem church in the investigation of the Samaritan revival which had occurred under Phillip's ministry (Ac. 8:14-17), and on their way home, they preached in various Samaritan villages (Ac. 8:25). Paul certainly recognized John, along with Peter and James the Less, as the prominent leaders in Jerusalem (Ga. 2:9). We should assume that John was present in the first council in Jerusalem (Ac. 15:2ff.).

According to church tradition, John bar Zebedee wrote the Gospel of John, 1, 2 and 3 John, and the Book of Revelation. Only one of these documents actually contains the name John (Rv. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8),<sup>114</sup> and it is not at all clear that this John is the same as John bar Zebedee. In the opening words of 2 and 3 John, the author describes himself as "the presbyter," but he does not call himself an apostle. 1 John is completely anonymous, while as described earlier, the Fourth Gospel is attributed to the "beloved disciple." There are, of course, both internal as well as external arguments which support the traditional viewpoint, and they may well be true. However, the question cannot be resolved with absolute finality.

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<sup>114</sup>While the Fourth Gospel contains the name John in reference to the Baptist and to Peter's father, John bar Zebedee, the brother of James, is nowhere mentioned by name.

## **Judas Iscariot**

### **Apostle, Thief, Betrayer**

Among the apostles of Christ, hardly any names are more familiar than that of Judas Iscariot. His infamy, of course, is the direct result of his handing Jesus over to the authorities, an act that led directly to the crucifixion. Unlike Peter and Andrew, James and John, Nathanael and Philip, and Matthew, for whom at least a minimal amount of background information is given, Judas is unknown until named by Jesus as one of the twelve apostles (Mt. 10:4; Mk. 3:19; Lk. 6:16). In all these listings, he is labeled immediately as the one who betrayed the Lord. This label was part of the living memory of the church, even though at the time of Judas' calling to apostleship only Jesus knew that he would betray him (Jn. 6:64, 70-71).

What can be known of this enigmatic figure? The name Iscariot offers several intriguing possibilities. In the synoptic gospels, it always modifies the name Judas, though in at least one text in John's gospel it modifies both Judas and his father, whose name was Simon (Jn. 6:71; 13:2, 26). One explanation is that it refers to a town, Kerioth, and the prefix *'ish* is the common Hebrew word for a man. Thus, he would be the "man from Kerioth," either a region in Judah (Jos. 15:25) or the transjordan (Je. 48:24, 48). However, the fact that Judas is *called* Iscariot (Lk. 22:3), as though this were a nickname, suggests that the name is a description of something other than a place of origin. In Aramaic, it is possible to understand the name as the "man of the lie," where Iscariot would be an eponym for a traitor. The name also could be a Semitic form of *sicarius*, which means dagger-man or assassin. The *sicarii* were Jewish freedom fighters taking advantage of every chance to kill Romans or collaborators.<sup>115</sup> If so, then Judas, like Simon the Zealot, would have been numbered among those nationalists who urged a patriotic uprising against the Romans.

As one of the twelve apostles, Judas was given special powers under Jesus' direction. Along with the others, he was sent out in Galilee with authority over unclean spirits and diseases (Mt. 10:1//Mk. 6:7//Lk. 9:1). He was ordained to preach about the coming of the kingdom of God, demonstrating its power by healing the sick and exorcising demons (Mt. 10:5-8). Later, the Lord sent out even more disciples to

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<sup>115</sup> G. Buchanan, *ISBE* (1982) 2.1151-1152.

preach (Lk. 10:1), and presumably Judas was also part of this group. The missionaries were amazed that God had given them power over demons (Lk. 10:17). Of course, there is no gospel account of Judas actually healing anyone, and in fact, there is evidence that the disciples were not always successful in their efforts (Mt. 17:16//Mk. 9:18//Lk. 9:40). Still, there is no reason not to think that Judas participated in this aspect of Christ's commission, and later, Simon Peter specifically says that Judas "was one of our number and shared in this ministry" (Ac. 1:17).

As one of the twelve apostles, Judas was given jurisdiction over the group's funds (Jn. 12:4-6; 13:29). While in this position, he fell into petty larceny (Jn. 12:6), and we may well wonder why Jesus allowed him such privileges without censure. Be that as it may, the dark side of Judas was demonstrated most clearly in his betrayal of Christ.

