

Zechariah 1

2010 July 20th for August 4th

The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, son of Berekiah, son of Iddo, early in the reign of Darius, in his second year. It was an apocalyptic vision, parts of it reminiscent of Revelation to John.

First, God says that he was very angry with their forefathers. “Return to me, and I will return to you,” the Lord Almighty says. Don’t do like your forefathers, ignoring God and engaging in their evil practices with impunity. Those people did repent, acknowledging that they deserved what God did to them because of their evil ways.

Zechariah had a vision in the night - not a dream, but a vision that came to him at night time. “There before me was a man riding a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in a ravine. Behind him were red, brown and white horses.”

He asked the angel who came with the vision what he was looking at. The answer was that these riders had been sent to go through the whole earth. They had found “the whole world at rest and peace.” Why, then had God not shown mercy to Jerusalem all these seventy years of exile? God said that he would show mercy.

“I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt. And the measuring line will be stretched out over Jerusalem.” “My towns will again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and choose Jerusalem.”

Zechariah then looked up and saw four horns. He asked the angel about them. The answer:

“These are the horns that scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem.”

Then Zechariah saw four craftsmen. He asked the angel about them.

“These are the horns that scattered Judah so that no one could raise his head, but the craftsmen have come to terrify them and throw down these horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter its people.”

I confess that I don’t follow well this discussion of horns, craftsmen, terror, and scattering.

Zechariah 2, 3

2010 July 20th for August 5th

Zechariah had more visions. He saw a man with a measuring line. Where was the man going, what he going to do? He was going to measure Jerusalem to see how large it was. Another angel (young man) was there and the first angel told him to run to Jerusalem and tell them the good news that Jerusalem would be a large city without walls. God himself would be the wall and they would have room for livestock within the city. Zion could flee from the threats of the north

and of Babylon. God would live among them and they would be his people and Jerusalem would once again be the chosen place. Beware the nations who plundered them - they had touched the apple of God's eye.

“Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.”

Then Zechariah was shown Joshua, the high priest. He was “standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.” God rebuked Satan and said that he had chosen Jerusalem as his rebuke. This man Joshua was the symbol.

Joshua was in filthy clothes, which he was told to remove. This symbolized the removal of sin from the people of Israel. Then a new turban was put on Joshua's head and he received his commission.

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.’” God gave symbols, a stone with seven eyes and an inscription on it. This all symbolized the removal of sin, “in a single day.”

“In that day each of you will invite his neighbor to sit under his vine and fig tree, declares the Lord Almighty.”

This is an image of peace and prosperity - having your own vine and fig tree and surplus for a neighbor.

Zechariah 4, 5

2010 July 20th for August 6th

The angel awakened Zechariah again. There was more to see. Now it was a gold lampstand with a bowl on top and seven lights and channels to the lights, and two olive trees. The prophet asked the angel what these were. “Do you not know what these are?” the angel inquired. No, he didn't.

“This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

(This is the text of a song we sing.)

Zerubbabel would begin and complete the rebuilding of the temple. Everyone would like this.

“Who despises the day of small things? Men will rejoice when they see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

“(These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the earth.)”

What about the olive trees? Zechariah wondered.

“These are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth.”

Next Zechariah saw a “flying scroll,” which was thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide.

What was this? It was the curse over anyone in the whole land who was a thief or who swore falsely. They would be banished; this was written on the scroll. The scroll would go into the thieves and liars houses and destroy them.

Then a basket appeared, a measuring basket with a lead lid. The angel removed the lead lid and a woman was inside! “This is the iniquity of the people throughout the land.” “This is wickedness.” The angel pushed the woman back in the basket and replaced the lid. Two women with wings picked up the basket. Where were they going? Babylonia. What for?

“”To build a house for it. When it is ready, the basket will be set there in its place.”

Zechariah 6

2010 July 24th for August 9th

Again Zechariah saw horses, this time four types of horses pulling four chariots. They were red, black, white, and dappled. He asked the angel about them.

The angel answered, “These are the four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole world. The one with the black horses is going toward the north country, the one with the white horses toward the west, and the one with the dappled horses toward the south.”

“When the powerful horses went out, they were straining to go throughout the earth. And he said, ‘Go throughout the earth!’ So they went throughout the earth.

“Then he called to me, ‘Look, those going toward the north country have given my Spirit rest in the land of the north.’”

