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THE PROMISES OF PROSPERITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:  
AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Exegetical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

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by

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May 1990

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THE PROMISES OF PROSPERITY

#### The Approach of this Study

Francis Bacon once said, "Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New."<sup>1</sup> Although Bacon lived many years ago, we can be sure that such an understanding did not originate with him nor is such an understanding confined to his day. As long as people have endeavored to interpret the Old Testament, there has always been the inevitable problem of how one should interpret the promises of prosperity that are so commonly found there. Attempts at a Christian understanding of the Old Testament promises of prosperity can be traced back at least as far as Origen's writings against Celsus. The thesis of this work is that the Old Testament itself gives us the principles by which these promises of prosperity can be properly understood and that the New Testament fills in the details, makes explicit what is implicit in the Old Testament, and puts the finishing touches on a proper understanding of these promises.

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Bacon, Thoughts on Holy Scriptures, compiler Rev. John G. Hall (New York: American Tract Society, 1862), p. 272.

This study of the promises of prosperity in the Old Testament is intended to be a comprehensive overview of almost the entire Old Testament. It is not a new treatment of Biblical theology and yet it borders on being such because promises of prosperity are found throughout the Bible and a proper understanding of them requires that one have a proper understanding of the central theme and message of the whole of Scripture.

Not every promise in the Old Testament will be examined but rather only those which promise material prosperity and/or escape from suffering. Certain Hebrew words frequently occur in these contexts and thus serve as indicators that a certain divine promise is appropriate for this investigation. There is no single distinctive term in the Old Testament that would be comparable to ἐπαγγέλλεσθαι ("promise") in the New Testament. Instead in the Hebrew Bible we find that ordinary words are used such as דַּבַּר - "to speak"; אָמַר - "to say"; נָשָׁבַע - "to swear." When God is the subject of these verbs and when His chosen people or their leaders are the recipients of the message, then the translator rightly gives to them the sense of binding promise or oath. Other words frequently found in the context of a promise of prosperity include: בָּרַךְ - "to bless"; טוֹב - "good"; הִשְׁכַּח - "succeed"; פָּרַח - "prosper"; רַב - "abundance"; הִשְׁכַּח - "have success"; נָחַם - "ease"; שָׁלוֹם - "peace" and the various derivations of these roots. If we

were to cite one particular passage as a paradigm to illustrate what is meant by a promise of prosperity, Psalm 37 would be highly appropriate. This psalm is a good example because it uses many general terms for prosperity and contains many of the key elements for proper interpretation within the psalm itself. The wicked will soon fade away and therefore we need not fear (vv. 1-2,7-8). If we trust in Yahweh and do good then we will dwell in the land and enjoy prosperity there (vv. 3,9,22,29,34). Yahweh will give to the one who delights in Him the desires of his or her heart and provide for all needs even in time of trouble (vv. 4, 19, 24, 25). The language is characteristically earthy. It speaks of prosperity in terms of material things such as land, children (vv. 26, 37-38) and crops.

Although a number of promises of prosperity can be identified in the Old Testament, it is not the purpose of this study to examine in detail every one of them. Instead representative examples have been selected which serve to illustrate and support the various points. For a complete list of the promises of prosperity in the Old Testament see the appendix. The canonical order of the books of the Hebrew Bible will set the agenda for this study, beginning with the Pentateuch, then the Prophets (both Former and Latter or "Writing Prophets") and finally the Writings (which, with the exception of some selected psalms, will for the most part consist of the Wisdom Literature). In this

way our concern is not so much how these promises were developed throughout Israel's history but rather throughout the canon and thus much debated arguments about sources and dating of various books are of little relevance for the purposes of this study.<sup>2</sup>

Not every book of the Old Testament contains promises of prosperity. Some books or texts within a book may appear to be applicable, but, because they simply indicate that a person did or did not prosper and do not record an explicit promise per se, they are not treated in this study. In other words, this study concerns itself primarily with benedictions rather than statements of benefaction for "the majority of God's blessings are promises."<sup>3</sup> Statements of God's benefaction for our purposes are useful mainly as keys to understanding how God intends to fulfill his benedictions.

Throughout this examination of the Old Testament it will become apparent that the promises of prosperity as a rule are not literally, or better completely, fulfilled in the life of Israel. Occasions of suffering and hardship

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<sup>2</sup>Although he denies that this is a "new exegetical technique," Brevard S. Childs' Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) legitimatizes this approach to the study of the Scriptures as Canon and "establishes a proper context from which to read the literature." pp. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup>Christopher W. Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK, "to Bless" in the Old Testament (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 29.



despite the promises to the contrary are seen as an indication that the full realization or actualization of these promises is always future. They are always to be understood eschatologically. The promises always contain an element of ultimacy which puts off the complete fulfillment into a future time or event. This being the case, it is necessary to observe the suffering and the seeming lack of fulfillment of the promises both for Israel and for ourselves as New Testament people. In doing this we must necessarily but also unfortunately gloss over an important topic. Little will be said in this thesis in defense of suffering and little attempt will be made to wrestle with the theodicy problem other than to point suffering believers to the future consummation of all God's promises.

As much as possible we will attempt to let the Old Testament itself interpret the promises of prosperity found there or at least to pave the way for a proper interpretation. In the conclusion some vital insights of the New Testament and the Lutheran Confessions will be brought in to complete the picture and make clear what is often only implied in the Old Testament alone. After doing this we will find a beautiful harmony and consistency between the two Testaments.

As we explore each major division of the Old Testament we will delineate five points throughout. 1) The nature of the promises of prosperity - what do they promise?

2) The subject or recipient of the promises - to whom is the prosperity promised? 3) The grace alone (sola gratia) context in which the promises are given. 4) The partial fulfillment of the promises (the "now") that serves as a foretaste of things to come. 5) The putting off (the "not yet") of the full fulfillment or consummation until some future date, namely the eschaton.

The Target of this Study:  
Prosperity Theology

Certain factions among Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostalism, Millennialism, and media religion (or what is frequently termed the "Electronic Church") proclaim what amounts to a gospel of success and physical/material prosperity. It can be systematized into three main teachings, with some overlap. They are 1) divine healing or divine health (i.e. never getting sick to begin with) 2) positive confession (i.e. we have what we say or "claim") and finally 3) material prosperity. For our purposes we shall put these all together and refer to them generally as "Prosperity Theology" without drawing a distinction between bodily and material well being. The common denominator and key element of all three aspects is faith. By faith one can claim health or material prosperity and by faith one confesses that health and prosperity are realities even if one's eyes see differently. In summary, prosperity

theology is the teaching that "you can be healthy and wealthy if you just claim it" by faith.<sup>4</sup>

For this reason prosperity theology is frequently termed "faith teaching" or the "faith movement" and churches which teach prosperity theology will frequently incorporate the word "faith" into their name. One such church which received considerable attention in the secular press was "Faith Assembly" in Claypool, Indiana, whose pastor, Hobart Freeman, was at one time a Hebrew and Old Testament professor at Grace Theological Seminary. A series of articles in the Fort Wayne News-Sentinel in 1984 reported that there were ninety documented and unnecessary deaths among them as a result of members claiming healings by faith rather than seeking medical attention.<sup>5</sup>

The history of modern prosperity theology can be traced back to European roots in the early part of the nineteenth century and perhaps to the person who appears to be the first modern Pentecostal leader, Edward Irving. A powerful Scottish preacher, Irving believed that miracle healings and spectacular gifts were not just for Biblical days but for the church today. Later a Swiss pastor named Otto Stockmayer acquired a reputation as a "theologian of

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<sup>4</sup>Bruce Barron, Health and Wealth Gospel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup>Jim Quinn and Bill Zlatos, "Assembly's Message Ominous," Fort Wayne News-Sentinel, 2 June 1984; also various Warsaw Times-Union articles in November and December of 1984.

the doctrine of healing by faith" by promoting the idea that Isaiah 53:4 teaches that we have physical healing in the atonement of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

In America one of the earliest proponents of prosperity theology was Russel H. Conwell, lawyer, Baptist clergyman and founder of Temple University in Philadelphia. He is perhaps best known for his "Acres of Diamonds" address which he delivered in 1861. It is reported that Conwell gave this talk over 6,000 times and earned by it \$8,000,000. It reflected the general materialistic attitude which was prevalent at the time that wealth can be found in your own backyard. Everyone can and should be rich and if people are poor it is their own fault and the result of their own shortcomings.<sup>7</sup> This view is apparently still quite prevalent in more than just religious circles.

As difficult as it is seriously to classify Conwell as a theologian or even a clergyman nevertheless his kind of ideology has certainly made its way into American popular theology and the teaching and preaching of many modern day

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<sup>6</sup>A. J. Gordon, The Ministry of Healing, 5th ed. (New York: Revell, 1881) pp. 162-64; William Edward Biederwolf, Whipping-Post Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1934), pp. 203-4.

<sup>7</sup>Much of this information is taken from Charles T. Knippel's unpublished research paper entitled "Spirituality of the Self-Made Man" (Nov. 6, 1984). For a more in depth look at the American phenomenon of the "Gospel of Wealth" see the books that are listed in Nelson R. Burr's A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 706-709.

clergyman. The divine health and healing aspect was eventually promoted in Boston by A. J. Gordan, pastor of the Clarendon Street Church for the latter half of the nineteenth century. He came to prominence largely due to his association with D. L. Moody's revivals in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> In His book The Ministry of Healing he cited Stockmayer and further developed the idea that Isaiah 53 may promise bodily healing as well as spiritual healing.

A key supporter of Gordan's theology was the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, A. B. Simpson. For Simpson and his organization, physical healing was one of the foundational teachings, one of the lines of the "Four Square Gospel" of Christ as Savior, Sanctifier, Healer and Coming King.

The next major practitioner of divine health and healing to come along in America was John Alexander Dowie. In 1900 he purchased a plot of land north of Chicago which he called "Zion" and attracted ten thousand people to take up residence there. What one historian called "the father

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<sup>1</sup>Among the books which tell of A. J. Gordan's prominence are Ernest Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 142-44, 160-61 and George W. Dollard, A History of Fundamentalism in America (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1973), pp. 19-26.

of healing revivalism in America," Dowie was known to lump doctors, drugs and devils all in the same category.<sup>9</sup>

As Dowie was fading in prominence, William Seymour brought notoriety to the famous Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, much celebrated by modern Neo-Pentecostals as the start of the charismatic movement. Charles Parham, "the single most important individual in the rise of the Pentecostal movement," like Dowie before him, "believed a cure would come if the seeker would appropriate a radical faith in God's desire and ability to heal" and felt that the problem was largely that we insist on nursing our diseases.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, however, shortly afterwards divine healing began to have public disdain and ridicule, which caused many denominations, that would otherwise have been open to it, to avoid it for fear of losing members. Thus, up until the end of World War II, for the most part only Aimee Semple McPherson managed to achieve a high public profile as a faith healer.

Since then, however, with the rise of Kenneth Hagin, Oral Roberts, Demos Shakarian's Full Gospel Business Men's

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<sup>9</sup>David Edwin Harrell, All Things Are Possible (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 13; Rowland V. Bingham, The Bible and the Body (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1921), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup>James R. Goff, Jr., "The Faith That Claims: Are Health and Wealth a Divine Right for Every Believer?," Christianity Today, February 19, 1990, p. 19. Goff's doctoral dissertation on Charles Parham and the missionary origins of Pentecostalism was published by the University of Arkansas.

Fellowship International (FGBMFI), Katherine Kuhlman and Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, prosperity theology in its various forms is enjoying new heights of popularity. Oral Roberts is perhaps the earliest and best known of the contemporary prosperity preachers. His first book on the topic, God's Formula for Success and Prosperity was published in 1955. Since then he has gained national prominence largely through the television ministry that he was able to start by promising supporters a guaranteed refund from the Lord equal to their contribution within one year. One even more brash in promising financial rewards to his contributors was A. A. Allen, who wrote about half a dozen books on prosperity theology.

He blatantly portrayed a God who specializes in financial miracles. He spellbound his audiences with an account that God once answered his prayer to meet a \$410 printing bill by turning the one-dollar bills he had into twenty-dollar bills. "I can command God to perform a miracle for you financially," Allen said. "When you do, God can turn dollar bills into twenties." Allen's expalantion of the miracel was a clear pronouncement of the prosperity doctrine that would begin to flourish in the charismatic congregations of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

Likewise Gordon Lindsay also contributed to the current prosperity teaching with his book God's Master Key to Prosperity. One who has been called the father of the faith movement, E. W. Kenyon had a great impact in turn of the century America through his radio program and his many books. He is perhaps the one figure chiefly responsible for

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

the connection between positive confession and healing. Key proponents of prosperity theology today have been greatly influenced by his thought. These include the Copelands (Kenneth and his wife, Gloria), Robert Tilton and especially Kenneth Hagin. Others among the hosts of popular prosperity preachers that could be added to the list are Earl Paulk, John Avanzini, Fred Price, Charles Capps, and Paul Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network. It is in the teachings and writings of these most recent figures that we have the clearest fusion of the three elements of health, wealth and faith.

One of reasons that prosperity theology is so extensively popular today is no doubt a result of effective use of the mass media of radio and television. Such names as Pat Robertson (who ran for president of the United States in 1988), Robert Schuller, and Jim and Tammy Bakker (of the infamous PTL organization of recent scandal) have become household words. It is difficult to underestimate the impact of this handful of theologians when one considers the millions of people throughout the world who watch the electronic church every week.<sup>12</sup> The sexual exploits of Jim

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<sup>12</sup>A University of Pennsylvania survey in 1984 concluded that 13.3 million Americans are regular viewers of religious shows. These statistics appeared in the April 6, 1987 issue of Newsweek magazine in its cover story "Holy Wars." The comparable issue of Time magazine had a story titled "Unholy Row." Time's August 3, 1987 issue featured much the same subject in "God and Money." The host of articles which appeared in 1987-88 with regard to the Jim and Tammy Bakker and later Jimmy Swaggart scandals is too numerous to print.



Bakker and other prominent TV evangelists caused many to question the propriety of their financial dealings as well. When confronted with the figures, prosperity theology is frequently drawn upon as justification for opulent life styles and extravagant spending. No doubt these preachers would not be nearly as popular as they are if the prosperity theology that they often teach was not so appealing to people, especially in America.

A recent issue of Christianity Today reports about what is apparently the Christian "fraud du jour." A report by the North American Securities Administrators Association (NASAA) and the Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB) noted that there is a recent surge in complaints about "self-proclaimed 'born-again' financial planners, con artists claiming to be endorsed by local and national church officials, and givers of 'divinely inspired' investment advice about coins, precious metals, real estate, and oil and gas well programs." In fact the Massachusetts-based Ford Oil and Development sold stock to raise money for an oil project in Israel because according to the book of Deuteronomy the feet of the tribe of Asher will be bathed in

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One recent book reports that nearly 500 million people worldwide take in TV preachers every week. This statistic is mentioned in the preface of a recent book entitled The Agony of Deceit: What Some TV Preachers are Really Teaching which is a collection of essays by noted evangelicals and edited by Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1990), p. 12.

oil.<sup>13</sup> The fact is people with little if any interest in religion may nevertheless be quite attracted to get-rich-quick schemes.

Like most heresies, one must concede that there is an element of truth to what prosperity theologians promote. St. John does desire and pray that his readers prosper and be in health (3 John 2) much the same as we desire it for those whom we love. But that which is God's ultimate desire is turned into everyone's potential possession contingent upon believing rightly. In an almost gnostic fashion, those who have right knowledge of God's abundance are supposedly capable of releasing it with right believing. When one has this "Revelation Knowledge" then he or she has a solid conviction that the promises of the Scriptures apply personally.<sup>14</sup> Thus if one is not healed of all diseases, financially successful or otherwise physically prosperous, then he either has insufficient faith, secret sin, lack of fellowship with God or a negative confession (i.e. is not employing a kind of spiritual power of positive thinking).

The Old Testament promises of prosperity prove to be fertile ground for this kind of "Health and Wealth

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<sup>13</sup>Kim A. Lawton. "Swindlers Prey on Trust of Believers," Christianity Today, September 22, 1989, pp. 42-43.

<sup>14</sup>Kenneth E. Hagin, Prevailing Prayer to Peace (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1973), pp.11-12; E. W. Kenyon, The Two Kinds of Knowledge (Lynnwood, Wash: Kenyon's Gospel Publishing Society, 1966) and Hagin, The Real Faith (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1970), p. 5.

Gospel."<sup>15</sup> Some Old Testament promises and examples of material prosperity are practically sedes doctrinae for its theology. A favorite is the sections in Genesis 13 through 25 having to do with God's blessings upon Abraham. As Abraham's spiritual descendants it is believed that we too can and should be blessed materially if only we would claim the promise for ourselves through a positive confession. As it was in ancient days so also today, material prosperity is seen as necessary in order to confirm God's covenant relationship (cf. Deut. 8:18). Typically Galatians 3:13-14 is brought in where it reads that Christ "redeemed us in order that the blessings given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles." Also with the help of Galatians 3, we are seen as freed from the curses of breaking the law that are mentioned in Deuteronomy 28 and thus freed in Christ to taste only of the blessings.<sup>16</sup> Prosperity theologians like to point to Exodus 15:26 ("Yahweh who heals you") and Deuteronomy 28 and say that these promises are just as good as any

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<sup>15</sup>I have borrowed the term "Health and Wealth Gospel" from the fine book on the subject by the same title written by Bruce Barron.