Plans for the betrayal were laid in advance when Judas, at the prompting of Satan, discussed with the temple priests and guards how Jesus might be handed over to them unobtrusively (Lk. 22:1-6). Money was involved, the equivalent of about four months wages for a laborer,<sup>116</sup> but it seems a rather modest sum for an act of this kind (Mt. 26:14-16//Mk. 14:10-11). On the night of the last supper, Judas along with the others allowed Jesus to wash his feet (Jn. 13:5). Later, during the seder meal, Jesus announced that one of the apostles would betray him (Mt. 26:221//Mk. 14:18//Lk. 22:21//Jn. 13:21). John quietly questioned the Lord who this person would be, and Jesus identified his betrayer by giving him a piece of flatbread dipped in the sauce, normally a gesture of trust and honor (Jn. 13:23-26).<sup>117</sup> It is unlikely that anyone else at the table would have seen this gesture as anything other than a courtesy. At the announcement of a betrayal, various disciples, including Judas, asked Jesus directly, "Lord, is it I" (Mt. 26:25)? After Jesus gave Judas the bread dipped in sauce, Satan entered Judas. Jesus told him that he should carry out his actions at once, and Judas left the room (Jn. 13:27-30).

Later that night, while Jesus was praying on the Mt. of Olives, Judas led the temple guard to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. He used a kiss of greeting to identify Jesus in the darkness (Mt. 26:47-49//Mk. 14:43-45//Lk. 22:47-48//Jn. 18:2-5). After Jesus' terrible death, Judas regretted his action, and in despair, he hung himself (Mt. 26:3-5). Presumably, the rope broke and he ruptured himself in the fall (Ac. 1:18).<sup>118</sup> Some days later, under the direction of Peter, the apostles chose a replacement for

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<sup>116</sup> Thirty pieces of silver was equal to about 120 denarii, and a single denarii was the going price for a day's labor, cf. R. France, *Matthew [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 363.

<sup>117</sup> M. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9.140.

<sup>118</sup> The two accounts of Judas' death from Matthew and Luke differ in several respects. If Luke's account simply intends to repeat a popular version, then there is no need to harmonize the two. However, if they are to be harmonized, the hanging and the rupture both can be explained by a broken rope.

Judas as a member of the inner circle of twelve apostles (Ac. 1:15-26).

Aside from the historical narratives in the gospels, the psychological question of why Judas betrayed the Lord often has been raised. It is difficult to unravel the psychology of Judas. If one accepts that Judas was politically aligned with the patriotic freedom fighters, it may be that he became disillusioned with Jesus when it became apparent that Jesus would not challenge the Roman authorities. Though at first he followed Jesus because he thought Jesus was a revolutionary, the failure of Jesus to take decisive political or military action led him to turn Jesus over. Alternatively, it has been suggested that Judas genuinely believed Jesus to be the messiah and hoped the betrayal to the authorities would prompt Jesus to display his messianic power against the establishment--a plan that failed terribly in spite of Judas' good intentions. On the other hand, the simplest explanation is that he was greedy, and money was his highest motive. In the end, it may be impossible to know for sure what was in Judas' mind. The fact remains that the gospels attribute his action to the influence of Satan (Lk. 22:3; Jn. 13:27). The deliberate action of Judas to turn Jesus over continued in the tradition of the church as the phrase "on the night the Lord Jesus was betrayed" (1 Co. 11:23).

## Stephen, The Hellenist Deacon Spiritual Christian, Leader, Martyr

In the earliest period of the Christian church, all Christians were Jews, and most of them lived in Jerusalem. However, within this larger body of Christians were two sub-groups, which in turn derived from two similar groups within the non-Christian Jewish community. These two groups were described by Luke as *Hebraioi* (= Hebrews) and *Hellenistai* (= Hellenists). Though both groups were Jewish, the differences between them lay in language, worship and culture. The Hebrews spoke Aramaic, while the Hellenists spoke Greek. The Hebrews worshiped in their own synagogues, while the Hellenists attended synagogues apart. The Hebrews made a special point to preserve Palestinian ways, while the Hellenists, with long-standing roots in the Graeco-Roman world, had absorbed much of Greek culture. It is in this context that we meet Stephen, a young Christian Hellenist in the Jerusalem church.