This is reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz....

Then God told Zechariah to collect silver and gold from the exiles that had returned from Babylon and make a crown for the high priest, Joshua, son of Jehozadak.

About the man to be crowned God said, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the Lord. It is he who will build the temple of the Lord, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit an rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.”

People would come from far away to help build the temple. “This will happen if you diligently obey the Lord your God.”

Zechariah 7

2010 July 24th for August 10th

During the fourth year of Darius, God’s word came to Zechariah again. The question from the people was, should they fast during the fifth month as was their long tradition in exile.

God answered that when they had fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for all those years, it was not for him but it was for themselves. When they broke their fasts and feasted, it was their own celebration, not for God. No, he did not want these fasts. What he did want, what had been proclaimed in the far past by the prophets when the land was settled and prosperous was:

“Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.”

He wanted just action, not religious observance. These are paraphrased from Exodus and Isaiah.

In the past the people had not paid attention to this. They had been stubborn and hard hearted. When God called to them they did not listen, so when they called to him, he did not listen. This is why they had gone into exile. This is why their pleasant land had become desolate.

Zechariah 8

2010 July 24th for August 11th

The word of God came to Zechariah again. “I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her.”

He described Jerusalem as a place of peace and prosperity, something remarkable to the exiles, but not to God. Old people would sit in the streets while kids played. They would be protected from nations on all sides. It used to be that all the people were turned against each other. There were no wages, there was no safety. Now this would all be changed. The seeds would grow, the vines would yield fruit, the weather would be suitable for cultivation.

In the same way that God had brought disaster on them, now he would bring them good. These were his instructions:

“Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts; do not plot evil against your neighbor, and do not love to swear falsely.” “‘I hate all this,’ declares the Lord.”

“The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.”

People would come from all over the land to entreat the Lord.

“In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, ‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’”

Zechariah 9

2010 July 26th for August 12th

In an oracle of Zechariah, God speaks against several cities: Tyre, Sidon, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ashdod, and Ekron, and the land of Hadrach. Though they are prosperous, skillful, and well defended, their powers will be destroyed, burned, and sunk. They will lose kings and be in agony.

God’s house will be defended, however.

“Never again will an oppressor overrun my people, for now I am keeping watch.”

The following verses are said to have been fulfilled by Jesus on Palm Sunday.

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

The occupation will be removed from Ephraim and “His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

God will appear with flashes like lightning and sounds like trumpets. He will march in storms and shield his people, overcoming their enemies. His flocks, his people will be beautiful like jewels. They will thrive on grain and wine.

Zechariah 10

2010 July 26th for August 13th

The oracle of Zechariah continues. God would care for Judah, defending against all neighbors.

Pray to God for your needs, not to idols. Idols lie.

God would punish the guilty but strengthen Judah. They would fight and overcome. They would be strong, glad, and joyful. All the places to which they were scattered, Egypt, Assyria, would suffer and grow weak while God’s people were brought back to their homes in Israel.

Zechariah 11

2010 July 26th for August 16th

The oracle of Zechariah concludes with warnings of destruction.

“Open your doors, O Lebanon, so that fire may devour your cedars!
Wail, O pine tree, for the cedar has fallen; the stately trees are ruined!
Wail, oaks of Bashan; the dense forest has been cut down!
Listen to the wail of the shepherds; their rich pastures are destroyed!
Listen to the roar of the lions; the lush thicket of the Jordan is ruined!”

Then follows a puzzling parable of two shepherds.

“This is what the Lord God says: ‘Pasture the flock marked for slaughter. Their buyers slaughter them and go unpunished. Those who sell them say, “Praise the Lord, I am rich!” Their own shepherds do not spare them. For I will no longer have pity on the people of the land.’ declares the Lord. ‘I will hand everyone over to his neighbor and his king. They will oppress the land, and I will not rescue them from their hands.’

“So I pastured the flock marked for slaughter, particularly the oppressed of the flock. Then I took two staffs and called on Favor and the other Union, and I pastured the flock. In one month I got rid of the three shepherds.

“The flock detested me, and I grew weary of them and said, ‘I will not be your shepherd. Let the dying die, and the perishing perish. Let those who are left eat one another’s flesh.’

“Then I took my staff called Favor and broke it, revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations. It was revoked on that day, and so the afflicted of the flock who were watching me knew it was the word of the Lord.”