<sup>16</sup>Kenneth Copeland, Welcome to the Family (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1979), pp. 21-22; Charles Capps, Releasing the Ability of God through Prayer (Tulsa: Harrison House, 1978), p. 123; Gloria Copeland, God's Will is Prosperity (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1978) p. 38-39.

in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup> They look at Joshua 1:8 and say that our wallets will prosper along with our spirits if we will only meditate regularly on God's Word.<sup>18</sup>

However there are some serious hermeneutical errors in almost all prosperity theology. For one thing it often employs a very literalistic and sometimes naive reading of the biblical texts (usually from the King James Version). In this way the text is frequently forced or twisted to say what one wants it to say. Then finally a given passage may simply be taken out of context. For example, Hobart Freeman was known to quote frequently Proverbs 23:7 (a verse that is textually difficult anyway) as a proof text for positive confession, "as (a man) thinketh in his heart, so is he." Proverbs 6:2 was another of his favorites, "thou art snared with the words of thy mouth." The context, however, has nothing to do with positive confession. Instead it is a warning against co-signing with someone for a loan.<sup>19</sup> The so-called hundredfold return principle, that if one gives to

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<sup>17</sup>Kenneth Hagin, What to Do When Faith Seems Weak and Victory Lost (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1979), p. 96.

<sup>18</sup>Kenneth E. Hagin, New Thresholds of Faith (Tulsa: Kenneth Hagin Ministries, 1972), p. 53-54, 85; Gloria Copeland, God's Will for You (Ft. Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1972), p. 27; Kenneth Copeland, Laws of Prosperity (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publ., 1979), pp. 24-25.

<sup>19</sup>For just one example of countless places where Prov. 6:2 is used in this way see Kenneth Copeland, The Power of the Tongue (Fort Worth: Kenneth Copeland Publications, 1980), p. 29.

God, he will get back what he gave times one hundred, serves as a good example of a literalistic reading of the text (Gen. 26:12; 2 Sam. 24:3; Matt. 13:8, 23; 19:29; Mark 10:30; Luke 8:8).<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 45:11 has been known to suffer from a naive reading of the King James Version. The Scofield Reference Bible (KJV) reads, "Thus saith the LORD, . . . concerning the work of my hands command ye me." But a look at the context in the original Hebrew (or even in a modern version such as the RSV) will clearly show that what appears to be God asking us to tell Him what to do is in actuality just the opposite. The preceding context and that which follows makes it clear that we as the "clay" cannot tell God, the "Potter," what to do.

Apart from these and many more cases of poor scholarship, the exegesis employed by prosperity theology suffers from another basic hermeneutical error. It misses the "material principle," the proper focus of what the Scriptures are all about. In other words, prosperity theology has a strong human-centered focus that relegates the Christocentricity of the Scriptures to the background. Often in a rather millennialistic fashion, the kingdom of God and the purpose of God are seen in a very mundane manner so as to imply that our existence here on this planet is God's only concern and that we can still enjoy paradise on

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<sup>20</sup>Gloria Copeland, God's Will is Prosperity, pp. 47-53.

earth. Prosperity theology fails to address the real need of human beings and thus misses the real thrust of God's purposes and the message of His word.

Christians need the knowledge of a just, holy and merciful God. We need to know God's character, His attributes. It is not that we desire too much. We are not asking for too much when we demand health, wealth, and happiness, but too little! Some televangelists are passionate about things that can only bring partial satisfaction. They appeal to half-heartedness when infinite joy is offered. They call us to settle for "mud pies in a slum" because they cannot imagine what is meant by "a holiday at the sea."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>This quote is taken from Art Lindsley's chapter "Settling for Mud Pies" in Michael Horton's book, The Agony of Deceit, p. 55. He takes the "mud pies" illustration from C. S. Lewis in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

## CHAPTER 2

### THE OLD TESTAMENT PROMISES OF PROSPERITY

#### EXAMINED EXEGETICALLY

##### The Pentateuch

##### The Nature of the Promises

We begin our exegetical examination with God's promises to the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Much research has been done already on this topic and the basic elements have been identified. David Clines has systematized these promises quite neatly into three basic elements: the promise of descendants; the promise of relationship with God, and the promise of the land.<sup>1</sup> All three of these elements are immediately evident in Yahweh's initial call and promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. He was to go to the land that Yahweh would show him (v. 1); Yahweh would make of him a great nation (v. 2); and God was on his side, blessing those who bless him and cursing those who curse him (v. 3). These three things are the content of Yahweh's "blessing." Yet for our purposes, only the promise of descendants and land can be seen as a promise of prosperity, because only these two elements of the promise are coram hominibus ("before humans"). The remaining element of the promise which has to do with Abraham's relationship with God is coram deo

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<sup>1</sup>David J. A. Clines, The Theme of the Pentateuch (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1978), p. 32.

("before God") and therefore immediately fulfilled and not something that he has to wait for. A common error in the interpretation of the promises of prosperity is the failure to draw this distinction. Rather than dividing between what is "spiritual" and what is "physical" it is better to think in terms of what God has declared to be so today (the coram deo promises) and what God has promised for the future that will be fulfilled in various degrees (the coram hominibus promises). When it comes to God's promises of forgiveness of sins and relationship with Him there are no degrees. The very promise itself is an indication that all of God's undeserved favor is upon that person. Either one has a proper relationship with God or none at all. On the other hand, the coram hominibus promises are "seeable" blessings such as crops, cattle, children, and so forth. These promises can and will be fulfilled in degrees, some now, more later. Furthermore God brings these blessings through other means than word and "sacrament" (i.e. circumcision and sacrifice). He sends the rain and sunshine to produce good crops. He provides fertile bodies to bring forth offspring, and so on.

The promise of the land is often found in combination with the promise of descendants and vice versa. This is altogether natural for what good is a land without a people to live in it and enjoy it and likewise a people must have a land in which to live and in which they can enjoy the bless-



ing of God who gave it to them.<sup>1</sup> Many see this twin promise as central to the theme of the entire Scriptures, that is, a "chosen people" for a "promised land." Moreover the theme of the land itself has received a great deal of attention in recent years and rightly so. Statistically, more mention is given in the pages of Scripture to the land than to covenant, per se.<sup>2</sup> Even Kaiser who sees "promise" as the central theme of the Scriptures concedes that

Were it not for the larger more comprehensive theme of the total promise with all its multifaceted provisions, the theme of Israel and her land could well serve as the central idea or the organizing rubric for the entire canon.<sup>3</sup>

The promises of prosperity given to the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, consistently bear the twin elements of many descendants (fertility) in an abundant land of promise. Genesis 13:15-17 is just a sampling of the

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<sup>1</sup>Earlier higher critical scholars saw different layers of tradition in the various promises to the patriarchs. Unlike Alt who understood the promise of a son as the Yahwistic nucleus of the Patriarchal narrative, both Von Rad and Noth see the promise of posterity and the promise of the land as integral parts of one another from the outset. See also Walter Brueggemann, The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. 3; Claus Westermann, The Promise to the Fathers, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 7 and Walter Kaiser, Toward an Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 56-59.

<sup>2</sup>Elmer A. Martens, God's Design (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 97-98. Martens points out that "land" is the fourth most frequent noun or substantive in the Old Testament, appearing 2,504 times.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Kaiser, "The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View," Bibliotheca Sacra 138 (October - December 1981): 302-312.

several times God promises prosperity to Abraham but it serves well as a paradigm. Abram was already "very rich (אֲבְרָם) in livestock, in silver and in gold" (13:2) when he went from Egypt to the Negev with his nephew Lot. Yet after a dispute they divided their respective shares of the land and parted company. Lot took the broad Southern portion of the Jordan and Abram settled in the land of Canaan. Then Yahweh told Abram to look in all directions for "all the land which you see before you I will give to you and your descendants forever" (v. 15, emphasis added). Furthermore, Yahweh promises to make Abram's descendants as numerous as the dust of that land/earth (אֲדָמָה) and then adds in almost sarcastic tones "if anyone can count the dust of the land/earth so also your descendants can be counted" (v. 16). Then so as not to give the impression that this promised land is just a dream or an ethereal vision, Yahweh instructs Abram to "get up, walk on the land yourself (Hithpael of הָלַךְ) through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you" (v. 17).

Similarly, when Abraham's son, Isaac was about to go to Egypt in Genesis 26, Yahweh appeared to him and told him to stay in the land and to "sojourn" there "for I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands (plural) and I will carry out the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. And I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and

will give to your descendants all these lands . . . " (26:3-4). The promises of prosperity made to Isaac parallel those made to his father, Abraham, and are not really anything new. The dual elements of descendants and land are restated and confirmed as God pledges to keep his promises to Abraham.

After Isaac's deceitful son, Jacob connived the blessing from his aged father (Genesis 27), he fled from Beersheba toward Haran (Genesis 28). Along the way he had a dream in which he saw a ladder reaching up to heaven. In this dream Yahweh stood above the ladder and revealed Himself as the God of his father and grandfather. Then Yahweh immediately confirmed his promise once again to the succeeding generation. As with Abraham and Isaac so also with Jacob there is the promise of the land to him and to his descendants (Gen. 28:13) and that his "descendants shall also be like the dust of the land/earth" (v. 14). Then in verse 15 Yahweh assures him that He will bring him back to this land (אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן) and will not leave him until He has done what He "promised" (אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי).

Thus far there has not been a great deal of detail in the promises of prosperity beyond the dual promise of land and many descendants. One possible exception might be when Isaac blessed Jacob in Genesis 27:28 with the "dew of heaven," the "fatness (רֵבֹב) of the earth," and "an abundance of grain and new wine" (שֶׂבֶע וְיַיִן). But as we leave behind

the book of Genesis the descriptions of the prosperity that God promises for His people becomes more detailed and the context is expanded.

It is in Exodus 3:8 that we first encounter that description of the promised land that is so often repeated - "a good land and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (i.e. a fertile land of plenty). It is evident throughout the Pentateuch that the prosperity that Yahweh describes and promises for His people is always meant to be fulfilled and enjoyed in the abundant land of promise. Even though the Patriarchs themselves may have enjoyed various degrees of prosperity in their own lives outside of the promised land, the prosperity that Yahweh promises is always prosperity in the land of Canaan. This becomes more obvious in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and especially Deuteronomy.

Once Israel is freed from the bondage in Egypt, Yahweh made a promise to Moses on Mount Sinai that He will send an "angel" (מַלְאָכִי) to lead the way before His people to "guard" them and escort them to the place which Yahweh had prepared for them (Ex. 23:20). What follows is one of three texts we will examine in which God promises abundance of physical and material blessings in the land, an absence of suffering as well as victory and ultimately rest from all enemies (Exodus 23; Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28).

Beginning with verse 25 of Exodus 23 Yahweh promises

to bless (בָּרַךְ) their bread and water and to remove sickness (לְהַרְחֵק) from among them (see also Deut. 7:15). Such a blessing implies that God will make the natural processes by which food and water are acquired work better than normally and that he will likewise bolster the bodies immune system to be able to ward off disease even better than it ordinarily would.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, verse 26 promises that there will not be any miscarried pregnancies (Piel participle of לָדַעַן). This same word is used elsewhere of domestic animals (Gen. 31:38) and people (Ez. 36:13) and thus fertility of all kinds is being promised here (see also Deut. 7:14). Then He promises to "fill the number of your days." Evidently this means that Yahweh promises to grant them a long life but, more than that, a full life as well. The language here is similar to that of the fourth commandment (Ex. 20:12) but here the days are "filled" rather than simply "made long" (בָּרַךְ, see also Deut. 4:40). Yahweh is promising, as we say today, life with all the "gusto" or better said "abundant life" (John 10:10). The "terror" (אֱלֹהֵי מַחֲרָה) that Yahweh promises to send before them is no doubt connected with the "angel" of verses 20 and 23. Again Yahweh promises to make life easy on His people. He does not promise to annihilate their enemies but simply to confuse them and cause them to turn their backs and become easy prey. In

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<sup>1</sup>C. W. Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK, "to Bless" in the Old Testament, SBC Dissertation Series 95 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 39.

verse 28 Yahweh uses yet a different word (הַצִּדְוֹן) for that which will go before His people in order to drive out the inhabitants of the land.<sup>6</sup> The message again is clearly that Yahweh will be the one who sees to it that His people obtain the gift of the land. The prosperity He promises bears little meaning apart from the land and He will personally see to it that they receive it.

Chapter 26 is the only place in the book of Leviticus where a promise of prosperity is found. Here we encounter a condition of obedience attached to the promise in a more obvious way than in Genesis or Exodus. The antiphonal chorus of blessings for obedience and cursings for disobedience is featured here as it also will be later in Deuteronomy. Such blessing and cursing sections were a common feature among ancient Near Eastern covenants or Suzerainty Treaties such as were found among the ancient Hittites.<sup>7</sup> The promises begin with verse 4 and again the emphasis is on fertility. In fact most of the covenantal blessings promise the fertility of domesticated animals and

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<sup>6</sup>F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon (Christian Copyrights, 1983), p. 864 translates the word as "hornets" (see also KJV, RSV, & NASB) but William L. Holladay, A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 310, renders it "depression, discouragement" here and in Deuteronomy 7:20 and Joshua 24:12. The root of the word is הַצִּדְוֹן and has to do with diseases of the skin.

<sup>7</sup>For examples of these see James B. Pritchard's Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 205.

crops.<sup>1</sup> The rains will come "in their time," at the right time in order to produce the best crops both for the land and for the "trees of the field." Verse 5 has language similar to Amos 9:13 and in both the accent is on abundance. The sense is that there will be so much to gather in that it will take all the time available until the next crop needs to be planted. The verse concludes with the idea of "fullness" again but here the word is  $\text{שָׂבַע}$ , "to be filled or satiated with food" whereas in Exodus 23:26 the word  $\text{שָׂבַע}$  is a more general term for fullness or abundance and in context, the fullness of days. The element of security in the land was also implied in Exodus 23 but it was something Israel would have to work toward. Here in Leviticus 26 Israel will permanently "dwell in safety" ( $\text{שָׁבַע וְשָׁבַע}$ ). This idea of peace ( $\text{שָׁלוֹם}$ ) in the land is further expanded upon in verse 6. They will lie down and not tremble. Just as Yahweh was concerned about the wild animals in Exodus 23:29, so also here Yahweh causes "harmful" or "evil" beasts to cease ( $\text{שָׁבַע}$ ) from the land. "A sword will not pass through your land" does not mean necessarily that there will not be any battles for in verse 7 Israel will "pursue" its enemies but that the one wielding the effective sword will be Israel. Only five will be needed to pursue a hundred, and only a hundred to pursue ten thousand. As with Gideon's

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<sup>1</sup>Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament, p. 37.

army, Yahweh is the one who will fight for Israel (Ex. 14:14; Deut. 3:22, etc.) and He always makes a majority.

In Leviticus 26:9 Yahweh makes a similar promise when He says, "I will turn to you," and as a result He promises to make Israel fruitful and to multiply them. Also in verse 11 and 12 He promises to make His dwelling (יְדוּשׁוּ) with them and walk in their midst. The language here is very reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Both verse 12 and Genesis 3:8 use the hithpael of יָלַץ ("to walk") for the activity of God among His people. It makes sense that what God created for His righteous creation before the Fall would be reflected in His promises to the righteous afterwards. God's will for the righteous never changes. As in Genesis 26, when Yahweh promised Isaac that He would "carry out" (יִקְוֶה) the oath which He swore to Abraham, so also Yahweh promised Israel that He will "confirm" (יִקְוֶה) the covenant with them and make good on His promises. They will always have what they need and then some, the demand never exceeding the supply (v. 10).

In Deuteronomy 28 we encounter perhaps the most familiar antiphonal chorus of blessings and cursings in all of Scripture. Deuteronomy 27 describes a ceremony that took place in the area of the twin mountains near Shechem just after Israel crossed the Jordan into the promised land. The curses were spoken from atop Mount Ebal and the correspond-



ing blessings from atop Mount Gerizim.<sup>9</sup> Here a conditionality of the blessings is very apparent as blessing and prosperity is promised only if (אִם) Israel will listen to (i.e. "obey") the voice of Yahweh their God. The first promise is that Israel will be "set high above" all the other nations on earth ("land") or, as verse 13 puts it, "the head and not the tail," above and not beneath (see also Is. 2; Micah 4) The content of "all these blessings" that will come upon Israel (v. 2) is what follows in verses 3-13. The word that is repeated frequently in this context is בֵּרַךְ ("blessed," which is the opposite of אָרַךְ, "cursed"). It is the only use of בֵּרַךְ in the Qal and then also only in the passive participle form "blessed are . . ." Here we have, as Driver puts it, "prosperity in every department of the national life."<sup>10</sup> The reference in this blessing to the "city" and "field" encompasses all environments of Israelite life both urban and rural. Verse 4 again conveys an obvious emphasis on fertility as it speaks of the "fruit" of three

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<sup>9</sup>Whether the curses were spoken before or after the blessings is not entirely clear. For a detailed discussion of some of the controversies about the historical setting of these blessings and cursings see Peter C. Craigie, The Book of Deuteronomy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 331 and J. A. Thompson, Deuteronomy (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), p. 265. Delbert Hillers points out in Treaty - Curses and the Old Testament Prophets (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964) that in Suzerainty treaties the curses were considered to be more important than the blessings and thus perhaps read first.