One of the practices of the Jerusalem church was to hold a common fund from which distributions could be made to widows or other needy persons (Ac. 2:45; 4:32-35). In time, a quarrel developed between the Hellenist Christians and the Hebrew Christians over the distribution. It seems that the more conservative Hebrews were neglecting those whom they perceived to be their more liberal counterparts, the Hellenists (Ac. 6:1). Therefore, the apostles chose as deacons<sup>119</sup> seven who were known to be spiritual, wise and trusted Christians to oversee the distribution to make sure it was performed fairly (Ac. 6:2-4). Stephen was one of those seven (6:5-6).<sup>120</sup>

It quickly becomes clear that Stephen's value in the early church far exceeded the issue of distribution. He emerges as a Christian with extraordinary spiritual gifts, including miraculous signs (Ac. 6:8).<sup>121</sup> However, his boldness for the Christian

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<sup>119</sup>To be sure, the word *diakonos* (= deacon, servant) is not used of Stephen. However, since the term *diakonos* was a common one in this period for one who waits on tables, and since later the early church adopted the term to refer to those chosen to serve in the church, it is usually assumed that the formal *diaconate* begins in this account, cf. G. Burge, *EDT* (1984) 295-296.

<sup>120</sup>It is probably significant that the seven men chosen all have Greek names, suggesting that they were all from the neglected group.

<sup>121</sup>The exact nature of Stephen's miracles are not specified, but the coupling of the words "power" with "grace" might suggest that they were healings.

message brought him into sharp conflict with members of a certain Hellenist synagogue, a synagogue where he attended worship, probably before and certainly after his conversion to Christ (6:9-10).<sup>122</sup> Stephen was a "theologian" in his own right, and he introduced to the synagogue an interpretation that the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, abrogated the Mosaic customs and meant the cessation of sacrificial worship (Ac. 6:11-14; 7:48-50). Furthermore, if the accusations of his opponents have any merit, he may have repeated to them Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse that the temple would be destroyed (Ac. 6:14b; cf. Mt. 24:2; Lk. 21:6). This interpretation was taken to be blasphemy, and Stephen was brought to a heresy trial before the Sanhedrin.

At his trial, Stephen was given the opportunity to defend himself. His defense was a recollection of Israelite history, somewhat after the form of the historical Psalms (i.e., 78, 105, 106). In his speech, Stephen develops two themes. The first has to do with the rejection of God's spokesmen. From ancient times, God had revealed himself to various ancestors and spiritual leaders of the Israelite people--Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (Ac. 7:2-16), Moses and Aaron (Ac. 7:17-43), Joshua (Ac. 7:44-45a), David (Ac. 7:45b-46), Solomon (Ac. 7:47) and the prophets (Ac. 7:52). All of these leaders the people consistently rejected. The sons of Jacob rejected Joseph, selling him into slavery (Ac. 7:9). They began their rejection of Moses while he was still young (Ac. 7:24-28, 35a). Later, when he was older and had led them to Mt. Sinai, they rejected him again, turning their hearts back toward Egypt (Ac. 7:39-40). In fact, the whole history of Israel was one long story of rejecting God's spokesmen (Ac. 7:51-52a, 53). Their ultimate rebellion was against Christ, the Righteous One, whom they betrayed and murdered (Ac. 7:52b).

The second theme of Stephen's defense was concerning the temple. The temple, as a permanent shrine for God, was highly over-valued by the Jewish community. In fact, from the very first, God's purpose for his people was that they live as pilgrims without a permanent shrine for God. Abraham was called to a pilgrim life (Ac. 7:2-3), and he traveled from the land of the Chaldeans to Haran and then to Canaan (Ac. 7:4). Abraham was given no land inheritance, though an inheritance was promised to his descendants (Ac. 7:5). Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt in the time of Joseph (Ac. 7:14-15), and even after they died, their bodies were moved yet again (Ac. 7:16). Moses lived as a foreigner in a strange land (Ac. 7:29). Later, he led the Israelites into the desert, where again they were pilgrims (Ac. 7:36). The ancient Tent of Meeting was a symbol of this pilgrim life (Ac. 7:44-45). Though

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<sup>122</sup>It is not entirely clear in the Greek text whether Luke intends one or more than one synagogue, but in any case, it is clear that the main congregation was composed of Hellenist Jews of Diaspora Judaism, both from Africa and Asia Minor. Later in the story it will become significant that some of these Jews were from Cilicia, for one of them turns out to be Saul of Tarsus in Cilicia.



Solomon, upon the wishes of his father David, built a permanent temple for God (Ac. 7:46-47), even he conceded that God could not be confined to any temple (Ac. 7:48-50; cf. Is. 66:1-2; 2 Chr. 6:18). Thus, to speak about the abrogation of temple worship could hardly be blasphemy or sacrilege against God. God was independent of any human structure!