I am not following the intent of this at all.

“I told them, ‘If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.’ So they paid me thirty pieces of silver.”

This is mysteriously prophetic of the betrayal of Jesus.

“And the Lord said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’ -- the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter.

“Then I broke my second staff called Union, breaking the brotherhood between Judah and Israel.

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Take again the equipment of a foolish shepherd. For I am going to raise up a shepherd over the land who will not care for the lost, or seek the young, or heal the injured, or feed the healthy, but will eat the meat of the choice sheep, tearing off their hoofs.

“Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock!

May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! May his arm be completely withered, his right eye totally blinded.”

Ouch!

Zechariah 12

2010 July 28th for August 17th

Another oracle through Zechariah.

While keeping Jerusalem safe, God would stagger all of the nations around her. All who moved against Jerusalem would injure themselves. All their horses would panic and be blinded. The attackers would know that Judah was strong indeed but that they would win because God was their God. The feeblest inhabitant of Jerusalem would survive while the enemies all around were torched.

Then God would “pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication.” They would mourn for him, he who they pierced, as for an only child or firstborn son. All the clans and all their wives would mourn bitterly.

Zechariah 13

2010 July 28th for August 18th

God will open a cleansing fountain in Jerusalem “to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” All the idols and their names will be banished. All the prophets will be removed so that the only ones left claiming to be prophets will be false prophets. If anyone prophesies, his very parents will kill him saying that he is a false prophet, a liar. Anyone known as a prophet will put on regular clothes and claim to have been a farmer all his life and will claim that his self-inflicted wounds came from someplace else, like from his friend’s house.

“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!’ declares the Lord Almighty.

‘Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.

In the whole land,’ declares the Lord, ‘two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it.

This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.

They will call on my name and I will answer them;

I will say, “They are my people,” and they will say, “The Lord is our God.””

Zechariah 14

2010 July 28th for August 19th

The day of the Lord is coming. All the nations will gather in Jerusalem to fight for it. “The city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped.” Half will go into exile.

God will enter the fight. There will be a great earthquake splitting the Mount of Olives in half. Some will flee down the valley. “Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.” It will be a strange day, without day and night, without light, cold, or frost. In the evening there will be light. Living water will flow out of Jerusalem in both directions, to the eastern sea and to the western sea, summer and winter. God will reign over the whole earth, there will be no other name. Jerusalem will be secure and inhabited forever.

“This is the plague with which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths.” Every man will panic. They will attack each other. The wealthy of all the nations will be collected into Jerusalem. “A similar plague will strike the horses and mules, the camels and donkeys, and all the animals in those camps.”

The survivors of the attackers will go up to Jerusalem to worship God every year at the Feast of Tabernacles. If they don’t, they will be punished by drought and plague. That includes Egypt and all the other nations.

“Holy to the Lord” will be inscribed on the cooking pots in the temple. In fact, every pot in Jerusalem will be holy. “And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord Almighty.”

This ejection of the Canaanite is the last word of Zechariah.

Malachi 1

2010 July 29th for August 20th

The messenger of God gives an oracle.

God has loved Israel but hated Esau. Edom was turned into a wasteland. They said they would rebuild but God said he would re-destroy. God is great, even outside of Israel!

A son honors his father, but this people shows contempt for God. They bring blemished and deformed animals to God’s altar. This is against his law. Would you give a blind goat to the governor? What would he think? What would he do? It is profane; it is like saying that the food on the altar is unclean and contemptible. God is to be respected in the nations!

Malachi 2

2010 July 29th for August 23rd

God admonishes priests to honor his name or they will be cursed.

“Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it.”

“Offal” is the Victorian English translation for “shit”, something that would be carried away from the sacrifice area.

It is the job of the priest to honor God and preserve knowledge and train men. By turning to evil, priests cause men to stumble. “So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

Further, doesn't Judah have just one Father God? Then “why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?” What is worse. Some had married “daughters of foreign gods,” that is, heathen women from other religions, even though they also brought offerings to God. What else? They cry and mourn and wail at the altar because God pays no attention to the offerings even though they have violated the covenants of their youth with their wives. By ignoring the offerings, God acts as a witness for the wronged wives. God makes married people one flesh. He does this so they can have godly offspring.