<sup>10</sup>Samuel R. Driver, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965), p. 305.

things: "your womb," "your ground," and "your cattle," both large and small (cf. Gen. 1:11, 22 and 28; Psalm 128). Verse 5 is short and simple. Two things are blessed, "your basket (see Deut. 26:2, 4) and your kneading bowl (see Ex. 12:34). Obviously God is not blessing these kitchen utensils as such but the food that is in them and the whole "fruit" of the land that they represent by metonymy.<sup>11</sup> As in verse 1, so also in verse 6 we have a comprehensive blessing in good Hebrew idiom (see also Deut. 31:2; Joshua 14:11; 1 Kings 3:7; Ps. 121:8; Is. 37:28). We might say that God is promising to bless them "coming and going." In verse 7 we again have the promise of victory over enemies and ultimately rest from war (Deut. 12:9-10). We encounter rather unique language in verse 8 as Yahweh "commands" the blessing upon Israel and yet the point is the same. The blessing "in your barns" is a blessing upon what is stored in the barns, again a blessing upon the productivity of crops. Yahweh promises to give Israel what amounts to a veritable Midas' touch (  $\text{בָּרַכְךָ}$  in construct with  $\text{בָּרַכְךָ}$ ; see also Deut. 15:10). The remainder of verse 8 together with verse 11 serve well as a summary statement for the general force of all the promises of blessing and prosperity upon Israel in the Pentateuch. "He (Yahweh) will bless you in the land which Yahweh your God gives you (emphasis added)."

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<sup>11</sup>Claus Westermann, Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 45-46.

"Yahweh will cause you to abound in prosperity" ( יהוה יגדלְךָ or in the Samaritan Pentateuch יגדלְךָ ) in the three areas of fertility mentioned earlier and again "in the land which Yahweh swore to your father to give you" (v. 11). From these paradigms of the promises of prosperity in the Pentateuch we can see an obvious pattern.

1) They are always concerned with fertility, from a son for Abraham to an abundance of children, crops and cattle in the promised land. The promises are very material and "this-worldly."

2) They are rooted firmly in the promise of the land. This latter observation helps to explain the former. Yahweh promises to bless Israel with a land of their own and to prosper them in that land. If the land is in fact a real place, then it must also hold real blessings. As we shall see, though the land holds a crucial theological significance yet it remains a real, earthy, piece of turf at the same time. Even though the land has theological aspects,

. . . it is nevertheless still soil and territory. It has theological aspects, but it is not thereby an ethereal thing, nor should it be spiritualized. Land is real. . . . Life with Yahweh takes place here and now. . . . his interest extends to the total man and to the total society and to the total environment. . . . The promise of land and all it signifies keeps the entire design rooted in history and is thoroughly reality related.<sup>12</sup>

This being the case we should not be surprised at the material nature of the promises of prosperity in the Pentateuch.

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<sup>12</sup>Martens, God's Design, p. 115.

3) These promises are open-ended in terms of time. There is no time-limit such as, say, "in five years this will happen." The promise is simply that these blessings will come to a faithful Israel in the future, sooner or later.

4) The picture of the promised future is extravagant, Edenic, almost hyperbolic (e.g. no vicious wild animals, Lev 26:6; no disease, Ex 23:25; seasons overlap one another, Lev 26:5; etc.) The emphasis of this picture is on how radically different it will be in the future from the way it is now. The future is not simply like today only better, rather it is very different. There is more of a discontinuity between now and then than there is continuity. Clearly this is a new creation, not a millennial kingdom on earth, not merely a return to the Old Testament land.

5) Finally the promises of prosperity are First Article of the Creed blessings and should be distinguished from God's promises of forgiveness and relationship with Him. The latter are Second Article blessings or salvation blessings which come through the means of grace, that is through the Gospel in word and "sacrament" (i.e. circumcision and sacrifice). This is evidenced by the fact that the means by which God promises to bless faithful Israel are not the means of grace but rather normal, natural means. For example, in order to have abundant crops He promises to send more rain (Lev. 26:4; Deut. 28:12). The abundance of

cattle and children will apparently come about through the normal sex-act. Thus we have here the Creator God providing for and blessing His creation. If God were promising salvation blessings, coram deo promises received through the means of grace, then they would have to be fulfilled all at once. But as coram hominibus, natural means promises, they can then be fulfilled in degrees and can be put off or postponed until a future date. One cannot be a little bit forgiven now, and then more later or a little bit God's person now, more later. One either has Second Article blessings or one does not. First Article blessings however can and will come in degrees of time and space.

#### The Recipient of the Promises

The recipients of the promises of prosperity in the Pentateuch were the individual Patriarchs themselves. In Genesis 12 Yahweh says specifically to Abram, "I will make you (masculine singular) a great nation and I will bless you (masculine singular)." Likewise the promises to his descendants Isaac (Gen. 26:3) and Jacob (Gen. 28:15) include masculine singular pronouns. Yet, even as the promises are directed specifically to the individual Patriarchs, the context clearly includes a much wider audience. Abraham is to be the father of a whole nation of people who will be "great" and "blessed." So also there is a clear emphasis on the "descendants" of Isaac and Jacob as ones who will enjoy the gift of the land and the blessings that go along with

it.<sup>13</sup> The fact is the promises of prosperity are always corporate. When they are given to specific individuals it needs to be understood that they are members of the covenant community. In the sermonic style of the book of Deuteronomy, for example, there is clearly no consistent pattern or rule that one can readily identify why Moses uses sometimes singular and sometimes plural pronouns. As he speaks about the covenant with its blessings and cursings he speaks to all of Israel as the "Church" which at the same time never ceases to consist of individual believers.

Much more readily apparent is the fact that those who will benefit from the promises of prosperity are the faithful. In Genesis 12 we see that the blessings promised Abram are his only if he trusts in God, takes Him at His word, and obeys God's command to go to the land of Canaan. In Genesis 15:6 we read that Abram "believed" Yahweh and it was credited to him as righteousness. In Genesis 17:1 Yahweh calls Abram to "walk before Me and be blameless" and then later to keep the covenant and be circumcised. Genesis 18:19 explicitly states that only a faithful Abraham and his faithful descendants will receive the promised blessings, only those who "keep the way of Yahweh and do righteousness." Abraham proved himself to be such a man of faith and obedience when in Genesis 22 he was willing to sacrifice his

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<sup>13</sup>Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament, pp. 34-35.

only child. In verses 16-18 we read that because of this Yahweh declares He will "surely bless" him (אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה). Similarly in Exodus 23:21-22, 25 we find the condition of faithfulness in order to be a recipient of the promised blessings. The many promises of prosperity found in the blessings and cursings sections of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are prefaced with very prominent "if" clauses. The danger that we will observe in the next section is to interpret these to be causal (i.e. "because you are faithful, I will. . ."). But at this point let us just note that they are descriptive of the kind of person who will benefit from the promised blessings, the faithful person.

With this in mind we would also do well to clarify the purpose of the promises of prosperity with regard to the faithful person. Even though it is true that the good things promised the faithful in the promises of prosperity are First Article of the Creed things rather than Second, that they are coram hominibus rather than coram deo, nevertheless they are a part of a gracious promise from God to His faithful people. This being the case we can expect that the promises of prosperity would function similarly to the promises of salvation in the Gospel. They engender trust in these promises, a trust that is rooted in justifying faith. They also then sustain that trust and motivate the recipient to "harken to Yahweh's voice."

In Genesis 12 the promise Abraham received from God brought him into the covenant relationship. Mitchell sums up the purpose of the blessing promises quite well.

God's purpose in issuing the patriarchal blessing promises is to call the patriarchs into a close relationship with himself. The promises of blessing are to motivate the patriarchs to obey God, leave their residences and enter into a covenant with God. By blessing the patriarchs God moreover intends them to acquire fame and renown. Others will seek to establish good relations with the patriarchs so as to acquire blessing too.<sup>14</sup>

Something similar is true of the promises of prosperity found in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 and yet they are also different. Mitchell continues by saying that "the main purpose of the covenantal promises is to motivate the Israelites to continue to observe the stipulations of the covenant already made, rather than to draw them into a covenant."<sup>15</sup> The promised prosperity was an integral part of Yahweh's covenant with His newly redeemed people right from the beginning. It was included into the description of the free gift of the land that was coming to them as Yahweh's gracious gift. As part of the gospel promise to them the prosperity was included in the object of their faith and it was the thing that kept them going through the wilderness.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 36.



### The Grace Alone Context of the Promises

To argue that God chose Abraham because of his own merit or worthiness would be to argue against the Scriptures themselves. St. Paul writes in Romans 4,

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (see Gen. 16:6).

Abraham is frequently a case study to demonstrate justification (and election) by grace alone, through faith alone, apart from the deeds of the law. But even without the New Testament commentary, the Old Testament text itself does not erect a stained glass portrait of the Patriarchs. The promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 virtually comes out of nowhere. Then afterwards it is clear that he still remains a sinner. Twice he tried to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister and he took the fulfillment of God's promise into his own hands and had a son, Ishmael, by his wife's handmaiden, Hagar. Then in Genesis 26 we read of how Isaac was no better but also tried to deceive the Philistine king Abimelech into thinking that his wife, Rebekah was only his sister. This habit of deception was certainly passed on to the patriarch, Jacob, who is known as the most "devious manipulator" of all. "He lies, cheats, deceives and gives ample evidence of being anything but the ideal person for

God's purposes."<sup>16</sup> We are not surprised to know that the Patriarchs were sinners for indeed "Yahweh looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. . . . There is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:2-3). This being the case we are forced to conclude that the choosing of the Patriarchs and the promises of prosperity that were made to them were not because they deserved it but by grace alone.

In addition to the coram hominibus promise of fertility, Leviticus 26:9 also alludes to what we have already noted to be a coram deo promise (namely the relational element of the Patriarchal and covenantal promises). Although this is not what could be called a "promise of prosperity," it is important for a proper understanding of the promises of prosperity to realize that God does not promise prosperity to just anyone but rather to those for whom He is God and those who are His people (Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12). Yahweh's continuous refrain to the Patriarchs, "I will be with you" rings true for Israel as it did for their ancestors (Gen. 26:2,24; 28:15; 46:3; Ex. 3:12).

The same can be said of Israel in the wilderness. It is clear throughout the Pentateuch that the promises of prosperity that Yahweh made to the people of Israel were in fulfillment and confirmation (□'רן) of the promises that

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<sup>16</sup>Ronald M. Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), p. 41.

he had already made to their fathers by grace alone (Deut. 6:10-12; 8:18). This Hiphil of  $\square\text{ױ}\text{ך}$  is frequently encountered in the covenant blessing texts that we have examined thus far.

The interchange of karat 'cut' and heqim 'establish' with berit 'covenant' is not due to different sources, J/E and P respectively, but due to the semantic difference between initiating or making (karat) a covenant and confirming or establishing (heqim) one.<sup>17</sup>

In actuality, when Yahweh promised prosperity to Israel it was not anything new, as in a "new covenant." Instead it was a confirming and remembering of an old covenant made with their fathers and kept by God in His faithfulness and covenant love ( $\text{ׁו}\text{ׁו}\text{ׁו}$ ) and really despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

The emphasis of the Sinai material is overwhelmingly clear, it was God's gracious choice in which Israel's peoplehood was rooted. . . . Any possibility of merit on Israel's part is carefully rejected. Once again, it is a matter of grace alone, a totally one-sided matter.<sup>18</sup>

Deuteronomy 9:5-6 makes this all abundantly clear.

It is not because of your righteousness nor the integrity of your heart that you are coming to possess their (the Canaanites) land but it is because of the wickedness of the nations that Yahweh your God is driving them out from before you in order that He might confirm ( $\square\text{ױ}\text{ך}$ ) the word which Yahweh swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. Know then, it is not because of your righteousness that Yahweh your God gave you this good land to possess for you are a stiff-necked people.

<sup>17</sup>Laird R. Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), " $\square\text{ױ}\text{ך}$ " by Leonard J. Coppes, p. 2:793.

<sup>18</sup>Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament, p. 34.

Even a casual reading of the wilderness experience will reveal just how grumbling and "stiff-necked" the Israelites were. From verse 7 on Moses reminds Israel that they have done nothing but upset Yahweh from the day they left Egypt. So why the gift of the land and all the abundant prosperity that is promised with it? Deuteronomy 10:15 answers that question simply by directing us to the love of Yahweh for the fathers and for their descendants after them. The gift of the land in the face of Israel's unworthiness "emphasizes the free act of grace on Yahweh's part. . . . The initiative was with God and arose out of His love for His people."<sup>19</sup> In Das Gottesvolk in Deuteronomium (1929), Von Rad makes a similar comment.

It seems paradoxical, but Israel was perhaps never more pious in its receiving gifts directly from God's hands than it was in Deuteronomy in receiving these material things. Neither in the times before nor in subsequent periods do we find this simple, unselfconscious willingness to accept earthly gifts; not as rewards of spiritual qualities but unmerited, accepted from God simply for their own sake. From this we are to understand that Yahweh's blessing which brings about the whole physical life of God's people, is the gift of salvation par excellence.<sup>20</sup>

This brings us to the apparent conditionality of the promised prosperity. It is untenable to hold to the above sola gratia context in which the promises of prosperity were given by Yahweh to His people and also at the same time hold

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<sup>19</sup>Martens, God's Design, p. 102.

<sup>20</sup>Westermann cites this quotation on page 46 of Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church.

to a mechanical system of retribution, as if Yahweh were saying, "if you are good enough I will promise to bless you." Prosperity theology, as Hobart Freeman put it, teaches that "there are no exceptions to the promises of God" and He "will fulfill all that He pledged Himself to do, if we meet the conditions."<sup>1</sup> The Bible teaches, however, that God blesses Israel out of His covenant love for them, not because they were bigger or better (see Deut. 7:7-8). As was noted previously, the "if" clauses frequently found in the context of the promises of prosperity in the Pentateuch are simply describing who will benefit and not why they benefit. The apparent condition is not the criterion for entering into blessing but for remaining in God's covenant favor. The "who" is the faithful people of God, given the gift to be faithful by grace. The "why" is purely because of Yahweh's gracious covenant love for His people.

Thus we realize that there is a vital link between love for God and love for His commandments (Deut 6:4-9 and John 14:15, 21). In this sense Craigie is essentially correct when he writes,

The prosperity, health and success of the Israelites would be contingent upon obedience; . . . This did not mean that obedience merited divine blessing, but rather obedience maintained the proper covenant relationship with God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hobart Freeman, Charismatic Body Ministry (Warsaw, IN: Faith Publications, n.d.), p. 33; see also pp. 37-39.

<sup>2</sup>Craigie, The Book of Deuteronomy, p. 180.

Craigie's choice of the term "maintain" is not the best. A better way to say it would be obedience demonstrated the existence of a proper covenant relationship with God. Good works are merely an evidence of the faithful believer being in a covenant relationship with God not the means to that relationship. Faith faith alone keeps one in God's gracious favor, not the keeping of commandments.<sup>23</sup>

It is not necessary to apologize for the conditionality of the covenant promises or to imply, as does Higher Critical scholarship, that such conditionality is a later addition (and corruption) of the original unconditional blessing.<sup>24</sup> Instead we need to see the apparent conditionality of the promises of prosperity as a description of faithfulness to the covenant which Yahweh initiated ("cut") and established (קָטַץ) by grace. Yahweh had already called and chosen the Patriarchs. He had already promised them prosperity. He had already redeemed them from the bondage in Egypt and was leading them to a promised land, miraculously and graciously blessing them along the way. In short, He has prospered and is prospering them already. Then only after all this does Yahweh say, therefore, this is how you are to live as My people (Deut. 6:21-25). This same

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<sup>23</sup>For a further elaboration on this point see the Apology of the Augsburg Confession XX:12-13 and the Solid Declaration IV:33.

<sup>24</sup>Westermann, Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church, p. 49.

point is evident in the 10 Commandments. The first "word" is really "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt" (Ex. 20:2). To use dogmatic terms, it starts with the Gospel of grace and what follows is third use of the Law. The keeping of these commandments does not earn deliverance but is rather a response to it.

The 10 Commandments is not what Israel had to do in order to become the people of God, but what she was obligated to do as the people of God. . . . The whole matter is not one of achievement, but one of allegiance.<sup>21</sup>

Another case in point is Deuteronomy 10 and 11. In chapter 9 and the first part of 10 Moses reviews the failures of the Israelites and demonstrates to them that it was clearly not on account of their merit or worthiness that Yahweh has delivered them from Egypt and brought them to the door of the promised land. Then in 10:11 Moses reminds them that Yahweh had commanded them to go in and possess the land and that they can do this only because He swore to give it to their fathers. If it were not for this promise long ago, they never would have made it this far. Then it is in the very next verse (v. 12) that Moses asks, "Now, Israel, what does Yahweh require of you?" The point is that God had already planned, promised and was in the process of carrying out what He promised long before He gave the "conditions." The land that Yahweh's people receive from His hand is a free gift but it is also tied to Him and to His relationship

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<sup>21</sup>Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament, p. 35.

with His people. Those whom he loves and those who love Him and show it in their lifestyle are the recipients of the blessings of the land. The land has already vomited up the unbelievers that resided in it previously (Lev. 18:24-28) and thus in order for Israel to inherit and enjoy the land their convictions and conduct must conform to Yahweh's commands as the owner and the giver of the land.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise the blessings and cursings sections of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 also bear this out. Yahweh's frequent reference to Himself as Israel's God and they as His people (Lev. 26:9.11-13, Deut. 28:1-2) is very much covenant language and is more a forensic declaration than it is a description. Yahweh has sworn an oath of faithfulness to His people and called them by His name (Deut. 28:9-10, see also Num. 6:22-27).

Those who remain faithful Yahweh blesses because of His gracious covenant love (רַחֲמֵי). But Israel has the freedom to fall away and those who do Yahweh curses because they have rejected Him. Their rejection and their unbelief brings upon themselves the consequent curses. It is their fault and not God's. However, just the opposite is true for the faithful. Those in Israel who remain faithful must give

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<sup>26</sup>The Sabbath and Jubilee festivals were constant reminders to the people that Yahweh continues to own the land and that they are only stewards of it who bear social and economic responsibilities. See Martens, God's Design, pp. 110-115.



all the credit to God who sustains their faith by the power of His word.