Stephen's defense, especially his biting indictment at the close (Ac. 7:51-53), only served to infuriate his opponents. They lynched him by stoning him to death (Ac. 7:54, 57-58a). Only at the end does Luke tell us that one of Stephen's primary opponents was a zealous young Pharisee named Saul of Cilicia (Ac. 7:58b; 8:1a; 22:20). In fact, Stephen's lynching was the beginning of a terrible wave of persecutions and executions leveled by Saul against the Christians (Ac. 8:1b-3; 22:2-5; 26:9-11).

Just before he died, Stephen had a vision of the risen Christ beckoning him home to the heavens (Ac. 7:55-56). He died praying for the forgiveness of his antagonists (Ac. 7:59-60).

## **Barnabas, The Apostolic Diplomat Diaspora Jew, Ambassador and Missionary**

Joseph Barnabas, known primarily due to his missionary companionship with Paul, was a diaspora Jew from Cyprus of the Israelite tribe of Levi (Ac. 4:36). The name Barnabas, according to Luke, was a nickname given to him by the other apostles, and it was taken to reflect upon his diplomatic character.<sup>123</sup> Like Paul, he was a Jew of the dispersion who migrated to Jerusalem. He had a cousin who lived in Jerusalem, John Mark (Col. 4:10). We know nothing of the circumstances concerning his conversion to Christianity.<sup>124</sup> The first mention of his name is in connection with the sale of his property, the proceeds of which he donated to the communal fund of the Jerusalem church (Ac. 4:37). It is interesting to note that his donation of land was not due to a position of independent wealth, for later Paul would write that Barnabas, even during his missionary work, was compelled to work for a living (1 Co. 9:6). After his initial introduction by Luke, Barnabas' name appears largely in connection with Paul. However, the description of him as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" marks him as a man of influence and leadership.

His prominence came about when he risked a good deal by bringing the newly converted Paul, who was regarded with deep suspicion, to the apostles. He explained to them how this former inquisitor of Christians had now become a fearless preacher of the gospel (Ac. 9:26-27). This act was to be his first great diplomatic success, and an important one it was! Had it not been for Barnabas, the history of the Christian church might have been considerably different than we know it! No doubt the fact that both Barnabas and Paul were diaspora Jews served as an initial bond in addition to their Christian faith.

Many diaspora Jews lived in Antioch, Syria, and it is there that Barnabas once more served the early church well. Stephen, another Hellenistic Jewish Christian, had been lynched in Jerusalem (Ac. 7:59-60). Many Christians fled to other cities as

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<sup>123</sup>Actually, the Aramaic form *bar nebu'a* means "son of prophecy," and Luke interprets this to mean "son of *paraklyseos*" or "son of encouragement."

<sup>124</sup>Eusebius (4th century) tells us that he was one of the original 70 sent out by Jesus (cf. Lk. 10:1), but the reliability of this tradition is uncertain.

persecution drove them out (Ac. 8:1). Some went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, and wherever they went, they told the story of Jesus to their fellow Jews (Ac. 8:4; 11:19).

In Antioch, however, a major barrier was crossed. The message of Jesus was not only preached to other Jews, but it was also shared with Greeks (Ac. 11:20-21). When the Jerusalem church heard that non-Jews were being accepted into the Christian faith, they determined to send an investigative mission, and Barnabas was the ambassador (Ac. 11:22).<sup>125</sup> Not only did he support the new development, he went to look for Paul, who was by now back in his home province of Cilicia. Bringing him to Antioch (Ac. 11:23-26a), Barnabas worked together with him for about a year (Ac. 11:26b). Perhaps he knew of Paul's commission from the Lord to be an instrument of evangelism to the non-Jews (cf. Ac. 22:21; 26:15-18). In any case, the Antioch church became characterized by multi-national, multi-racial leadership (Ac. 13:1).<sup>126</sup> When the Antioch church decided to collect funds for the Jerusalem church as a famine relief, Barnabas and Paul were sent as the couriers (Ac. 11:27-30).<sup>127</sup> While there, the Jerusalem apostles confirmed Barnabas and Paul in their Gentile mission (cf. Ga. 2:1, 9).<sup>128</sup> They were apparently in Jerusalem during Peter's famous imprisonment and his later release by an angel, and when their task was completed, they returned to Antioch, taking with them Barnabas' cousin, John Mark (Ac. 12:25).