“I hate divorce,’ says the Lord God of Israel, ‘and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

God is tired of all their words and deeds. People do evil then ask “Where is the God of justice?”

Malachi 3

2010 July 29th for August 24th

Who can withstand God when he comes? He is like laundry soap, or the fire in which silver is purified. Righteous men will bring offerings to the temple, as in the past.

God will judge: “I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me.” (Watch out Arizona!)

Because God is constant, the descendants of Jacob are never destroyed. He begs them to return to him. “How?” they ask.

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse -- the whole nation of you -- because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much

blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land.”

God says they have said harsh things. “What things?” they ask.

“You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.’”

But God would spare those who followed and served him, like a father spares a son who serves him. This is the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, whether they serve God or not.

Malachi 4

2010 July 28th for August 25th

Malachi concludes with this description of the “Day of the Lord.”

“‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings,. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,’ says the Lord Almighty.

“‘Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

“‘See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.’”

Carrot and stick to the very, very end.

Conclusion of the Minor Prophets

2010 July 29th for August 26th

This concludes the Minor Prophets of which there are twelve: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

(It should be pointed out that Malachi means “your messenger.” Some think that this does not refer to a particular person but others, needing the Bible to be accurate in every way, claim that it can also be considered a proper noun.)

Alternating with the conclusion of the New Testament and the reprise of the Gospels, we have been here at the last section of the Old Testament for nearly a year.

Somehow the prophetic tradition ended at this point four hundred years before Christ and the canon was closed on it at that point. (Details of canonization are beyond my knowledge and out of scope here.)

These prophets are called “minor” due to the size of their extant writings, only a few chapters each. They share common themes, mostly that the people of Israel have been bad and have been punished or will be punished, but that God is ready to or will be ready to take them back and that upon taking them back and upon their continued obedience, he will make Israel and Jerusalem into paradises of security and plenty, the envy of and superior to all the nations of the world, that is, their former enemies, forever.

As we know, this has never happened forever, not in this creation anyway. Not to this day. Cycles of badness and repentance, good circumstances and bad, continue throughout all recorded time and probably unrecorded time as well.

One of the five Bible Study Fellowship years is a survey of the Minor Prophets. I was not privileged to be in the program when that year came around. I’m sure that in the present survey I would have picked up or remembered more if I had been. This does, however, raise the question of interpretation.

One purpose of my survey has been to test the Protestant claim that the Bible alone is sufficient to our faith, that a Christian with a Bible is adequate. (Many would say, a Christian in a community of faith with a Bible is adequate. At least those in charge of running communities of faith say that.) I am more skeptical about this claim now than I was at the beginning. Hardly a day has gone by in our in-depth reading of the Bible that I haven’t said, “dad said...”, or “this is famous...” or “I have heard preaching about this that explains....”. I know what I know more because of how it was taught to me than because of what it is on the page. Because the Protestants where I came from stay out of the Minor Prophets, except to snatch a paradise phrase out of context for a chorus here and there, I don’t know much about them, and haven’t picked up much from the present flat reading except the themes stated above. I feel like the Ethiopian reading Isaiah without understanding, to whom Philip ministered after being miraculously transported.

In fact, the question of interpretation is key. As a reasonably smart guy, I ought to be expected to read the Bible (we are people of “The Book” after all) and from it, do and think correctly. At some level I am sure I’ve been able to do this all my life, from my youth, with an occasional stumble into sin, iniquity, transgression, or just plain error here and there. At deeper levels, I am clueless. Beginning there, I am dependent on my tradition for understanding, and my tradition is a very different thing from an “inerrant” and supremely authoritative Bible. Tradition is where most of the understanding comes from, however.

Do I believe the Bible? Yes.

Do I take the Bible seriously? Yes, obviously.

Do I think the Bible is inerrant? No. At least not any copy I've ever had. At the very least the translation and presentation are unnecessarily sanitized to modern sensibilities (e.g., uses the word "offal" a lot when the original language meant "shit" and so forth). But there are other problems of translation, rendering, reconciliation of concepts, and so forth. At one level it is so simple a child can understand it, and we are encouraged, by Jesus himself, to do take it just in that way, probably out of his own desperation to get through to us. How difficult it must be to be the omnipotent creator trying to get through to the mere mortal creations! On the other hand, the text is infinitely complicated. Only God himself can get his arms around it all, so to speak.