#### The Foretaste of Fulfillment

If we were to look again at the nature of what is promised to faithful Israel in Exodus 23:20-31, Leviticus 26:1-13, and Deuteronomy 28:1-14 one would have to wonder if Israel ever really did experience any of these things that were promised. The answer is yes, but not without some qualification. It is a necessary part of the interpretation of Old Testament promises of prosperity to recognize that, to one degree or another, there are foretastes of fulfillment experienced by the recipients of the promises in their own life time. There will always be some sense in which they are fulfilled in the here and now.

As we look at the Patriarchs we can see that Abraham was personally wealthy (Gen. 13:2) as was his son, Isaac (Gen. 26:12-14) and his son, Jacob after him (Gen. 30:43). The book of Exodus opens with a description of an Israel living in Egypt who obviously experienced a great deal of fertility (1:7). At the time of the exodus itself, even the common people of Israel were able to leave with great spoils that were given into their hands by the Egyptians (Ex. 12:36). When the initial spies listed in Numbers 13 entered the promised land they truly had a foretaste of its prosperity as a single cluster of grapes from the valley of Eshcol required two men to carry it (13:23-24). Even after

their unbelief caused them to wander in the wilderness for forty years before entering the land, still Yahweh protected and provided for them, often quite miraculously, with food and water and even clothes and sandals that did not wear out (Deut. 8:3-4).

#### The Future Fulfillment

But nagging questions still remain. Were all the diseases removed from Israel (Ex. 23:25)? Were there any miscarriages or was there any barrenness among the faithful (v. 26)? Were all the enemies driven out of the promised land (vv. 28-31)? Were the borders ever as wide (v. 31)? How about this new garden of Eden existence (Leviticus 26)? What about all those crops and cattle? What about that supremacy over all the nations (Deuteronomy 28)? On the contrary we observe time and again that the Patriarchs and their families as well as later Israel at the time of the exodus did not experience a complete fulfillment of the promises of prosperity in their own life times but rather complete fulfillment or consummation of the promises was always put off and awaited a future time. Right away after Yahweh promises to bless Abraham in Genesis 12:2, verse 10 tells us that there was a famine in the land and Abraham had to go and sojourn in Egypt. Furthermore the Canaanites and Perizzites and other native peoples still lived in the land promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:6 and 13:7). Abraham saw very little real claim to the promised land in his own lifetime.

He even had to buy the cave of Machpelah in order to bury Sarah for he was "a stranger and sojourner" in the very land promised to him (Gen. 23:4-20).<sup>21</sup> Later we see that the wells that he dug were stopped up by the Philistines after his death (Gen. 26:18). Isaac also continued to have trouble with this most basic claim to the land (Gen. 26:19-22). It was really only in Genesis 37 that Abraham's grandson, Jacob could be said actually to have lived in the promised land rather than just sojourning there. It has been said that the promise of the land is "open ended" and "fulfilled by degrees" and this can be seen right away in the lives of the very first recipients of the promise of it.<sup>22</sup>

The fulfillment of the promise of descendants was not immediately evident either. It really did not have its first indication of fulfillment until Isaac was born some twenty-five years after Abraham first received the promise. The lack of immediate fulfillment is made painfully obvious by the whole Hagar and Ishmael affair after eleven years of continued infertility. Likewise both Rebekah and Rachel found themselves to be barren for a number of years before they saw the first taste of the fulfillment of the promise of many descendants (Gen. 25:21; 29:31).

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<sup>21</sup>Walter Zimmerli, The Old Testament and the World (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), p. 68.

<sup>22</sup>Martens, God's Design, pp. 100-102.

As it is described in Genesis 15, perhaps even within the covenant to Abraham itself, we have built-in indicators of not only blessing but also adversity. Stöckhardt makes this interesting observation in his Die biblische Geschichte des Alten Testaments,

Die Verheissung vom Besitz des Landes Canaan verbürgte Gott dem Abraham durch ein Zeichen. Die Thiere, die Abraham auf Gottes Geheiss zerstückte, sind Bild des Volks Abrahams, des Volks Israel, welches übel geplagt, wie zu Tode gemartert werden soll. Die Raubvögel, welche auf die Aase herab fuhren, sind Bild der Feinde Israels. Israel wird vierhundert Jahre einem fremden Volk dienen. Auch die grosse Finsterniss und der Schrecken, welcher Abraham übersiel, deutete auf die schwere Trubsal, welche dem Samen Abrahams zugedacht war. Dass aber schliesslich eine Feuerflamme zwischen den Stücken hin und her fuhr, damit zeigte Gott an, dass er zulesst seinem Volk zu Trost und Hülfe erscheinen, dasselbe aus dem fremden Land ausführen und in das Land der Verheissung einführen werde. Hiermit ist überhaupt das künftige Geschick des Volks Gottes, der Kirche aller Gläubigen vorgebildet. Der Weg der Kirche Gottes geht durch Dunkel und schwere Leiden, schliesslich aber durch Nacht zum Licht, durch Leiden zur Herrlichkeit."

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"Gerhard Stöckhardt, Die biblische Geschichte des Alten Testaments (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1896), pp. 20-21. "The promise of the possession of the land of Canaan was guaranteed by God to Abraham by a sign. The animals which Abraham cut into pieces according to God's command are pictures of Abraham's people, the people of Israel, which will be sadly plagued, and which will be tortured to death. The vultures which came down upon the carcass are a picture of Israel's enemies. Israel will serve a foreign people for four hundred years. Also the great darkness and horror which overcame Abraham demonstrated the burdensome affliction which the seed of Abraham is destined to have. But finally a burning torch went here and there between the pieces thereby showing that God will ultimately appear to His people to comfort and help them. They will emerge out of this self same foreign land and they will enter into the promised land. Along with this in general, is the coming destiny of God's people, the church, the model of all believers. The way of God's church goes through darkness and severe suffering, but finally through darkness to light, through sorrow to godliness."

Although his exegesis may be considered somewhat allegorical, it nevertheless is quite evident from the covenant regulations in the Pentateuch that Israel's breaking of the covenant would result not in a blessing but a curse. Indeed the very language of "cutting" a covenant and the splitting of the animal in two may imply that unless Israel keep the covenant they too will be divided asunder (see Jer. 34:18-20).

In general, the Patriarchs and early recipients of the promises of prosperity did not live in a rose garden any more than believers do today. We read of their family problems (Gen. 26:34-35; 27:46). We read of Jacob taking the blessing into his own hands, resulting in his fleeing for his life, having nothing but a stone for a pillow and then after wrestling with God coming away crippled (Gen. 28:11; 32:25, 31; 47:9). We read of Joseph sold into slavery. One famine after another troubles the land. The Israelites spend hundreds of years of hardship and forced labor in Egypt. The covenant regulations have to make provisions for those in need because "the poor will never cease to be in the land" (Deut. 15:11).

All these things mentioned here and more have led David Clines to speak of the "non-fulfillment" of the various elements of the promises to the Patriarchs and to the nation of Israel as a whole. Often the promise

except for the slightest degree . . . remains no more than a promise, a promise that can be threatened even

thwarted by its recipients. Only the fact that it is Yahweh's promise can create any confidence in its continuing fulfillment.<sup>10</sup>

Still further evidence of the "open ended" character of the promises can be seen in the fact that God's promises to Abraham and others were eternal and everlasting (e.g. Gen. 13:15; 17:8; 49:10). Such an eternal quality obviously can never possibly find complete fulfillment or consummation in this finite world. Furthermore the geographical boundaries of the promised land are almost hyperbolic, at least in terms of what the historic nation of Israel ever actually possessed (see Ex. 23:31; Deut. 34:1-4; Joshua 1:4, etc.) The Eden-like existence that is promised in Leviticus 26 could hardly ever be experienced in this fallen world. The amount of descendants that were promised to the Patriarchs is innumerable. The number of grains of sand and stars in the sky is always an open number. All these things work together overwhelmingly to assert the fact that the promises of prosperity that God gave as a part of His covenant with the Patriarchs and their descendants cannot be considered fulfilled, at least not completely, in the lives of the immediate recipients but rather they await a future fulfillment that transcends what they can enjoy merely in this lifetime. Consequently, as Walter Zimmerli points out and as von Rad also substantiates, we find "the entire

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<sup>10</sup>Clines, The Theme of the Pentateuch, pp. 45-46, 60. See also Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament, p. 35.

Deuteronomistic account of the giving of the law . . . cloaked with an air of expectant waiting . . . an overtone of hope which is yet unrealized . . . " Like a flowing brook, there will be times when the promise seems to come to rest and find fulfillment but as it fills a quiet backwater it then continues to flow "toward a distant goal which lies beyond itself." Zimmerli continues:

Every Old Testament event receives increasingly the character of a fulfillment which in turn presses the question of deeper fulfillment. All Old Testament history, insofar as it is history guided and given by Yahweh's word, receives the character of fulfillment; but in the fulfillment it receives a new character as promise.<sup>31</sup>

At the root of prosperity theology is the basic problem that Israel had in the wilderness. They lost sight of the goal and of the fact that they were not yet in the promised land. They wanted it all in the wilderness. But God's will for Israel has always been for them to wait for what is in store in the future. In other words, the promises of prosperity always remain just that, promises. It always requires a certain amount of faith in things not seen to believe that they will come true. They are never quite completed or exhausted.

#### The Former Prophets

#### The Nature of the Promises

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<sup>31</sup>Walther Zimmerli, "Promise and Fulfillment," in Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics, ed. C. Westermann; trans. and ed. J. L. Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), pp. 109-112.

Continuing our examination of the Old Testament promises of prosperity we come to that section of the Hebrew Bible called the Prophets, first the former and then the latter or writing prophets.<sup>11</sup> Just as in the Pentateuch so also here, the Former Prophets concern themselves largely with the gift of the land, its conquest and maintenance. There are not many prosperity promises in this part of the Old Testament but those that are found here are deeply rooted in the context of the covenant, the covenant land and life in that land.

As the book of Joshua opens, Yahweh speaks to Moses' successor, Joshua, informs him of Moses' death and then commissions him to lead the nation of Israel into their promised land. The entire land from the Mediterranean sea to the Euphrates River and from the Sinai desert to Asia Minor in the North is promised to them (1:4), every place on which their feet tread (1:3). Obviously these lands were already in the possession of others but Yahweh promises to dispossess them and to give them and their land into Israel's hands and then to provide rest from war afterwards. The land is to be a place of rest from the fear of enemy attack (Joshua 1:13-15, 11:23; 21:43-45; 22:4 - ׀׀׀ , ׀׀׀).

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<sup>11</sup>The historical books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther for our purposes have been included in with the Former Prophets as in the English Bible, rather than with the Writings. Furthermore no promises of prosperity, as we have defined them, are found in these books.



With the assurance of His promise, they are to be strong and courageous as well as completely faithful to Yahweh and to the covenant regulations they have received from Him through Moses. In this way they are promised success (ל'צֹלָחַ) wherever they go and prosperity (רַבְרָבָה) along the way. These and other promises of prosperity made to Joshua and Israel are very "Deuteronomic" in tone and largely are a reflection of what God has already promised in the Pentateuch.

The other context in which promises of prosperity are found in this part of the Scriptures are in songs; Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:4-9 for example and also in a psalm of David that is recorded in 2 Samuel 22. Typically such songs praise Yahweh's goodness and deliverance in the past and speak of Him continuing it in the future. In Hannah's song she praises Yahweh as the Sovereign God who "kills," "makes poor" and "brings low." but at the same time He is the One who "makes alive," "raises up," "makes rich," and "exalts" (1 Sam. 2:6-8). The Pentateuchal themes of fertility and productivity of crops and children are again evident (v. 5). Likewise in 2 Samuel 22 David sings of how he called to God in trouble (v. 7) and He delivered him from his enemies (v. 18). With Yahweh on his side he can practically leap tall buildings with a single bound (v. 30).

Another connection is found between the promises of prosperity in the Former Prophets and those in the Pentateuch when it comes to the covenant king and his kingdom. When David wants to build a "house" in which Yahweh would dwell and be worshipped, Yahweh turns the tables on David and promises to build a "house" for him and "establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). Solomon clearly benefits from this promise to his father. His material wealth and power, as it is described in 1 Kings 4:20-28, were admired around the world (1 Kings 10).

#### The Recipient of the Promises

As we observed in the Pentateuch, so also here the recipient of the promises of prosperity is at times an individual, as was the case of the Patriarchs. Many times, however, the recipient is also corporate Israel. In either case, again, the individual never stands as an island but is part of the corporate Old Testament "Church." Individual recipients would include men like Joshua (Joshua 1:5-9) and Caleb (Joshua 15:6-15). David and Solomon of course stand out as kings who were promised great blessings and also experienced many fulfillments of these promises to one degree or another in their lifetimes. Even when Israel as a whole was under God's judgment, through the ministry of God's faithful prophets, Elijah and Elisha, some individuals in particular enjoyed God's gracious provision and miraculous intervention (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4-6).

During much of the history of Israel that we read about in the Former Prophets there was not an experience of general prosperity by the entire nation, especially after the division of the kingdom. But archeological findings show that even under the reigns of some wicked kings such as Omri and Jehu the nations enjoyed political and economic prosperity that rivaled that of David and Solomon.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the Scriptures do not attest to their prosperity reflects their theological rather than purely historical perspective. Furthermore, their prosperity is not in fulfillment of the promises of prosperity because these promises are directed to faithful Israel. When the wicked prosper it simply is a result of God's long suffering and the fact that in His goodness and forbearance He sends rain both on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45).<sup>14</sup> In order to find a Biblical description of national economic and political prosperity under a godly ruler we must turn primarily to the accounts of the unified Monarchy under David and especially Solomon (1 Kings 5:5; ET 4:20).

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<sup>13</sup>Omri's fame in the world of his day is attested by the Assyrian's reference to him on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. See also the Moabite Stone from Dibon. The New Unger's Bible Handbook (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 1984 by Merrill F. Unger gives a brief description of each.

<sup>14</sup>See Mitchell's entire section on "Statements of God's Benefaction..." in The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament, pp. 65-67.

As was the case in the Pentateuch, so also here in the record of the conquest and early monarchy those promised prosperity are faithful, obedient Israel. This is very clear in the promises found in the book of Joshua. Joshua 1:8 promises prosperity and success only if Israel will not let the word of God depart from their mouths and will meditate on it day and night, being careful to do everything written in it. The story of Achan's sin in chapter 7 demonstrates that God meant what He said. On the contrary when Israel was successful at defeating their opposition it was because Joshua and Israel had left "nothing undone of all that the Yahweh commanded Moses" (Joshua 11:15; 22:2-5). Joshua recognized the reason behind his success and therefore he urges Israel to remain faithful to the covenant and to obey God after he is gone so that they can continue to prosper (Joshua 23-24).

#### The Grace Alone Context of the Promises

In the midst of all the success and wealth that marks this period in Israel's history there can be no doubt that it came to Israel only through the gracious blessing of Yahweh Himself. Israel was frequently reminded that it was Yahweh who fought their battles and defeated their enemies that they might have the promised land (Joshua 10:25; 25:10). Just as He had promised to dispossess the peoples of Canaan in the Pentateuch, so He keeps His promise. When Yahweh is with them they are victorious as for example with

the Battle of Jericho in Joshua 6 but when He is not with them, fighting for them, they are routed as was the case with the Battle for Ai in Joshua 7. Sometimes Yahweh seemingly goes out of His way to make a special effort to demonstrate to Israel and to her enemies that it is He who is fighting for Israel and not Israel herself. This is evident in Gideon's army of only three hundred men who defeated the Midianites merely by making a large clamor and shouting "a sword for Yahweh and for Gideon" (Judg. 7:20b, emphasis added).

The theology of the wars of the lord is extremely simple and consistent: God does it all. This is a prominent setting of grace in the Old Testament. In holy war, God does it all. The deliverance of His people, (whether from spiritual enemies or physical ones,) comes by His grace alone.<sup>11</sup>

Once Israel possessed the promised land they had a hard time holding claim to it. The Philistines, Ammonites, and other Canaanites continued to be thorns in the eyes of Israel (Joshua 23:13) but only because of their own wickedness and "doing what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 2:11-15; 21:25). Nevertheless, Yahweh demonstrated His gracious love and faithfulness to His promises by raising up judges to deliver them even though they had brought the trouble upon themselves (Judg. 2:16-18).

When Israel wanted a king like the rest of nations (1 Sam. 8:5) God graciously allowed it and the kind of men

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<sup>11</sup>Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament, p. 24.

He selected to rule also demonstrates Yahweh's gracious choosing. Saul was a virtual nobody (1 Sam. 9:21); David was the "runt of the litter" (1 Sam. 16:7-12); Solomon was the son of David's illicit marriage (2 Sam. 12:24-25); and yet by grace Yahweh chose them and in this way magnified His place as Israel's true King.<sup>36</sup>

One would have to grant that in the Former Prophets (especially if we include the Chronicles) there is a prominent theology of retribution, sometimes with almost mathematical precision.<sup>37</sup> Yet when interpreted in the total Biblical context the ultimate conclusion is again that all the credit for the prosperity goes entirely to a gracious God. As in the Pentateuch, so also here in the Former Prophets, the over arching theme of the grace of God must be seen as backdrop for the promises of prosperity. Israel's life in the land, just as much as the gift of the land itself, is a result of God's gracious blessing rather than a reward for good works (Joshua 21:43-45; 24:1-15). Just because Israel could and did forfeit the blessing of the land by their unfaithfulness and disobedience does not mean that they earned the same blessing of the land by obedience and good works.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>37</sup>Horace D. Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), pp. 625-626.