Barnabas' penchant for pleasing others, while certainly a strength, was a trait that could be carried too far. Sometime after the trip to Jerusalem, Peter traveled north to visit the racially mixed Antioch church. When he first arrived, he warmly fellowshiped with all the believers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. However, when some Jewish visitors from Jerusalem arrived, Peter lost his courage and segregated himself from his new non-Jewish friends (Ga. 2:11-12). The peer pressure for racial separation was too great for him, and in fact, Peter's weakness led others to follow him in this segregation, one of whom was Barnabas (Ga. 2:13). Paul ended up publicly rebuking Peter, and by implication, Barnabas as well (Ga. 2:14).

It comes as no surprise to find that the Antioch church was the first to specifically send out a mission to the cities of Asia Minor. Barnabas and Paul were

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<sup>125</sup>The careful reader will notice that this same type of investigation occurred whenever racial boundaries were crossed in the earliest periods (cf. Ac. 8:14; 11:1-4ff.). That Barnabas served in the same capacity as Peter and John certainly suggests the respect he had gained within the Jerusalem church.

<sup>126</sup>The leadership seems to have included both Jews and blacks, cf. M. Green, *Evangelism Then & Now* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979) 39.

<sup>127</sup>It may be significant that at this early stage Barnabas' name is mentioned before Saul's name, possibly indicating that he was the leader of the deputation.

<sup>128</sup>There is debate about whether the references in Galatians to Barnabas' and Paul's trip to Jerusalem should be correlated with the trip Luke describes in Acts 11 or the one in Acts 15. Here, I am following the former position, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 244, 298ff.

commissioned and sent off for parts north and west (Ac. 13:2-3). Their travels included Barnabas' island home of Cyprus (Ac. 13:4) and various cities on the mainland. They preached to both Jews and Gentiles (Ac. 13:42-48; 14:1). They experienced revival, and they suffered persecution (Ac. 13:49-52; 14:3-7, 19-20). Along the trip, John Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem (Ac. 13:13). In Lystra, after a healing, Barnabas and Paul were hailed as the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes,<sup>129</sup> and the citizens tried to offer sacrifices to them (Ac. 14:11-13). Barnabas and Paul were barely able to prevent them (Ac. 14:18). It is here in Lystra that Luke gives to Barnabas, along with Paul, the title "apostle," which approximates the English term "missionary" (Ac. 14:14). Returning by a route that would again allow them to revisit the Christian converts they had already won, Barnabas and Paul encouraged the churches and ordained leaders in each congregation (Ac. 14:21b-23). Finally, they returned to Antioch to report on their missionary trip (Ac. 14:26-28).

The tension between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians was sharpened, if anything, by Barnabas' and Paul's gentile mission. In the Jerusalem church, some believers who were still Pharisees advocated that one must become a Jew (via circumcision) before he could become a Christian, and they traveled to Antioch with this teaching (Ac. 15:1, 5). Needless to say, this teaching created a serious controversy, and Barnabas and Paul vehemently resisted such a distortion of the gospel of grace (Ac. 15:2a). As a consequence, Barnabas and Paul headed a delegation from Antioch to Jerusalem to put the they brought this issue before the mother church (Ac. 15:2b). At this first ecumenical council, they reported on their missionary work among non-Jews (Ac. 15:3-4, 12). In the end, the issue was resolved by sending a letter back to Antioch disclaiming this teaching (Ac. 15:22-30). A delegation, including Barnabas, carried the letter back to Antioch (Ac. 15:30-31). So, the interracial ministry at Antioch continued (Ac. 15:34-35).

The final direct mention of Barnabas in the New Testament concerns a rift between him and Paul. The two missionaries determined to return to their newly established churches in Asia Minor, Barnabas wishing to take John Mark with them, but Paul adamantly refusing (Ac. 15:36-38). Their disagreement was so sharp that they finally separated, Paul taking Silas as his missionary companion and Barnabas taking John Mark to Cyprus (Ac. 15:39-40).