To me, the concept of inerrancy is, in any case, irrelevant. I do take the Bible seriously, obviously, but I can't be dishonest or just defer to nonsense due to some superstitious belief in textual perfection. Inerrant? Not for English speakers anyway. And when I go to school to "learn" Greek and Hebrew so I can read the Bible correctly in the original languages, I'm engaging in the school's lexical tradition and we're back to somebody's community and the tradition that I don't necessarily trust so much.

Do I trust God? Yes.

Do I trust my tradition of interpretation of God and his Word? Well, that's the can of worms, but, in short, no. My tradition is made up of a lot of very bright, inspired people who have lathered the text up to quite an extent, "unpacked it" they like to say these days. All this unpacking is speculation. Inspired speculation? Perhaps, but still speculation. How much of it inspired revelation from God and how much is fast talking manipulation? Good question. I don't have a good answer, but strongly suspect from my own experience that there is a lot of both.

There are lots of traditions out there. There is much common ground among them, but there is much disagreement on specifics, on details, and the disagreement can escalate to violence. Yes, sometimes violent disagreement in the name of God our creator. Didn't Malachi just address this. Didn't he say in essence, 'We have one God, why are we all in dispute with each other?' Where is it written that we should kill each other over disagreements in interpretation? Perhaps we need to understand that what we believe *is* interpretation.

We also see this working from tradition (as opposed to text) in the Minor Prophets. The prophets speak for God, relaying his message of blessing and punishment. Are they accurate? Is our God one of correction by punishment? Generations of punishment? Are the prophets projecting their own values on God? Bismillah!

Nonetheless, are they? Or does the all-loving God have another side in which loving means punishing.

I won't go further into that today. Let's just say that in the Minor Prophets, I have seen some beautiful poetry, some so beautiful that some of that beauty even shines through the translation into English. But mainly what I have seen is the repetition of the two extremes of God's interactions with the people. Rhapsodic blessing, eternal life as it should be for those who accept God and his requirements. Stark, abysmal, indescribable punishment for the rejecters. God's mercy allows us (or the Israelites here, as a group) to go from one to the other freely, it would seem.

Clearly Jesus was well versed in the Prophets; he spoke similarly. Or perhaps he knew firsthand. Jesus was the prime prophet and more, to the Christians. He speaks *as* God, of blessing for the followers and punishment for the rejecters. No contradictions there.

This is the End of the Old Testament 2010 July 30th for August 27th

This concludes the Old Testament. We have been here, in alternation with the New Testament, for six years. After the reprise of the Gospel of John, next, this survey of the Bible will be complete.

According to a note in my current Bible (The Archaeological Study Bible, NIV, Zondervan, not the 1983 BSF NIV in which I started) this material was canonized or at least discussed for the working out of problems at a council of Jewish scholars in Jamnia in A.D. 90, about 500 years after the last of the writings. There are some inter-testamental writings that I'll be studying on my own in the future but which we won't go into here.

Of interest to me is a little of the history of and arrangement of the Old Testament.

For us, the Old Testament consists of 39 books including the Law, the Prophets, History, and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, and other "wisdom literature"). They are arranged that way in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the whole work from as early as the fourth or fifth century B.C. The legend is that 72 translators rendered the Greek exactly the same and so the translation must have been inspired. I don't think anyone believes that today, but 72 is where the name "Septuagint" comes from. When people (Jesus, Paul) in the New Testament quote scripture, they are usually quoting the Septuagint, which was their Bible, and which was, until recent archaeological discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, much of the basis of our own Old Testament.

The ancient text was actually 24 books, but contained all the same material. All twelve minor prophets were in one book, and what we think of as I Kings, II Kings was just one book, "Kings," and so also with Samuel and Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah were also combined. Some even combined Lamentations to Jeremiah and Ruth to Judges making a total of 22 books,

one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This had obvious advantages in a mostly oral society with some well protected scrolls. They would have been memorizing the books of the Bible much more seriously than we do now because it was their only access.

So, if someday you see a reference to the Book of Samuel, you'll know what's going on. Such a reference is unlikely in Protestant circles, however, where most of our Bible literacy comes from training, one or two hours a week by "experts," and those experts have agreed on what the inerrant Word of God is -- KJV, or NIV, possibly, but English rendered for the masses for sure, and the organization of the Old Testament therein has come from the Septuagint.