### The Foretaste of the Fulfillment

The experience of prosperity in the history of Israel as recorded in the former prophets was occasionally quite widespread and literal. One could say that Israel at this time experienced many solid foretastes of the complete fulfillment of these promises. The most obvious foretaste is found in its success at winning the promised land. In Joshua 21:43-44 there is an explicit connection between the promises to the fathers (וַיְבַרְכֶם אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֵינוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֵינוּ) and possession of the land by Joshua and the people of Israel. Not only did they take possession of it but they now lived in the land. The term "sojourn" (גֵּר) is no longer used here but now they are "dwelling" (יָשָׁבוּ) in the land. Furthermore Yahweh has given them "rest on every side," and again, as He had sworn to their fathers (Ex. 23:14; Deut. 3:20; 12:9, 10). This rest is made possible by the fact that "Yahweh gave all their enemies into their hand." The extent to which this was true is controvertible however. This is not meant to cast doubt on the text so much as it suggests that what is described here is true more in principle than it is empirically. It is not so much a complete fulfillment of the promises to the fathers as it is a foretaste (much land is still left unsettled according to Joshua 13-21), albeit a solid foretaste (Joshua 21:45; 23:14).

Furthermore and no less dramatically, we see a foretaste of the complete fulfillment of the promises of prosperity in the history of Israel at the time of the united monarchy. No one would deny that this was perhaps, the golden age of Israel's history. Under David Israel was free from Saul's bumbling and was ruled by a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14-15). Under Solomon, as it had been for Israel under Joshua's leadership, they enjoyed rest on every side with neither adversary (  $\text{שָׂטָן}$  - Satan!) nor misfortune (  $\text{צָרָה}$  ) (1 Kgs 5:18; ET 5:4). But even more so at this time than in Joshua's day, Israel was a well established nation that was very settled into the land and had an international reputation. In 1 Kings 4:20-28 we have what appears to be the literal fulfillment of the promises of prosperity to the Patriarchs and a description of wealth and prosperity unrivaled in the past. After recounting the list of Solomon's officials, we read that "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand of the seashore (cf. Gen. 22:17, interestingly a few manuscripts also supply  $\text{וְשָׂטָן}$  for a perfect match) and they were eating, drinking and rejoicing." The geographic area of Solomon's empire comes very close to that which Yahweh promised in Exodus 23:31. He had "shalom" all around him (1 Kings 5:4; ET 4:24). The inventory of Solomon's possessions is awesome: 40,000 stalls of horses; 12,000 horsemen; and an ivory throne overlaid with gold. We read that he made silver as common as a stone in Jerusalem and cedars



as plentiful as sycamore trees."<sup>11</sup> When the Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's wealth she had to come and see it for herself in order to realize that indeed Solomon was "greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom" (1 Kings 10:23). During the reign of King Solomon, Israel experienced a degree of prosperity that was not only unprecedented in their history but also to be rivaled only in the eschaton. According to 1 Kings 5:5 (ET 4:25) "Judah and Israel dwelt in safety, every man under his vine and his fig tree from Dan to Beersheba." The same existence is promised in Zechariah 3:10 at the coming of Yahweh's servant, the "Branch" and Micah 4:4 at the dawn of His peaceful reign in which the swords are hammered into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks (see also Jer. 23:6).

#### The Future Fulfillment

All this being the case, one would almost conclude that the eschatological age broke into Israel's history at the time of the united monarchy and that in this time the promises of prosperity found their ultimate consummation. However all one need do to see that this is not the case is

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<sup>11</sup>There is some textual dispute over the number of stalls of horses Solomon actually had as well as a discrepancy with 2 Chron. 9:25 which reads 4,000 rather than 40,000. For a detailed description of Solomon's wealth and a thorough analysis of the same see Keil-Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), vol. 3: I & II Kings - Esther, pp. 51-54. Note also Alan R. Millard, "Does the Bible Exaggerate King Solomon's Golden Wealth?" Biblical Archaeology Review, May/June 1989, pp. 20-34.

to take a closer look at the text and see that for all the prosperity Israel experienced in the days of the former prophets, they also had their share of adversity, both as a nation and in the experience of many righteous individuals as well.<sup>19</sup>

Already in the book of Joshua we read that there is much land still to possess, land that was allotted but not settled yet (Joshua 11:22; 13-19; 23:4-5). In Judges 1:19 we learn that by Yahweh's power Judah took possession of the hill country but they could not drive out those who lived in the valley because those who dwelt there had iron chariots. Whereas Caleb was successful in taking Hebron, the Benjaminites on the other hand were unsuccessful in driving out all the Jebusites from Jerusalem (Judg. 1:20-21). Beginning with verse 27 of Judges 1 we have a whole list of places not conquered and people not dispossessed. Granted this demonstrated Israel's lack of obedience (Judg. 2:2) but it also demonstrates a lack of full and literal fulfillment until some future date.

Although at times we may be tempted to put the blame for the lack of fulfillment on Israel's failure to live up

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<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 4:8-9 reminds us that if Israel had experienced complete rest at the time of the conquest and thereafter there would be no need for Joshua and others to speak of another awaited day for the fulfillment of the promises of prosperity. But the fact is they did speak of another day to come. "There remains therefore a sabbath rest for the people of God" (emphasis added). We see this fact borne out initially in the history of the conquest.

to their side of the covenant, we also must concede that even in the lives of faithful and obedient Israelites there was not always a complete and literal fulfillment of the promises. Faithful David is a case in point. Although he was righteous and ruled with justice (1 Sam. 8:15) nevertheless he had family problems and his rule was plagued with conspiracies against him and the continual threat of the Philistines and other hostile neighbors.

Even apart from these problems and troubles in David's life the very nature of the promises of prosperity to David indicate that they could never be completely fulfilled in his own lifetime or in his own person. In the covenant that Yahweh made with David in 2 Samuel 7 it is really the descendant of David who is promised great blessing. We recognize that these promises were at least partially fulfilled in David's son, Solomon. But even Solomon in all his glory does not entirely fulfill the promises. The eternality of the promise demands that we look beyond Solomon. In order for David's "house" and the throne of Solomon's kingdom to be established and endure forever, one "greater than Solomon" must sit upon the throne of David (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31).

It was noted earlier with regard to the recipients of the promises of prosperity in the former prophets that often a great deal of material prosperity and political success was experienced by Israel under the reigns of kings

such as Omri and Jehu. As was noted earlier these were wicked, disobedient kings and thus both Israel and Judah as a nation were far from covenant faithfulness at the time of this experience of prosperity. We have here an indication of the fact that the literal and complete fulfillment of not only the promises of prosperity but of the curses for unfaithfulness as well is put off until some future date. In this period of Israel's history there is no question that they experienced some fulfillment of the promises but it is equally as evident that we must look farther to find a complete fulfillment.

### The Latter Prophets

#### The Nature of the Promises

The unity of the Biblical message is again evident as we now take up the Latter Prophets. Theologically the Prophetic corpus is little different than the Pentateuch which precedes it. Consequently promises of prosperity found in the Prophets reflect to a large extent the promises to the Patriarchs and the promises that were part of the covenant. A good example of this, yet only one among many, is Isaiah 51:1-3 and 11. In these four verses Isaiah proclaims to Israel a future restoration from Exile in terms of a return to what was promised to the Patriarchs. They are to "look to Abraham . . . and to Sarah . . ." as their spiritual parents who were called, blessed and made to multiply. In fact Isaiah predicts a return to the pros-

perity enjoyed in the days prior to the Patriarchs, even a restoration of paradise in which the dry and desolate (  $\text{הַיַּבֵּשׁוֹת}$  ) wilderness of Israel will be like Eden, "the garden of Yahweh." The return to the land of Israel will be a return to a joyful and prosperous land where there is joy and gladness (  $\text{שִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן}$  ) and the complete absence of groaning and trouble.

Whether this restoration of paradise is predicted before the exile as with Isaiah, or afterwards as with Zechariah 8:13-15 and Malachi 3:10, either way the language of blessing is similar to that of the Pentateuch and then some. There is often a sense in which the restoration promises of prosperity go one better than the original promises of prosperity. The new is a resurrection after the old has died, giving it in effect a glorified body, like the old, yet better.

Beyond "not my people" there can come by analogy to the old covenant the promise "you shall be my people." Beyond "no heir upon David's throne" there can be analogy to the old oracle of Nathan the promise, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David (Ezek. 34:23) and beyond "the Lord has forsaken Jerusalem" there can come by further analogy to the old description of the destruction of the temple the promise, "the name of the city henceforth shall be, the LORD is there" (Ezek. 48:35). In each case the use of the "new" establishes an analogy to the old, but at the same time, the new is in some way better or greater than the old.<sup>40</sup>

The new is new but in a sense it is not totally new either. Compare the New Covenant which is really the Old Covenant

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<sup>40</sup>Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament, p. 78.

fulfilled (Jeremiah 31) or the return from the exile as the new exodus (Jer. 23:7-8; Isaiah 43). Thus the new is what we might call today "New and Improved." The content is basically the same but the concept is expanded.

As was evident thus far in the Bible, so also here in the Writing Prophets, the promises of prosperity are covenant promises and continue to reflect both the contents and the context of the original promises to the Patriarchs as part of God's covenant with them. It has been established already that the prosperity promised to the Patriarchs and to the people of Israel through Moses was always prosperity in the land and we see that the same is now true in the writings of the prophets.

Amos concludes his prophecy with a picture of abundant land for the returned remnant. The ruined cities will be rebuilt that Israel might live in them. Not only do they plant vineyards and gardens but similar to the picture in Isaiah 60:21, Yahweh will plant Israel in its own land and "they will not again be uprooted from it."

Likewise we turn to the second half of Isaiah. In these prophecies of restoration we are sometimes "hard put to distinguish the temporal and the eschatological."<sup>1</sup> As Isaiah describes the prosperity of the remnant that returns it appears perhaps to be a better description of the new

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<sup>1</sup>Horace Hummel, "A Survey of and Approach to the Problems of Old Testament Eschatology," (STM thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1952), p. 20.

creation than the old land. Isaiah 60:21 not only promises righteous people along the lines of the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:33-34 but also a righteous land for them to live in and in fact "possess forever." As in the days after the exodus, so also after the exile, it is not enough to travel in the land. God promises it as an eternal possession. Yahweh's branch must be "planted" (cf. the vineyard of Isaiah 5). His people cannot prosper without being rooted and nourished in the land of blessing.

Ezekiel 34 changes the metaphor but makes the same point. The people of Israel need more than even Yahweh Himself as their Shepherd. They need their "own land" where Yahweh can bless them and feed them "rich (𐤍𐤏𐤔 - lit. "fat") pasture on the mountains of Israel" (Ez. 34:14, see also Jer. 31:12-14:25).

Not only does Israel require a place of blessing in which God can bless them but Yahweh also needs a place to live among them in order to bless them. In Zechariah 8:3 Yahweh declares that He will return to Zion, and He will dwell (𐤍𐤏𐤔) in the midst of Jerusalem and it will be called the city of Truth, the Mountain of Yahweh of Hosts, the Mountain of Holiness." This will indeed be a place of prosperity as people live to a ripe old age and the streets are filled with the laughter of children but only because Yahweh dwells in their midst. It is a holy land when the holy Lord takes up residence there. It is a place of bless-

ing when a gracious and giving God lives there with His people.

In attempting to characterize the prosperity which the prophets promise we see that it is again very similar to the way prosperity was defined hundreds of years earlier by the Pentateuch. The concept of prosperity in the abundant promised land has already been demonstrated but now additional details can be added. Again, these things are always evident within the context of the covenant land. They are, a) material abundance, b) numerous descendants, and c) rest from enemies.

A. The promise of material abundance in terms of agriculture (crops and cattle) is frequently a part of nearly all the writings of the prophets. Beginning with Isaiah we have for example chapter 30:23-26 of his prophecy. Because of their unfaithfulness and breach of the covenant, Yahweh had deprived Israel of rain causing their agriculture, and consequently their food and supplies, to suffer. But His promise is if they will return to Him, He will again "give rain" and the result then will be healthy crops and abundant produce (גִּשְׁשׁוּ) גִּשְׁשׁוּ) not only for them but also for their livestock. Verse 26, however, takes us clearly into an eschatologically and even otherworldly context as the moon will be as bright as the sun and the sun seven times brighter. We will return to this point later but for now suffice it to say that we have here a description of very



prosperous agriculture, both crops and cattle, which was for the people of this day the equivalent of a great deal of money or material wealth. In fact in Jeremiah 50:19, healthy cattle are so equated with the prosperity of Israel that Yahweh promises to bring "Israel back to his (masculine singular) pasture and he (masculine singular) will graze on Carmel," and so forth. In Ezekiel 36 there are many references to restoration in terms of reinhabited cities and recultivated and producing fields. In verse 35 the whole scene is described as a return to the garden of Eden. In Joel 2 Yahweh promises to make up for the devastation brought about on the land by the "swarming, creeping, stripping and gnawing" locust (v. 25). His concern is not only for the people but for the land (v. 18). Added to the picture of prosperity is "new wine and oil" (vv. 19, 22, 24). Verse 26 sums it all up with "and you shall have plenty to eat" (Qal imperfect plus infinitive absolute).

Just as Israel was metaphorically cattle in Jeremiah 50, so also on occasion Israel is metaphorically crops. In Amos 9:15 Yahweh will "plant" Israel in their own land that they might flourish and promises that they will never again be "uprooted from their land." The preceding verses also describe an abundant harvest of crops. The picture described is a harvest so plentiful that it takes an extraordinary amount of time to bring it in. "In each case the sower of seed for the next crop will find the reaper of the last crop

still at work. The abundance will be so lavish that it will seem as if the very mountains and hills are themselves oozing with sweet wine."<sup>41</sup>

For our final example we briefly take up Malachi 3:10-12. We do well to see this passage in the same context as those above. Obedience, whether it be bringing the tithes or keeping other aspects of the covenant, is again promised the reward of prosperity in terms of healthy crops and abundant produce. Although some try to argue that Malachi promises spiritual blessings rather than physical blessings because the "windows of heaven" will be opened, as the text stands, Yahweh's promise is more likely that the "windows of heaven" will "pour out" (הִרְקִיטוּתִי - Hiphil perfect of רָקַט) the blessing of rain rather than some etherial spiritual blessings. The fact is there is really little difference between this promise of prosperity and the others which the Scriptures contain and thus it needs to be interpreted in the same way as other promises of prosperity in the prophets.

B. Another frequently seen aspect of the prosperity promised to Israel by the mouth of the prophets is the promise of children and many descendants. In Old Testament culture to be childless was a curse and to have children was a blessing. Much has been made of this with regard to the

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<sup>41</sup>J. A. Moyer, The Day of the Lion: The Message of Amos, Prophet in an Era of Affluence (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1974), p. 205.

"great nation" promised to Abraham and the Patriarchs and we will encounter still more of it in the Wisdom Literature. In our modern age of over population and zero population growth it may be difficult to appreciate these promises. Nevertheless, in Isaiah 49 a land "too cramped for the inhabitants" (vv. 19-20) is seen as a great blessing. Again we have here a restoration of paradise. Granted, the Garden of Eden only had two inhabitants, nevertheless God's will was that this man and this woman "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth . . ." (Gen. 1:28). This same language is echoed in Jeremiah 23:3 and although it uses the metaphor of a flock it still is Yahweh's promise that His remnant will be fruitful and multiply (וַיִּבְרְכוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ). In Ezekiel 36 there is another change of metaphor, but again with the same point. This time Ezekiel prophesies to the land and "the mountains of Israel" to put forth their branches and bear fruit. Yahweh is for them and they shall be cultivated and sown. Yahweh promises to multiply on these mountains both man and beast better than ever before and they will "increase and be fruitful" (וַיִּבְרְכוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ). The mountains of Israel will never again bereave Israel of children (vv. 12-14).

C. The idea that Ezekiel 36:15 records of the land of Israel never again hearing insults from the nations or bearing disgrace from her neighbors introduces us then to the final aspect of the nature of the promises of prosperity

in the Prophets and that is the promise of security and rest from enemies. Again even this new aspect of the nature of prosperity is rooted in the covenant land of blessing. Whether the prosperity be defined in terms of crops, cattle, children or security, these blessings are always received and enjoyed in the land God has given to Israel as a free gift of grace.<sup>41</sup> The last verse of Amos also leaves us with the promise that Yahweh will "plant Israel in their own land" and then adds that element of protection and security in the land in that they will never again be uprooted from the land by enemies or foreign invaders. Likewise in Isaiah 11 we have the combined promise that the wild animals will be tame and compatible with each other in the eschatological land and also that under the leadership of the "Root of Jesse" all the remnant of Israel that is scattered throughout the world will be reclaimed and the enemies defeated once and for all. Furthermore there will be no more infighting between Ephraim and Judah but there will again be a united kingdom. All totaled Yahweh promises a wonderful land of rest and peace. In Ezekiel 28:25-26, Israel will live in the land in safety (נִשְׁבְּטוּ). Without the threat of enemy attack they are free to build houses, plant vineyards, and enjoy the goodness of the land. Just as Yahweh fought for Israel in the original conquest of the land after the Exodus, so also it is Yahweh Himself who will "punish" all

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<sup>41</sup>Martens, God's Design, pp. 237-246.

those enemies of Israel who "scorned them" (see Ezek. 25:6, 15). According to Joel 2, if Judah will repent and "rend their hearts and not their garments" (v. 13), then Yahweh will "be zealous for His land" (v. 18) and remove the enemies attacking from the North and drive them out (v. 20). In chapter 4 (ET 3) Yahweh in effect dares the nations to attack Judah saying, "beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears" (v. 10) and "come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat" (meaning "Yahweh judges" - v. 12) for "the day of Yahweh is near in the valley of decision" (v. 14). However in Micah 4:3 and Isaiah 2:1-5 we see the calm after the storm and the promise of peace and the absence of war all around God's people. Here the nations do just the reverse and beat their "swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." Then with Micah 4:4 we have that beautiful promise of peace and tranquility which harkens back to the days of Solomon (1 Kings 4:25) when everyone will "sit under his vine and under his fig tree with no one to make them afraid." In fact under the peaceful rule of the Messiah ("My Servant, the Branch"), people will even invite their "neighbors" (לְרֵיבֵי) to sit with them under their vine and fig tree (Zech. 3:10). One cannot enjoy the bounty of the land when constantly under fear of attack, but with "no one to cause them to fear" the remnant of Israel, again using the cattle metaphor, can "graze and lie down"

(Zeph. 3:13) and dwell in safety (Zech. 14:11) and enjoy prosperity in the land.