Barnabas might figure in some other important ways in the New Testament period. Both Luther and Calvin regarded Barnabas as the unnamed "brother who is

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<sup>129</sup>Some translations give the Latin equivalents, Jupiter and Mercury. It is suggestive that Paul, by this time, was perceived as the primary communicator, hence his designation as Hermes (the messenger of the gods in the Greek Pantheon). Barnabas, for his part, was a figure of wisdom and dignity, hence he was called Zeus, the principal deity in the Greek Pantheon (cf. Ac. 14:12).

praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel" (cf. 2 Co. 8:18).<sup>130</sup> This may well be true, but there is no way to know for certain. Also, it has been speculated that Barnabas might have been the author of the Book of Hebrews. His levitical background and eminent standing in the apostolic church seem to be appropriate credentials, and this opinion was championed by Tertullian in the ancient church and by various other scholars in more modern times.<sup>131</sup> His name became attached to the early Christian document called *The Epistle of Barnabas*, a work that was included in a number of early copies of Christian Scripture and regarded by some as near-canonical. However, most scholars do not believe it was written by Barnabas, though, of course, it is impossible to be certain either way.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup>H. Jacobs, *ISBE* (1979) I.432.

<sup>131</sup>Tertullian expressed his opinion as though it were commonly agreed upon within his circle, cf. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) xxxvii.

<sup>132</sup>J. Michaels, *ISBE* (1979) I.206.

## **Silas, Companion To Paul And Peter**

### **Diplomat, Missionary, Amanuensis**

Though not one of the original twelve apostles, Silas had the unique distinction of being a leader in the Jerusalem church as well as a close associate of both Paul and Peter. Still, he stands in the shadows of the New Testament, barely in view and usually in the background of the more colorful and well-known leaders. His name comes in two forms, Silas (used by Luke) and Silvanus (used by Paul and Peter). The former is a Grecianized form of the Hebrew name Saul. The latter is a Latinized form and probably more easily recognizable in the larger Greco-Roman world.<sup>133</sup>

Silas, like Paul, was both Jewish and also a Roman citizen (cf. Ac. 16:37). The reader first meets him as a Christian diplomat who, along with Barsabbas, was chosen by the Jerusalem leaders to help carry and read the encyclical letter to the church at Antioch, Syria concerning the decision about circumcision (Ac. 15:22, 27). It may even be that Silas had a hand in composing the letter.<sup>134</sup> When the other delegates from Jerusalem returned home, Silas stayed on in Antioch.<sup>135</sup> As both a prophet (Ac. 15:32) and an apostle (1 Th. 1:1, 2:7), he was active in encouraging and strengthening the existing church (Ac. 15:32; cf. 1 Co. 14:3-5, 22b, 31) as well as in preaching the message of Christ where it had not been preached before.

His missionary work began in earnest after Paul chose him as a traveling companion for his second missionary trip (Ac. 15:40). Traveling back through the congregations established on Paul's first trip, Silas and Paul went through Syria, Cilicia, Phrygia and Galatia (Ac. 15:41; 16:6). At Lystra, they were joined by Timothy (Ac. 16:1), and in all the established churches, Silas confirmed the decision of the Jerusalem church concerning circumcision (Ac. 16:4-5). Silas was with Paul when he made the momentous decision to cross the Aegean to Macedonia (Ac. 16:7-

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<sup>133</sup> R. Campbell, *ISBE* (1988) IV.509.

<sup>134</sup> The loose translation of the NIV obscures the introductory phrase in Ac. 15:23 (γράφαντες διὰ χειρὸς αὐτῶν = having written through their hand), which is supported by the earliest Greek texts of the NT.

<sup>135</sup> Verse 15:34 is missing in the earliest manuscripts, though it appears in the Western Text and the Textus Receptus and hence the KJV, i.e., "But it seemed good to Silas to remain there." Whether or not the verse is textually valid, 15:40 implies that Silas remained in Antioch when his companions returned to Jerusalem.

10), and soon he along with Paul found himself stripped, flogged and incarcerated in the Philippian jail due to disgruntled slave-owners who protested an exorcism Paul performed on their slave girl (Ac. 16:19-24). When Silas and Paul began to sing and pray in the jail in the middle of the night, a violent earthquake loosened their fetters from the prison walls and sprung the jail doors. The jailer awoke, thinking his prisoners were escaping, and he nearly committed suicide, since failure to keep his prisoners for trial was punishable by execution. In the end, Silas and Paul baptized the jailer and his entire household community (Ac. 16:29-34). The incarceration of Roman citizens without a formal hearing and sentence was illegal, and Paul demanded concessions (Ac. 16:35-40).