It seems to me that the division I Samuel / II Samuel by those working on the Septuagint was just a technical convenience, to break the work up into manageable pieces.

Personally, I really enjoyed the portions of the Old Testament that were history, the story of the people and their real-life struggles. These lessons and stories are ageless and apply to us today. I didn't find the Law as tedious and dry as most people do. Some of it in detail I find irrelevant to modern life, such as how to deal with mildew in a house, or downright ignored by our culture/tradition, such as prohibitions against charging or receiving interest on loans, and forgiving all loans on the Jubilee every seven years. (I'll be discussing this at more length in the summary of the whole Bible to follow in a month or so.) In the face of strident preaching about how worthless and sinful we all are, how perfect the Bible is and how we should condemn others based on three or four verses here and there, I find this willful ignorance amusing, if not downright unethical. But as a guide to what God is like in detail, I find the writings of Moses inspiring.

Next best I enjoyed the wisdom and succinctness of Proverbs and particularly Ecclesiastes. I'm sure I would enjoy the Psalms more if the music to which they were set was extant. Sadly it is not. As for the texts, I identify intellectually with the groanings of despair and the ecstatic heights of joy expressed there, but do not (yet anyway) live in the Psalms experientially as some do, as dad claimed to, for example.

Finally, I found the prophets most abstruse. I grasp them better as characters in the historical accounts, as Ezekiel confronting Ahab and Jezebel in Chronicles, than from reading their writings directly. One of the most poignant prophets is Nathan, confronter of David. He wrote down nothing; there is no book of Nathan.

Sadly, the prophets (as we discussed more at length yesterday) come across to me as just whining in perpetuity at the people of Israel for their apostasy and holding out paradise on earth that God will create if they just behave.

Before this survey of the Bible, I would have claimed that there was some correlation between obedience and God's blessing, but now I have to notice that there is at least some phase shift in that correlation. Solomon, for example, the most blessed king of Israel of all, the only one who

presided over anything remotely resembling the paradise Israel, the strongest and richest country in the world whom everyone else honored in the name of their God: Solomon was highly disobedient. He married scores of foreign wives in violation of the Law, indeed the First Commandment, and built them temples of their own religions right in Jerusalem near the temple of the true God, also in violation of the First Commandment. Of course the kingdom fell apart after Solomon, but it could be claimed from strictly secular arguments that this was inevitable anyway, in the ebb and flow of nations.

Call me cynical, but now I am more likely to think that Saul, though disobedient (actually, mostly ignorant), was not as bad as Samuel made him out to be, that David had much better public relations because Samuel, the annointer of both Saul and David, died on the day that Saul died and David became king. David himself did terrible things, mass genocide, murder, adultery,, an unnecessary census of the people, but he got to write his own book (like I said, no “Book of Nathan”) and felt from his early youth that God was with him regardless, that his repentance in all these sins (the ones that were even considered sins -- genocide was not) was accepted and that God, despite very real consequences, remained with him nonetheless.

Even so, David was the great warrior, not the one to build the Great Society and the Temple. His wise son Solomon did that, and David’s power in the region lasted through Solomon’s life too, until the kingdom split on Solomon’s death due to messed up arrangements for succession. Even Solomon wasn’t perfectly wise in everything, it seems. He bloodily arranged for the security of his own succession, but not that of his heir. Nor was his heir wise or well trained.

No, it is all much messier than I thought. The most striking scene in the whole Old Testament for me is that moment when David is on his deathbed and Bathsheba, widow of murdered Uriah and Solomon’s mother (!), is summoned to be with him. Outside one of the other children of David (but not of Bathsheba) are assuming that they will be king and are having parties and making announcements, and Bathsheba calls Nathan to come and get the real word about succession from the dying king before it is too late and they are all toast.

There they are in that bedroom together, three of the most famous, pivotal people in the history of the faith, indeed, in the history of the world: David, Bathsheba, and Nathan. What a personal history they each had with each other. What incredible lives they had each lived. And so young Solomon was enthroned and the blood started flying. In the end, even Bathsheba, the queen mother, ended up being banished but at least not executed.

In going through the Bible, now near complete, I had assumed I would be transformed into something mystically better, something that my Christian Protestant tradition would expect. Though I have been transformed, it hasn’t happened as expected or into the sort of person of faith expected. But like I said, I don’t trust my own tradition that much.