#### The Recipient of the Promises

When we ask the question; "To whom did the Prophets promise prosperity?"; it is again evident that those who received the promise were covenant people whom Yahweh had called and chosen to be in relationship with Himself. At this point in the history of Israel they could certainly be characterized as disobedient and unfaithful people, but still God's chosen people nonetheless. God's anger over the failure of His people to keep the covenant is directed toward both the individual who fails and the corporate nation which consists of many fallen individuals. In the same way God's mercy and forgiveness applies to both the nation which He loves and chose by His grace and the individuals who make up the nation. To be sure there were some individuals who were spared the suffering of exile because of their faithfulness, for example the Ethiopian Ebed-Melech (Jer. 39:16); Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch (Jer. 45:5); and Jeremiah himself (40:1-5). Even so, the individual accountability that is stressed by the prophets (for example in Ezek. 18:2-4, 20) is paralleled with God's wrath over Israel's corporate failings. Thus what we have here is

nothing new but rather the "exposition of a principle that pervades the Bible from start to finish."<sup>44</sup>

No one can deny the fact that both Yahweh's promise of blessing and His cursing in the prophets are directed by and large at the national or corporate level. Nevertheless, as Walter Eichrodt is apt to point out, the disobedient or obedient individual can easily bring God's wrath or favor upon the whole nation, since the solidarity of the community makes all equally responsible for its welfare. One simply cannot draw clear lines between the individual and the corporate nature of the promises of prosperity in the prophets any more than one can elsewhere in the Old Testament.

There is an important qualification, however, that comes across very clearly in the prophets with regard to the national character of the promises. Whenever the prophets speak of the prosperity of Israel as a nation they always refer to only a remnant of Israel and not to the whole nation. In his landmark work, The Remnant, Gerhard Hasel makes a compelling case that in the Hebrew Bible the remnant motif was "from the start incorporated into salvation history and became gradually employed to express future expect-

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<sup>44</sup>Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh, p. 272. Hummel also points out on page 266 that "contrary to critical evolutionism, this retribitional pattern was as old as revelation itself, not a new mechanistic and corporate doctrine which Jeremiah and E (i.e. the "Elohists") must struggle to adjust in individual, personal circumstances."

tations of Yahwistic faith."<sup>45</sup> He admits that the remnant motif is perhaps most prominent in the prophecies of Isaiah and yet he shows convincingly that it is also found throughout the Bible as well as in extra-Biblical ancient near eastern sources. One such place in Isaiah that gives expression to the remnant motif quite clearly is the "root of Jesse" which becomes the seed of new life (Isaiah 11). One would expect that after Israel is cut off that this would be the end and yet a small branch begins to grow again from the older and larger stump. "Yahweh punishes to save; he destroys to rebuild. The end in view in God's purpose is not destruction but salvation."<sup>46</sup> And yet not unlike Jesus' description of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament, "wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. But how narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which lead to life, and there are few who find it" (Matt 7:13-14).

#### The Grace Alone Context of the Promises

As we consider the promises of prosperity that the Prophets proclaimed to Israel and Judah we also have to ask the question: Did Israel and Judah deserve the prosperity God was promising them? Did they merit His blessing? The

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<sup>45</sup>Gerhard F. Hasel, The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), p. 402.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 245.



answer to these questions is immediately obvious. If Israel and Judah earned anything from God, it was His wrath and judgment. This is also, of course, exactly what they received. However at the same time that Yahweh warned them, wept over them, and vented His wrath on them, He also promised them restoration and prosperity. Contrary to the typical historical critical opinion, the true and original message of the Prophets need not be and was not all bad news. God always wields His two-edged sword of both Law and Gospel. It should not surprise us that Yahweh would promise blessing to His undeserving and rebellious people for this is the very nature of His grace and Gospel. Yahweh had chosen Israel by grace and His promises are everlasting. He did not choose them because they deserved it and in the same way He will not drop them even though they deserve it. Isaiah reminded the people of this fact and pointed to the inviolability of Jerusalem and Zion. This was Yahweh's sacred space in which He chose His name to dwell. There is nothing special or meritorious in Jerusalem itself that God chose it but He selected it by grace and he was not about to go back on His word.<sup>41</sup> Israel never became good enough for God to promise her blessing, nevertheless, He does.

In that prominent prosperity promise at the end of Amos 9 we can also find elements of the context of grace in

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<sup>41</sup>Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament, pp. 51-56.

which it was given. Yahweh promises blessing to Israel and even its surrounding neighbors when and if His name has been called upon them. The attaching of His name to a nation or people is a sign of His gracious choosing and the fact that He has put Himself into covenant relationship with them. His gracious choosing continues to remain binding even after they have rebelled and do little that Yahweh would desire to put His name to. Even though Israel is an exiled people as a result of their disobedience and rejection of Yahweh and His covenant with them, nevertheless Yahweh still calls them "My people" (v. 14) and promises to restore and rebuild the aftermath of the destruction that they brought upon themselves. Along the same lines we see in Joel 2:18-27 that Yahweh's promise to take charge of "His land" once again and get everything together for His people is not because they deserve it but because He takes "pity" on them. The word here is from the root  $\text{רָחַם}$  and in this context has to do with the a feeling of compassion so as to spare someone, especially someone who is utterly helpless. The word is used of Pharaoh's daughter as she had compassion on baby Moses floating in the Nile river and is what the rich man lacked in Nathan's parable to David. Interestingly enough, Lamentations 2:2 and 3:43 describes God as not having this compassion for His people, or at least so it seemed. But this only makes Joel 2:18 and for that matter Malachi 3:17 that much more of a wonderful contrast.

Ezekiel 16 also uses the word  $\text{לִצְנִיף}$  and gives us a beautiful illustration not only of its meaning but most importantly of the gracious love and devotion that God has for His covenant people so as to reach out to them when they were completely unable to help themselves. Jerusalem is depicted as a new born baby girl abandoned by her mother shortly after birth and left for dead in the gutter still "in her blood" (v. 6, cf. Moses in Exodus 2). But Yahweh rescued her and cleaned her up and nurtured her to health. He adorned her with fine clothing and jewels only to have her become a harlot to the passers-by, even paying others to be immoral with her. She then faces the consequences of her sinfulness and her lovers abuse her. Nevertheless, Yahweh remembers His covenant with her which He made with her in her youth. He remembers that it is an everlasting covenant and that even though she repeatedly breaks it, He will never break it but instead will provide for the atonement of her sins (vv. 60-63).

#### Foretaste of the Fulfillment

One wonders from time to time while reading the Prophets how well the prophet himself understood his oracles. Did he expect that Yahweh would fulfill them all in his own lifetime? Would he ever see the "days" that "are coming?" Perhaps the prophets understood more than we often give them credit and were aware of what was eschatological

and what would occur in the near future. Those of us who live thousands of years later can look back upon the history of Israel and see that there was in fact a degree of fulfillment to the promises of prosperity that Israel experienced in her history after the Exile. While the Post-Exilic Prophets reminded Israel that things are not as good as they could be and directed them still more toward the future, the historical post-exilic accounts that we have recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah show a return of the remnant to the promised land, a rebuilding of the temple under Zerubabel and a rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under the direction of Nehemiah. Nevertheless no thinking Israelite, who had heard and could recall the messages of the Pre-Exilic Prophets would ever be able to look around him and feel that all had been fulfilled. The great joy that Israel experienced at the dedication of the rebuilt temple still must have left them with a feeling of confusion and bewilderment over the fact that there was still so much more that they had been promised that they were not as yet experiencing (see Hag. 2:3).

#### The Future Fulfillment

Regardless of the blessings that Israel may have known during the days of the Prophets, no one can deny that there was also a high degree of suffering. The complaint of Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and others over the fact that God was allowing Israel's enemies to teach her a lesson is a clear

indication of what Israel was going through. Prophets like Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel also underwent a high degree of personal suffering as well. God frequently called upon them to be a living demonstration to the people of how sad their situation really was. We can even say that Yahweh Himself suffered over His people, with His people and ultimately for His people. In this way, the "prophet's laments are a mirror of the laments of God."<sup>4</sup> Israel's life was clearly not what God intended or planned. The obedience, the covenant faithfulness, and the promised prosperity was not fully theirs. Clearly what was pictured for Israel in the Pentateuch is also in the message of the Prophets but not in the sense of what was predicted of old is now fulfilled but rather what was predicted of old still does not find complete fulfillment and is again put off until some future day--indeed the future day--the eschatological day of Yahweh. Thus the promises of prosperity in the Pentateuch become prophetic promises and even then continue to remain promises.

As we examine some of what God promised Israel and Judah through the Prophets we can readily see that not only was this prosperity not fully experienced by them but was indeed not even possible in this world but rather only in the world to come. The promises of prosperity have a dis-

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<sup>4</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 157-158.

tinct eschatological flavor to them and a clear thrust toward an indefinite future date. A good example is the geographical boundaries that the prophets give in their pictures of the restored land. Not only are these boundaries never fully attained but the possibility of their physical attainment at any time in this life is doubtful. In Isaiah 24 we have a clear reference to the final judgment of the earth and the end of the world. Then in chapter 26 we read "in that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah," and in "this song" we read that Yahweh has "extended all the borders of the land" (v. 15). The fact is, however, that Israel never knew a more vast expanse of its borders than in the days of the united monarchy under David and Solomon (1 Kings 5:1; ET 4:21). This was certainly not part of Israel's post-exilic experience but rather a promise for the eschaton. Only when the sun and moon no longer shine because Yahweh Himself is Israel's everlasting light will the people dwell in this new land and possess it forever (Is. 60:20-21). When the prophets describe the new covenant and the rebuilding of the city "as of old" (Amos 9:11) they describe it with boundaries that it never had before nor ever did see in post-exilic times. This is evident when one compares the description of the rebuilt city in Jeremiah 31:38-40 with that of Zechariah 14:9-10. Especially the description of the new temple in Ezekiel 40-42 is clearly an

eschatological picture.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, areas that were once used for Canaanite human sacrifice and the most unclean places of dead bodies will then be holy to Yahweh forever (Jer. 31:39-40).<sup>50</sup> Land that previously belonged to the Gentiles will now belong to Israel, and "the kingdom will belong to Yahweh" (Obad. 19-21). Israel will possess "all the nations who are called by My name" (Amos 9:12). Clearly Kaiser is correct when he points out that Zechariah (e.g. 10:6-10) is still promising further reassembling of Israel even after the return from the exile. "Clearly, then, the plans for a restoration to their land had not been terminated or fulfilled in the return from the Babylonian exile."<sup>51</sup> Finally when we compare this description of the new Jerusalem to the one in Revelation 21:10-23 which has no temple at all, it is obvious that anyone who tries to take all these measurements and boundaries literally is really going to have his hands full. The eschatological kingdom of God transcends human and even earthly boundaries to the

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<sup>49</sup>Ralph W. Klein, Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 92-93.

<sup>50</sup>The Masoretic text reads הַשְּׂרָאִיִּת - "terraces" but a number of manuscripts including Qumran and the LXX suggest we read שְׂדֵה מוֹת - "fields of death." Even without this however, we still have the uncontested, כָּל-הַעֵמֶק הַפְּגָרִים - "all the valley of the dead bodies," an unclean place whether they be animal or human.

<sup>51</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), p. 52.

point where the ultimate fulfillment of the promised land of blessing cannot be found in Israel's B.C. land but only in the new heaven and the new earth (see esp. Is. 65:17 and 66:22).

Not only the geography but also the degree of prosperity promised by the Prophets is explicitly greater than anything that Israel has previously experienced. As always, the antitype is greater than the type. Even in Moses' sermon to Israel in Deuteronomy 30, when he predicts their apostasy and their return to Yahweh after the captivity, he promises that Yahweh will return them to the land of the fathers and prosper them (וְהִרְבֵּיתֵם) and multiply their descendants more than their fathers. Isaiah 61:4-7 promises the remnant, which returns to rebuild the "ancient ruins" after their destruction and neglect of years of exile, the wealth (כְּבוֹד) of the nations and that "with their glory you will make yourselves fat."<sup>52</sup> Indeed Israel will receive twice as much as the nations and everlasting joy will be theirs. In Ezekiel 26, Yahweh promises blessing again on the Mountains of Israel, and in verse 11, to treat them even better than before. Finally in Haggai 2:7-9 the new temple, the symbol of the presence and blessing of Yahweh, and the glory of

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<sup>52</sup> Most English versions follow the MT and translate "in their riches you will boast" (Hithpael of כָּבֵד, see BDB p. 56.) The editors of the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (1977) recommend in the footnote on page 771 that perhaps a better reading would be וְהִרְבֵּיתֵם or וְהִרְבֵּיתֵם both from the root כָּבֵד, "to be fat," rendering the translation, "with their glory you will make yourselves fat."



this new temple will be even greater than that of the previous temple before the exile. Yet we know that, historically speaking, Israel did not enjoy greater peace and prosperity after the exile than before. Zerubabel's temple was not greater than Solomon's. Instead the people of Israel are forced to look beyond the present to the future, eschatological fulfillment. Present realities are but a shadow of that which is to come.

In short, the peaceful prosperous existence in the land after the exile that the Prophets promise to Israel is a return not just to the former glory of the united monarchy but to the former idyllic paradise before the fall, a restoration of paradise that is clearly unlike anything the world has know since the Garden of Eden (Ezek. 36:33-36). Those who look for the fulfillment of the promises of prosperity in a millennial kingdom on earth need to recognize that what is promised here is not a restoration of anything that Israel has ever known in their history. Not only will everyone "sit under his vine and under his fig tree" (Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10) but animals that are now carnivorous will graze and be harmless vegetarians (Is. 11:6-7; 65:25). People will live to enjoy the fruits of their labor (Is. 65:20-23). There will be no more deserted desolate places in the promised land (Is. 35:1-2; 7) and eternal joy will belong to the redeemed of Yahweh (Is. 35:10). This is a new creation, a new heaven and earth, a new Jerusalem (Is.

65:17-19; Rev. 21-22:5). The old creation that groans with labor pains (Rom. 8:18-22) will rejoice at the birth of the new creation and this new creation will nurse and be satisfied with Jerusalem's comforting breasts (Is. 66:11-13).

### Wisdom Literature and Other Writings

#### The Nature of the Prosperity

It has been typical of much of Higher Critical thought to understand Wisdom Literature as a later development from the "court circles" of Israel which amounts to what is basically common sense and has little to do with the history of salvation. While B. Duhm, for example sees Wisdom Literature as a more homey and everyday application of the message of the prophets, Hermann Gunkel, on the other hand, as well as others, sees Wisdom Literature as arising from a distinctive group of wise men in Israel and having little connection with the Torah or the Prophets and a great deal of parallel in neighboring pagan civilizations.<sup>53</sup> Von Rad reflects this same idea when he writes,

There is a deep gulf between the intellectual striving of the wise teachers on the one hand and that of the narrators, theologians of history, etc., on the other. And this is justifiable, for the intellectual activity of these two types was quite different, as were the subjects with which they were concerned. In one case, Hebrew man examined his sphere of life closely for reliable orders and gathered together whatever could be expressed in the form of rules. In the other case, he came upon Yahweh's irreversible historical decrees,

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<sup>53</sup>Ronald E. Clements, One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) p. 101.

which certainly could not be expressed in the form of rules and which, at least at first sight, were actually unique in character.<sup>54</sup>

One must grant that on the surface it appears that Wisdom Literature, especially when we discount the wisdom psalms, is not so much concerned with the love of God as it is the reason and common sense of man. "The great Biblical themes of the election of Israel, Sinaitic covenant, Exodus and conquest, promises about people and land, sacrifice and temple are almost totally absent."<sup>55</sup> But the fact is these things are implicitly rather than explicitly in Wisdom Literature as a part of the canon. The lack of distinction between sacred and secular is not because everything is secular but rather because "everything is sacral!"<sup>56</sup>

As Elmer Martens understands it, the history of salvation and Wisdom Literature are like two roads running parallel to one another in the same direction. This being the case, there are going to be some common elements and a number of them are evident when we examine the nature of the promises of prosperity in the Wisdom Literature. A major link that can be traced throughout is again the land. Using Psalm 37 as an example, Martens notes, "In Psalm 37, a wisdom Psalm, those who do good, the righteous, the meek,

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<sup>54</sup>Gerhard Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1972), p. 289.

<sup>55</sup>Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh, p. 395.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 396.

the trusting ones, will dwell in the land (vv. 3, 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). Such a passage indicates the harmony of design between the history of salvation and Wisdom Literature.<sup>11</sup>

As was mentioned in the introduction, most of the time that promises of prosperity are found in the Writings they are found among the Wisdom Literature. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the land is also found in some psalms which are not necessarily considered to be "Wisdom Psalms." For example, Psalm 25:12-13, the "man who fears Yahweh, "the righteous man," is described as one who "abides in prosperity (אֲשֵׁר) and his descendants will take possession of the land." In Psalm 85 Yahweh shows favor to "the land" (v. 2) and gives what is good and the "land will yield its produce (v. 13.). In Psalm 101, Yahweh's eyes are not upon just any faithful person but on the "faithful of the land" ( אֲשֵׁר) and Psalm 122 the "peace" and "prosperity" of Jerusalem (שָׁלוֹם) is again not just anywhere but within her walls and within her palaces.