Their next stop in Macedonia was Thessalonica, where a large number of Greeks and prominent women accepted the Christian message (17:1-4). Once again, Silas and Paul were forced to leave the city due to aggressive opposition (Ac. 17:5-10), so they went on to Beroea, where Paul left Silas and Timothy while he went ahead to Athens alone (Ac. 17:10-15). It was some time before Silas and Timothy caught up to Paul, and in fact, Paul already had left Athens and gone on to Corinth before they rejoined him (Ac. 18:5). Their time in Macedonia, especially in view of Paul's abrupt but necessary departure, no doubt was spent teaching and encouraging the new Christians. Silas' name disappears from the record at this point in the Book of Acts. We know that he continued to work alongside Paul in Corinth (cf. 2 Co. 1:19), but when Paul left Corinth after the arraignment before Gallio, his traveling companions are listed as Priscilla and Aquila (Ac. 18:18). Presumably, Silas stayed in Corinth.

Silas' literary skills show up in four New Testament documents. The first, already mentioned, was the brief encyclical letter arising out of the Jerusalem council. The other three are New Testament letters. While at Corinth, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians twice, and in both letters, his address includes Silas and Timothy as co-authors (1 Th. 1:1; 2 Th. 1:1). The order of names in the address, Paul, Silas and Timothy, was probably according to seniority. Paul, of course, was the primary author, for even though in the letters he refers to himself and the others as "we", it is clear that the "we" in some cases really means "I" (cf. 1 Th. 3:1). How much Silas was actually involved in the composition of the letters is unknown, but the fact that Paul closes the letters with the first person "I" (1 Th. 5:27; 2 Th. 3:17), whereas elsewhere he uses the plural "we" suggests that both Silas and Timothy may have had more than simply a nominal contribution. Furthermore, the fact that Paul concluded the second letter with a greeting "in my own hand" suggests that someone else performed the actual penmanship of the larger body of the letter (2 Th. 3:17). Silas may very well have served as the amanuensis for both letters.

Finally, Silas appears in the composition of 1 Peter. What happened to Silas after Paul left Corinth is not stated. However, it is feasible that he may have gone to

Bithynia, an area near the Black Sea where earlier he had wanted to travel (cf. Ac. 16:7). In any case, 1 Peter was written to Christians in this area (1 Pe. 1:1), and Silas had a hand in its composition as well (1 Pe. 5:12). 1 Peter was written “through Silas,” a comment that probably specifies Silas as the amanuensis of Peter and possibly the courier of the letter also.<sup>136</sup> If so, the polished Greek syntax and vocabulary of 1 Peter might very well be attributed to the literary skills of Silas.<sup>137</sup> Secretaries were sometimes granted extensive freedom in composition so long as they were persons who could be trusted implicitly.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Though there was an imperial post in the Roman Empire, the *cursus publicus*, it was not available for private correspondence. Hence, private letters, such as this, had to be delivered by a chosen courier, cf. O. Seitz, *IDB* (1962) III.114.

<sup>137</sup> E. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (1947 rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pp. 9-17.

<sup>138</sup> J. Lown, *ISBE* (1982) II.123-124.



## **James, Half-Brother Of The Lord Leader, Mediator and Martyr**

In the gospels, it is apparent that the family of Mary and Joseph consisted of more than just three persons. In addition to Jesus, there is mentioned a group called his "brothers" as well as some "sisters" (cf. Mk. 3:31; 6:3//Mt. 12:46; 13:55-56//Lk. 8:19).<sup>139</sup> James, then, was one of these brothers, and most biblical scholars consider him to have been the half-brother of the Lord. He was closely associated with Jesus' disciples following Easter (Ac. 1:14), and Jesus had made a post-resurrection appearance to him before his ascension (1 Co. 15:7).

It may be that the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to James was instrumental in his conversion, somewhat along the lines of Paul's encounter with the Lord on the Damascus Road. During Jesus' public ministry, it is clear that James and the other brothers were skeptical about his messianic identity (Jn. 7:2-5). From a non-canonical early Christian writing, called *The Gospel to the Hebrews*, comes the story that James had taken a vow not to eat bread until he should see the risen Christ. However, the passage assumes that James had been present at the last supper. When Jesus appeared to him, he broke bread and gave it to James to eat.<sup>140</sup> In any case, by the middle of Luke's account of apostolic history, James had risen to a level of prominence in the Jerusalem church (Ac. 12:17).