There are also a number of proverbs which make an explicit connection between the righteous and the land. Proverbs 2:21 reads, "The upright (צַדִּיק) will dwell in the land and the blameless ( אֲשֵׁר) will remain in it." In contrast, however, the "wicked will not dwell in the land" (Prov. 10:30). As the text stands, Proverbs 11:31 further

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<sup>11</sup>Martens, God's Design, pp. 181-182.

supports the idea that the righteous find their reward in the "land."<sup>54</sup>

The relationship of "life" to land and wisdom materials is not at first obvious. Land is turf, but very early it acquires a symbolic meaning. For Israel land is the promised land, the good land, and as such is symbolic of a rich quality of life.<sup>55</sup>

Brueggemann is basically correct when he says "land is the fundamental blessing" and is a link to creation, "for land is the specific experience of God's well-ordered creation."<sup>60</sup> But it needs to be said that the land has a redemption, salvation connection too. In other words, beyond being a link to creation the land was for Israel a link to salvation. Wisdom Literature is naturally more "this-worldly" and "earth-affirming" but as we properly understand the theology of the land in its total Biblical context it is none the less theological (and we might add Christological).<sup>61</sup> Land is the common denominator between wisdom material and Heilsgeschichte.

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<sup>54</sup>It seems odd to the editors of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (1977) that the text should read as it does. They suggest in the footnote on page 1290 that the word  $\text{יְרֵאָה}$  should perhaps read  $\text{יְרֵאָה}$  or  $\text{יְרֵאָה}$ , and thus be translated "if the righteous are rewarded with destitution, how much more will the wicked and sinner be." The text is however the more difficult reading and the suggestion would require much consonantal change.

<sup>55</sup>Martens, God's Design, p. 175.

<sup>60</sup>Walter Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 72.

<sup>61</sup>Martens, God's Design, p. 182.

It is almost axiomatic that the prospect of dwelling in the land involved more than substituting a Palestinian address for an Egyptian address. At stake was the quality of life, . . . For the Hebrew, "life" is more than remaining alive; it is existence with gusto and enjoyment" (Jer. 2:7).<sup>62</sup>

This good life in the land which is specifically the subject of Wisdom Literature can also be broken down into the same basic elements that the promises of prosperity have contained in other places of Scripture as they are tied to the covenant, namely: descendants; crops, cattle and other material wealth; and rest and protection from enemies.

We noted above that Psalm 25:13 refers to blessings "in the land" and now we note also that a major blessing in the land is the blessing of descendants. What good is a covenant land without covenant people to dwell in it? Likewise just as Psalm 37 stresses the importance of the land as the place of covenant blessing, so also there will be descendants in that land as part of the blessing (vv. 26-37). In Psalm 112 we have yet another acrostic Psalm which speaks of the prosperity of the righteous person. Among other blessings, "his descendants are mighty in the land" (v. 2). Then there is, of course, Psalm 128. As in Psalm 1, the righteous, God-fearing man is "happy" (שְׂכֵן), but here especially over the fact that his wife is like a "fruitful vine" and his children like "olive plants" around his table.

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., pp. 175-176.

He will see his children's children in a prosperous (רִבְרוּב) Jerusalem and "peace" (שָׁלוֹם) will be upon Israel.

In a sense there is no blessing more earthly than children and grandchildren and yet these blessings are not as scandalous and patently material and this-worldly as some of the others promised to the faithful in the Wisdom Literature. If Yahweh's promise in Psalm 81:11 (ET 81:10) for example were "open wide your ears" or even "your heart and I will fill it" it would not be problematic, but "open wide your mouth and I will fill it" clearly is a promise of physical blessings that you can sink your teeth into. Yahweh will feed the righteous not with just any wheat but the "best" (רִבְרוּב) wheat (v.17; ET 16). After all, it is promises such as these that leads prosperity theologians to "claim" a Cadillac rather than a Chevy. Psalm 112:3 is worse still. Again it would be more palatable to hear only that the man who fears Yahweh will have righteousness in his house, but he is also promised "wealth" (הוֹן) and "riches" (עֲשֹׂר).

Proverbs also often uses this kind of language. Wisdom brings with it "riches" (עֲשֹׂר - Prov. 8:18) and the sinners "wealth" (רִבְרוּב - Prov. 13:22) is stored up for the righteous. The scandalous nature of Proverbs 14:24, "the crown of the wise is their riches (עֲשֹׂר)," caused the Septuagint to translate it the crown of the wise is their

"cunning" (πανουργος).<sup>61</sup> Much "treasure" (אֲשֵׁר - Prov. 15:6) is stored up in the house of the righteous and among the rewards for those who fear Yahweh is "riches" (אֲשֵׁר - Prov. 22:4). Proverbs 3:9-10; 11:25; 22:9; and 28:8, 27 also all work together to make an impressive case for the popular notion among prosperity theologians of "miracle money," and that the more you give to God the more you get back.

As great as the temptation may be, our first step should not be just to spiritualize these promises away. One cannot do this anymore than one can spiritualize the wealth and riches of Abraham or Solomon. We must deal with the reality of the fact that Yahweh promises material blessings and abundance, even the best of these things, to His faithful people.

Finally, as was the case with the promises in the Pentateuch and Prophets, so also here we find the promise of safety and protection from enemies in the land of blessing. Psalm 55:23 (ET 55:22), for example, exhorts David, and indeed all believers, to cast their burden upon Yahweh and He will "carry" it (Pilpel of לָקַח - "to hold in, contain") and will not allow them to stagger (אֲשֵׁר) around under the weight of it. In context the burden is David's enemies and even a deceitful friend (vv. 14-15) but the idea of personal

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<sup>61</sup>The footnote on page 1293 of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (1977) gives the LXX reading and then prescribes that the Hebrew instead read אֲשֵׁר אֲשֵׁר.



protection is still here whether it is protection from one person or a thousand.

In addition to protection from enemies we also find in a number of the Psalms promises of protection from natural disasters, accidents and various mishaps. We think of Psalm 66:9 and God's promise that He will not allow our foot to "stumble" ( מִיִּשְׁׁל - same word as in Psalm 55). But this also brings to mind the still more familiar passage (thanks to Satan's misinterpretation of it in Jesus' wilderness temptations), namely Psalm 91:11-12, "for He will command His angels on your behalf, to guard ( גִּבֹּרְךָ ) you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands lest you injure your foot on a stone." Although not a "Psalm of Suffering" or what S. Mowinckel called a "Krankenreinigungsliturgie," this "Schutzpsalm"

. . . in its three parts (vv. 3ff and 14ff) explains that these words of encouragement are based on the knowledge that Yahweh is to be trusted and that his refuge is not deception. On the contrary we can lean on this godly proverb which describes Yahweh's thoughts.<sup>64</sup>

This Psalm promises that the one "who dwells in the shelter of the Most High ( יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ )" and "abides in the shadow of the Almighty ( אֲשֶׁר־אֵל )" will be like an eaglet in a cleft of a very

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<sup>64</sup>Klaus Seybold, Das Gebet des Kranken in Alten Testa-  
ment (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1973), p. 164.  
". . . wie der Psalm in seinen drei Teilen V 3ff., V 9ff.  
und V 14ff. ausführt. Dieser Zuspruch basiert auf der  
Erkenntnis dass Jahwe den, der auf ihn trauend seinen Schutz  
sucht nicht enttuschen wird, und vermag sich dabei sogar  
auf einen Gottesspruch zu stützen welcher Jahwes Überlegun-  
gen zu einem solchen Fall wiedergibt (V 14-16)."

high rock (גִּבְעוֹן) is the Hithpolar of גִּבְעוֹן, see also Job 39:28), delivered from trappers (v. 3) and protected with the wings of his mother (v. 4). We need not be afraid night or day. Even though pestilences cause thousands of others to drop like flies around us, we will not be harmed. "No evil will happen to you nor will any affliction come near you" (v. 10). Verse 13 is reminiscent of the eschatological descriptions in Isaiah 11. Then finally in verse 16 long life is promised as well. Clearly this entire Psalm is one large promise of prosperity for those who trust in the Lord, and especially a prosperity which is characterized in terms of security and safety.

The safety and security aspect of the promises of prosperity in Wisdom Literature is also found in the Proverbs of Solomon. Proverbs 3:2, for example, promises long life and peace (שָׁלוֹם) to those who live wisely or Proverbs 12:21, "no harm will happen to the righteous." Not only does the fear of Yahweh lead to knowledge and understanding but according to Proverbs 19:23 so also it results in the good life (חַיִּים טוֹבִים) in which one can sleep well and not be visited with evil.

#### The Recipients of the Promises

Just as it has been commonly thought that Wisdom Literature is little concerned with the cultus or with the history of salvation so also it has traditionally been thought that Wisdom Literature speaks primarily of and to

the individual and is little concerned with the nation as a whole. As we have pointed out already this can be overstated. It is really an artificial distinction when one separates the Israelite from Israel or the believer from the Church. Artur Weiser suggests that this is especially so in the psalms where the "theocentric character of the cult of Yahweh" is especially prominent.<sup>65</sup> Again, although not a Wisdom Psalm, a Psalm of Lament like Psalm 22 demonstrates quite clearly the fact that the worship of Yahweh for having delivered the righteous individual's affliction takes place in the great assembly (לְרַבִּים) among other individuals who are gathered together to praise Him for the same. Even those who did not experience prosperity in this life, worship Him in the hereafter (v. 30) and the chorus of praise is further enriched with the addition of those yet to be born (vv. 31-32). Likewise Psalm 36:9 points out that abundance (רַבִּים) is always found in Yahweh's house as people gather to worship there together, even though it may not be particularly evident in the lives of isolated individuals.

Having said this much, however, it is also necessary to take a close look at the individuals who are promised prosperity in the Wisdom Literature. Sometimes it will be a singular individual but sometimes a group of individuals in terms of a mere segment of the population. This emphasis on

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<sup>65</sup>Artur Weiser, The Psalms (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 91.

the individual that is evident in Wisdom Literature is certainly not unique to Wisdom Literature but is found also in the promises to the individual patriarchs and in the prophetic messages of prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. "Religious individualism," then, is not anything new.<sup>66</sup> If anything, it demonstrates the fact that Wisdom Literature need not be a priori dated as late nor outside of the total spectrum of the history of salvation. The common element is that those promised prosperity whether they are individuals or groups are always believers, always covenant people.

Frequently the individual promised prosperity in the Wisdom Literature is the poor person (עָנִי - e.g. Ps. 34:6). A related term, הַיָּבֵשׁ, is also frequently found and usually translated the "humble" (e.g. Ps. 37:11). Other terms not etymologically related but nonetheless semantically equivalent include the "lonely" (יָחִיד - e.g. Ps. 25:16; 22:21; 68:6) and the "prisoners" (שְׁבוּיִם - e.g. Ps. 68:6). The semantic field includes all those who are down and out and in need of being helped and elevated by the Lord. In the Psalter these down and out people are often described as the victims of others who oppress them and in the case of Job, even of God Himself. In the writings of Solomon, however, the unfortunate person may have brought his own problems

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<sup>66</sup>O. S. Rankin, Israel's Wisdom Literature (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1954), p. 57.

upon himself through greed, laziness and other foolishness (e.g. Prov. 10:4, 15; 12:24; 13:18).

When dealing with the promises of prosperity to the "poor" in Wisdom Literature one needs to not only address the errors of prosperity theology but also of liberation theology. This deserves a more detailed treatment than this study calls for but nevertheless a few words along these lines are appropriate. Prosperity theology of the popular variety usually concerns itself only with the prosperity of the righteous and those who have a high degree of faith and positive attitude. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is concerned with the prosperity of those who are weak and helpless. Typically they see God siding with the poor simply because of their socio-economic status and regardless of their spiritual condition. In actuality, however, the Bible identifies four different categories of people. It identifies not just the rich and poor but the faithful rich and the faithful poor as well as the unbelieving rich and the unbelieving poor. When the poor are promised the blessing and aid of God it is not just because they are economically down and out but because and if they are people who are in covenant relationship with Him by grace through faith. The Gospel preached to them is not a theology of glory, of health, wealth and prosperity in this life, but rather an exalted status before God which may not find full expression until the eschaton. In fact as we can see from

many of the Psalms of David, even a wealthy king could be "poor" in a spiritual sense. This is a blessed poverty such as is found in the beatitudes of Matthew 5, "blessed are the poor in spirit" (οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι) for their's is the kingdom of heaven."

King David, unquestionably a prosperous man, nevertheless frequently refers to himself in his psalms as being poor.<sup>67</sup> In Psalm 34:7 (ET 34:6) for example, David says of himself, "this poor man (פֶּדְיָוָה) cried to Yahweh and He heard me." In Psalm 37:11 David uses the related term often translated "humble" (יִשְׁתַּבֵּחַ) in a statement which is the Old Testament equivalent of Jesus' beatitude, "Blessed are the meek (οἱ πραεῖς) for they shall inherit the earth." Interestingly, the Hebrew reads "land" (אֶרֶץ) and consequently brings to bear the theology of the land. The פֶּדְיָוָה or יִשְׁתַּבֵּחַ may never benefit from the prosperity of physical turf in this life and yet they can be rich in Christ who is our "land" of blessing and promise and in the new creation which is the ultimate consummation of the promise of the land.

Other individuals promised prosperity in the Wisdom Literature (and theologically parallel to the "poor") include "those who fear Yahweh" (e.g. Ps. 25:12-13; 33:18-19)

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<sup>67</sup>According to Albert Gelin, The Poor of Yahweh (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1964), p. 60, out of 69 times that פֶּדְיָוָה is used in the Psalms, 35 occur in psalms attributed to David. He quotes this from T. Maertens, "Le Vocabulaire des beatitudes," Lumiere et Vie, 8 (1952), p. 22.

the "righteous" (יָשָׁרִים) and the "perfect" (תְּמִימִים - see Ps. 1; 37:18-19, 29; 55:22). Again it must be recognized, however, that such persons are not deserving of the epithet "righteous" or "blameless" because they have earned this status. It is not that they cease to be sinners but rather that their sins are covered and forgiven through the blood of the covenant. Ultimately their status as "righteous" or "blameless" comes to them as a gift from Yahweh Himself who alone is "righteous" and "blameless." Jeremiah 23:5-6 says,

The days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and have insight (or "succeed" or even perhaps "prosper" - צָדִיק) and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell in safety and this is His name by which He shall be called Yahweh our righteousness. (emphasis added)

This "righteous branch" is the Messiah, Jesus who "succeeded" for us where we have failed, who gives to us His righteousness in exchange for our sinfulness, and as a result "Judah and Israel" (i.e. all true believers, God's chosen people in Christ) will be saved, live in safety, reign, and succeed in Him even as in Him they are righteous. In short, the righteous, the blameless, the wise, the poor, and so forth, when they are promised prosperity and blessing, always equal the faithful, true believer.

#### The Grace Alone Context of the Promises

Just as much in the Writings and Wisdom Literature as in any place in Scripture, we again can see that the

blessings and prosperity that God promises His people is not something they earn themselves but is a free gift of His grace. God has attached promises of prosperity to His covenant of grace with His people whether that covenant be expressed in the Torah, the Prophets or the Writings and Wisdom Literature. Frequently the latter reflects the covenant promises that were made to the Patriarchs and at the time of the exodus. It was a covenant of grace then and its reflection is also a covenant of grace. As Hans K. LaRondelle writes in commenting on Psalm 15:5, "Whatsoever steadfastness or prosperity there is in our life, we can only attribute this to God's blessing and to His keeping grace."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Wisdom Literature, with its down-to-earth perspective does not draw a distinction between sacred and secular nor between material and spiritual. The assertion is that "work and pleasure, toil and sex, and emotions of anger or impatience as well as love are all included in the realm of faith" and we might also add, grace. The Old Testament shows security and abundance to be things received as God's gifts of grace and not grasped in greed and covetousness or obtained only through secular pursuits.<sup>7</sup> The wise person is one who observes a divine plan and order in all things so that prosperity is not sought as an end in

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<sup>6</sup>Hans K. LaRondelle, Deliverance in the Psalms: Messages of Hope for Today (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impressions, 1983), pp. 86-87

<sup>7</sup>Martens, God's Design, pp. 188-189.



itself. Neither is the goal or motive found in the blessing and reward itself but rather every event in life is embraced in the plan of God (Ecc. 3:1-5, 20).<sup>70</sup>

As we noted earlier, the theme of the land as a major part of the nature of all Biblical promises of prosperity is also clearly a major part of the promises of prosperity in Wisdom Literature and other Writings. This connection with land is also then a connection with the sola gratia context of the promises of prosperity in that the land is undisputedly a gift of grace. Any prosperity promised to or enjoyed by an Israelite in Wisdom Literature as in the rest of the Old Testament, is prosperity in the covenant land which was received unmerited and undeserved from the hand of their gracious God. In fact Wisdom Literature reminds Israel that not only was the land of Palestine a free gift from God's grace but so also is all the world. "Qoheleth and Job are unimpeachable witnesses that every act of subjection of the world, every act of dominion over it, is a gift from the hand of Him who always and alone remains the Lord."<sup>71</sup> The so-called "challenge to rival" speech of Yahweh to Job in the final chapters the book asserts His creative Lordship and reveals the folly of anyone who would

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<sup>70</sup>Kaiser, Toward an Old Testament Theology, p. 179.