We also know that James had a significant impact upon Paul. When Paul had traveled to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter, he also saw James there (Ga. 1:18-19). James, along with Peter and John, were considered to be "pillars" in the Jerusalem church, and they authorized Paul and Barnabas to conduct missionary work

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<sup>139</sup>In all probability, these "brothers" and "sisters" were children of Mary and Joseph who were born after Jesus. Of course, alternative explanations have been given. In later periods of the church the "brothers" of Jesus were explained either as cousins or as sons of Joseph by a previous marriage. The motive behind this explanation was the effort to protect the doctrine of the eternal virginity of Mary, a doctrine which is not in the New Testament, but which became popular from the late 2nd century and onward in the context of a growing emphasis on asceticism, cf. D. Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1977) III.46-49; G. Bromiley, *ISBE* (1986) III.271. Though Mary was a virgin in the conception and birth of Jesus (Mt. 1:25; Lk. 1:27, 34), there is no biblical indication that she remained a virgin after Jesus' birth. In fact, Mt. 1:25 seems to imply a normal marital relationship between her and Joseph.

<sup>140</sup>F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James & John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 87; E. Yamauchi, *ISBE* (1979) I.184.

among the Gentiles, while they determined to conduct their ministries within the Jewish community (Ga. 2:9). It is clear that Paul considered James to be an apostle and an important leader (Ga. 1:19; 2:12).<sup>141</sup>

Still later, when Paul came to Jerusalem with Barnabas to defend their practice of preaching to Gentiles without demanding circumcision, James was obviously the leader in Jerusalem inasmuch as he gave the summary conclusion to the whole issue (Ac. 15:13-21). He suggested writing the encyclical to the other churches, and upon his advice, the apostles and elders did so (Ac. 15:22-32). While the other half-brothers of the Lord performed some itinerant missions work, taking their wives with them (1 Co. 9:5), James apparently stayed in Jerusalem.

The final reference to James by Luke came when Paul visited Jerusalem for the final time. Paul had become a controversial figure due to his teaching concerning the law of Moses. The core of the Christian community at this early stage was Jewish, but due to Paul's missionary trips, many Gentiles had also come to accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The Jewish Christian community had remained faithful to its Jewish heritage and the requirements of Torah, while the Gentile Christian community, under Paul's tutelage, assessed the law of Moses in quite different terms. This theological difference was very disturbing to the many thousands of Jewish Christians who were still zealously keeping the requirements of Torah. Thus, when Paul arrived at Jerusalem, he met with James and a delegation to discuss a possible resolution (Ac. 21:17-19). Under James' leadership, they advised Paul to demonstrate his personal loyalty to his Jewish heritage by accompanying four other Jewish Christians who were discharging a vow (Ac. 21:20-26). Such an action would hopefully disarm the suspicions of the right-wing reactionary elements in the Jerusalem church.<sup>142</sup>

It is apparent, then, that James served on more than one occasion as a mediating figure during times of tension. In addition to such biblical-historical references to James, we also have a New Testament document penned by "James," whom most Christians have believed to have been the half-brother of the Lord (Ja. 1:1).<sup>143</sup> The Jewish historian, Josephus, tells us of James' death. The high priest,

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<sup>141</sup>It should be pointed out, however, that James the Lord's brother should not be confused with James bar-Zebedee nor James bar-Alphaeus, both of whom were among the original Twelve. James bar Zebedee had been martyred quite early (cf. Ac. 12:2), and James bar Alphaeus, who is not mentioned after the gospel, apparently did not rise to prominence in the Jerusalem church. In all, there are some 41 mentions of the name James in the New Testament, but scholars generally narrow down these references to three (or sometimes even two) individuals, cf. R. Harris, *ISBE* (1982) II.958-959.

<sup>142</sup>As it turned out, of course, the well-intentioned vow turned into a disaster. Onlookers thought Paul brought a Greek into the temple precincts, a riot resulted, and Paul was arrested (Ac. 21:27-29).

<sup>143</sup>We cannot linger to explore the authorship of the epistle of James, but suffice it to say that the traditional view has significant support, and the objections to it are not insurmountable, cf. R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) II.358-363.

Ananus, had James stoned to death, but because of the priest's rash action, the populace revolted against him.<sup>144</sup> Eusebius, the Christian historian of the 5th century, notes the tradition that James was a man of great piety and prayer, constantly on his knees in the temple, so much so that he earned the nickname "Camel-knees." James was evidently greatly respected in the Jewish community, both by Christians and non-Christians. Eusebius adds that James was thrown from a pinnacle of the temple because of his faith in Christ before being beaten with a club and stoned.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup>Antiquities, XX.9.1.

<sup>145</sup>Ecclesiastical History, II.23.3-25.