<sup>71</sup>Zimmerli, The Old Testament and the World, p. 52.

pretend to be the captain of his or her own destiny or the master of his or her own corner of the world.<sup>11</sup>

Looking again at Proverbs 3 we can see that there is a major prerequisite that is essential to the blessing of God and the prosperity that follows. Before obedience or faithfulness or any human action comes the favor (  $\text{ןן}$  - v. 4) and love (  $\text{ןןןן}$  - v. 12) of Yahweh. This word  $\text{ןן}$  is roughly synonymous with  $\text{ןןן}$  and  $\text{ןןן}$  and comes as close as anything to the word "grace." Overwhelmingly, its usage in the Qal stem has Yahweh as its subject and thus it carries with it the sense of "divine grace" or even "saving grace." This combination of Yahweh's love and grace for those He blesses is also found in Proverbs 8:17 and 35. Verse 35 introduces another word for grace (  $\text{ןןןן}$  ) which has the idea of being made acceptable to Yahweh and especially through ritual and liturgical regulations, through "means of grace" as it were (see also Prov. 12:2 and 15:9). Proverbs 20:9 asks a rhetorical question which indicates that no one is without sin and therefore all the righteous, upright and wise individuals found in Proverbs must also find favor with God by grace and not by personal merit. This point is also seen in Ecclesiastes where the Preacher also asks a rhetorical question, "Who can eat and who can have enjoyment with-

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<sup>11</sup>Henry Rowold, "Yahweh's Challenge to Rival: The Form and Function of the Yahweh-Speech in Job 38-39," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 47 (April 1985): 211.

out Him?" The good things in life are all a "gift" from God (Eccl. 5:18; ET 5:19).

#### The Foretaste of Fulfillment

As we have seen in the past, so also here finally in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, there is surely a degree of prosperity experienced by individuals and by the community in which they are a part. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Job, both before and especially after His sufferings. Job had a large amount of all the economic indicators of his day, 7 sons and 3 daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and numerous servants. At the end of his life Yahweh restored to him his 7 sons and 3 daughters and exactly double all the cattle he had lost. To top it all off, Job's daughters were the most beautiful in the land and he died "an old man and full of days" (Job 42:17). The other two most prominent authors of wisdom writings, David and especially Solomon, were clearly some of the most prosperous in the history of Israel.

Frequently we have in the songs of Israel not so much a promise of prosperity as an indicative statement of how Yahweh prospers people. Psalm 113 is a case in point. Yahweh is to be praised for the prospering that He does. Certainly to some extent God does give riches and wealth and He then intends for these blessings to be enjoyed as a gift

from Him (Eccl. 5:18-20).<sup>13</sup> However such prosperity will never be everyone's experience in this life and even for those for whom it is, it is only temporary. Better things and more lasting things are always still to come. In the restoration of Job's fortunes, just as with restoration of the fortunes of Israel and Judah after the exile, we have a picture of eschatological prosperity and not of a "continuing city" here on earth (Heb. 13:14).

#### The Future Fulfillment

As much as Yahweh is to be praised for His blessings to the righteous, the poor, and other recipients of prosperity in the Wisdom corpus, there are also numerous places where the suffering and lack of prosperity is evident in the same. Psalm 34:20a (ET 34:19a) clearly states "many are the afflictions of the righteous . . . "

Psalms of complaint of various kinds, disorientation, are foundational to a life of faith in God. Much piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its positiveness. As children of the enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms, it is a lie in terms of our experience.<sup>14</sup>

There are certainly numerous psalm writers who cry out in a time of suffering, pleading for God to rescue and

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<sup>13</sup>Christopher Wright, An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 82.

<sup>14</sup>Brueggemann, The Message of the Psalms, p. 11.

send prosperity (Psalm 38, 43, 55, to name only a few). Perhaps most familiar among the Wisdom Psalms is Psalm 73. This is a Psalm of Asaph who was a Gershonite Levite choir leader in the time of David and Solomon (1 Chronicles 15-16; 2 Chronicles 5; there was also an Asaph among the returnees from the exile). Twelve psalms are attributed to him. In this psalm he begins by asserting that "God is good to Israel" but then he goes on to confess that he is envious of the prosperity of the wicked and confused over the corresponding suffering of the righteous. Not unlike Job, he begins to question whether there is any benefit in being among the righteous (v. 13).

The double portion of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous weighed heavily on the minds of many in ancient Israel, who only knew of this world as the scene of God's dealings with men, and missed the clear evidence of God's sovereign justice which they desired to see in the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked. On Psalm 73 we have a simple exhortation to patience and faith in view of the prosperity of the wicked. The triumph of the wicked will be short lived, while the reward of the righteous will be sure and abiding.<sup>15</sup>

For Asaph, and for all the suffering righteous, there needs to be that reminder of God's economy that is found only in the "sanctuary," that is in "word and sacrament." Only there can the end of the prosperous wicked be perceived for the impression one gets on the surface of things may be quite different.

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<sup>15</sup>Alexander Francis Kirkpatrick, The Book of Psalms with Introduction and Notes (Cambridge: University Press, 1902), p. 431.

Although not a Wisdom Psalm, another perhaps yet more familiar Psalm of lament sung by a righteous sufferer is Psalm 22. This time we have another Psalm of David. The opening words bring the hearer immediately to the cross on which the Son of David cried out, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken Me?" With this as background, the first 19 verses (18 in ET) read as if Christ Himself is being described. The silence of God, the jeering and taunting of those who passed by, the dislocated joints, the great thirst, the "pierced" hands and feet and the casting of lots for his clothing, all vividly and graphically reflect not merely someone's suffering or even someone's crucifixion but the eye witness accounts of Christ's crucifixion as presented in the Gospels.<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly righteous David and other righteous people have felt a taste of what is expressed in this Psalm but only as types of the Righteous Man par excellence who bore all our griefs and carried all our sorrows (Isaiah 53). To look at this scene is to look at the cross of Christ and to realize that suffering may indeed be the lot of the righteous, for "the servant is no greater than the Master" (John 15:20). The ignorant unbelievers who mock at the anointed one's sufferings believe that "God would only bless Israel by means of prosperity and supremacy.

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<sup>16</sup>The translation "pierced" is problematic. The Masoretic Text reads "like a lion my hands and my feet." Numerous other manuscripts read כִּאֲרֵי - "to dig" or "tie together," the former giving some justification for the LXX ὤρυξαν and the AV "pierced."

What a fateful misunderstanding of God's way of salvation."<sup>77</sup>

As much as we would like to, no one can fully explain or understand God's ways and why He allows the righteous to suffer. Many volumes have been written on this subject and many are worth careful reading but ultimately the theodicy question is not one that can easily be answered. The "orthodox dogma of retribution" does not always fit and proves to be "inadequate as a total explanation of the phenomenon of evil and suffering, especially if it is applied in a mechanical, legalistic fashion."<sup>78</sup> It is clear that God not only allows suffering but even uses it in order to make the righteous better, to "refine us as silver . . ." even though it may mean bringing us "through fire and water," for the result will be our abundance (  $\text{ה' וְיִרְדְּנוּ -}$   
 $\text{רַחֲמֵיךָ}$  Psalm 66:10-12).

No better illustration of this can be found than that of Job. Job teaches us

that we cannot argue for the invariable connection of sin and suffering, or of righteousness and prosperity. We ought, on the contrary, to be prepared to find in many cases that the wicked prosper, while the righteous are doomed to pain . . . The most important lesson is that even though no speculative solution is possible to us, we may so know God as to be sure of His love, to be

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<sup>77</sup>LaRondelle, Deliverance in the Psalms, p. 101.

<sup>78</sup>Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh, p. 469.

content to suffer without understanding or caring to understand the reason."<sup>9</sup>

Yahweh appears in the end of the book of Job not so much to give an answer or a solution to the problem of pain or to present a rational theodicy. Rather Yahweh proclaims that He is in control and is the Master of life "and that man is even more impotent in relation to spiritual enemies (Leviathan and Behemoth)." Job is not "everyman," but neither is he a unique exception to the rule.<sup>10</sup> Rather Job is typical of the covenant man and of the experience of covenant people, albeit to an extreme. Here we have a graphic demonstration of the fact that a full consummation of the promises of prosperity is definitely more "not yet" than "now."

This same message is certainly a part of the writings of Solomon as well. The wise and righteous man, although frequently promised prosperity, is also not immune to suffering and suffering that is not necessarily self imposed. The causes of innocent suffering in the book of Proverbs has been classified into four groups: 1) false accusation (19:28; 25:18); 2) bribery and corruption (17:23,; 18:5); 3) spoliation and oppression (24:15; 29:2); and 4) family troubles (10:1; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 26; 21:9;

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<sup>9</sup>Arthur S. Peake, The Problem of Suffering in the Old Testament (London: the Epworth Press, 1947), p. 90.

<sup>10</sup>Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh, pp. 489-490. See also Psalm 44 as an interesting comparison with Job.



25:24; see also 20:20; 27:11; 30:17)<sup>11</sup> In Proverbs 3:9-12 we have on the one hand, a promise of prosperity to those who "honor Yahweh"--filled barns, vats overflowing with new wine--and yet immediately following we hear "the discipline of Yahweh do not reject, my son, or loath His reproof, for whom Yahweh loves He reproves, just as a father (does) the son in whom he delights." Solomon in his great wisdom was well aware that "discipline" (רַעוּת) and suffering are part of the life experience of those who are also promised prosperity. God's call is to be faithful to Him, even if it means poverty and hardship for this is much better than the way of evil even though it may bring temporary riches (Prov. 28:6).

Likewise Qoheleth, with its down-to-earth, "under the sun" perspective, draws a sometimes grim picture of the reality of life on earth for the righteous. Like Job, the Preacher learned that no one knows the doings of God (Eccl. 11:6). He may choose to send prosperity or He may choose to send adversity and it does not always follow that only the wicked receive adversity and only the righteous prosperity. The moral of the story for Solomon is "in the day of prosperity (הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה) be happy (גִּבְחֵי לֵב - LXX has ζῆλον) but in the day of adversity consider that both the former and

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<sup>11</sup>John Kennedy, "Riches, Poverty and Adversity in the Book of Proverbs," in Transactions of Glasgow University Oriental Society, vol. 12 (Hartford: Steven Austin and Sons, 1948), p. 19.

the latter come from God" (Eccl. 7:14). And again in 9:1-2, "the righteous, the wise, and their deeds are in God's hand, whether love or hatred, no man knows--all are before him" and anything is possible. "It is the same for all. There is but one fate (אֶחָד הַמָּוֶת - 2:14-15) for the wicked, for the good and the clean and for the one who offers a sacrifice, and for the one who does not offer a sacrifice. As the good person is, so is the sinner. . . ." Ultimately the one fate that awaits all is death. It is the great leveler. So enjoy life (9:7-9) but remember the fact that "we can't take it with us" is an indication that material wealth and happiness here and now is not God's primary concern but rather eternal "wealth" that lasts beyond this life and the death that inevitably comes to all people.<sup>12</sup>

This brings us to the final point. All indications point to the fact that the prosperity of the covenant person, while it may at times be experienced in the "now," is primarily still "not yet" and thus also greater and longer lasting than the prosperity of the unbeliever. Regardless of his temporal lot, the faithful covenant person can conclude, as did Asaph in Psalm 73:28, "the nearness of God is my good." In Psalm 49, a psalm of the sons of Korah, there is a comparison between "those who trust in their wealth and boast in the abundance of their riches" (49:7; ET 49:6) thinking that "their houses last forever" (49:12; ET 49:11)

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<sup>12</sup>LaRondelle, Deliverance in the Psalms, p. 18.

and those who are redeemed from "the hand of Sheol." Not that the latter will not die but their hope is in Yahweh and not in the things of this world. On the contrary those who, to use the words of Jesus, "lay up treasures on earth," will carry nothing away with them into the afterlife (v. 18; ET 17) and they are no better than an animal (v. 21; ET 20). It can be argued how thoroughly the Old Testament saints knew of eternal life but it is safe to say that the "glory" (Psalm 73:24) that waits the faithful certainly "rises victorious over the world of sense and appearance in the inward certainty of the reality of . . . communion with God. . . . Such a knowledge is eternal life."<sup>1</sup>

The Proverbs also contain a wealth of passages which reiterate this point. On the one hand according to Proverbs, riches can be obtained by various ways, including inheritance, diligence, hard work, shrewdness, and even by wicked means such as violence and usury, but on the other hand, these riches do not necessarily indicate the favor of Yahweh nor does their absence indicate his displeasure. Although Proverbs warns of laziness and foolish vice that can lead to poverty, it does not state that riches are the most important things in life. Righteousness, wisdom,

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<sup>1</sup>Kirkpatrick, Commentary on the Psalms, p. 438. See also Psalm 99 for a contrast of the impotence and transitoriness of wealth with God's care for the righteous and the final triumph of righteousness. Also LaRondelle, Deliverance in the Psalms, pp. 170-172, on what Asaph in Psalm 73 experienced in the sanctuary which gave him new hope.

knowledge, discretion, the fear of Yahweh, all outweigh them. In fact under certain circumstances poverty may be preferred over riches when it is in the interest of more lasting spiritual goals. Honest poverty is better than prosperous wickedness."

When Wisdom speaks in Proverbs 8:18-19, He declares that "riches and honor" come with Him but then furthermore describes these as "enduring wealth" (הֵיוֹן עֲתִיק).<sup>1</sup> What wisdom has to offer is better than gold and yield's more than the finest of silver. The wealth that Wisdom promises in verse 21 is certainly not merely temporal, earthly wealth that is here today and gone tomorrow. After worldly wealth is gone, the righteous still have a refuge when they die (Prov. 14:32). This is ultimately the context in which one must read a promise like Proverbs 22:4, "the reward of humility and the fear of Yahweh are riches (עֲשִׂיר), honor and life." There is no need then for the suffering faithful to envy the prosperous unbeliever because surely for the faithful "there is a future" (23:18) but the same cannot be said for the unbeliever. The righteous person may fall seven

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<sup>1</sup>Kennedy, "Riches, Poverty and Adversity in the Book of Proverbs," pp. 19-20.

<sup>2</sup>The word עֲתִיק is a hapax legomenon but Holiday's translation "hereditary" is inferior to BDB's "surpassing" in this context.

times but he will rise again (24:16).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>For further evidence of a blessed afterlife for the faithful see also Proverbs 14:32; 15:24; and by implication 11:7.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS

After covering to some extent the entire Old Testament, there are a number of conclusions that can be drawn with regard to the promises of prosperity. Differences have been identified in the various major divisions of the Hebrew Bible but for the most part the promises of prosperity demonstrate a certain set of basic characteristics and the identified differences are merely variations on a theme. At this point we can also now summarize the findings and synthesize the data to form some general conclusions about how to interpret the promises of prosperity. Where necessary, New Testament passages are brought in to round out the total picture.

#### The Nature of the Promises

Our examination of the promises of prosperity as they are found throughout the Hebrew Bible enables us now to draw some general conclusions about their nature. Although the exact nature of what is being promised may vary, for the most part the prosperity is described as being physical or material and is expressed in terms of what was valuable in that day, namely agricultural abundance (crops) and cattle. In addition, there is also the promise of things universally

considered valuable in any age: children; long life; good health; happiness. In short, the prosperity promised could be summed up as crops, kids, and cattle. The real insight, however, is to say that this prosperity, regardless of how it is defined, is always related to and in the context of God's covenant with His people. As Christopher Mitchell says:

Fertility, as well as the other benefits such as prosperity and dominion, are really not essential elements of blessing at all. The factor that makes a blessing a blessing is the relationship between God and the person blessed. God blesses because of his favorable attitude toward a person or group of people. A blessing is any benefit or utterance which God freely bestows in order to make known to the recipient and to others that he is favorably disposed toward the recipient. . . the reason God blessed by bestowing fertility, dominion, prosperity, etc. is that these were the most valued benefits during the biblical period. These were the benefits that people needed to thrive in their culture. By bestowing these benefits God loudly proclaimed his relationship to his people.<sup>1</sup>

Yahweh brings people into covenant relationship with Himself and then prospers them in order to demonstrate His love and faithfulness to them. He promises prosperity to those faithful to the covenant in order to show them that life with Him is the place of joy and success. The prosperity promised is then a sign of God's favor given to believers. The gifts may be material (the "visible word") or an

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher W. Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament, SBC Dissertation Series 95 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 165-166. See also p. 167 for his summary of how BRK can have the idea of God bringing people to Himself in His love and favor.

oral word but either one is a proclamation of God's gracious favor toward the believer.

Another all-important observation is related to the above. The prosperity that God promises to His covenant people in and through their covenant relationship with Him is always in some way attached to His promise of the covenant land of blessing. In the Bible the covenant "promised land" is clearly the place in which God will deal out His grace and mercy. It is the place of blessing and prosperity, the place of protection, peace and victory, all because it is the place where Yahweh "has caused His name to dwell." Yahweh did not create His people in a vacuum and expect them to enjoy a relationship with Him apart from "means." He has made us physical people and He relates to us in tangible, physical ways. In this way the land "acquires thereby something of a sacramental quality. It is the sign of the confirmation of God's love for Israel and of Israel's belonging to God." The land is the "place where Yahweh is present."<sup>2</sup> In this important "quite worldly phenomenon of the land" we have a clue as to why Yahweh chooses to make the sign of being in covenant relationship with Him physical and material prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Walther Zimmerli, The Old Testament and the World (Atlanta: John Knox Press), pp. 77-78.

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 67.



It would be wrong to spiritualize the promises of prosperity in the Old Testament just as much as it would be wrong to spiritualize the covenant land. It was a real place and it was there that Israel enjoyed real prosperity. Ultimately, however, we must also bear in mind that the material and financial descriptions of plenty and prosperity in the B.C. promised land and as part of the covenant correspond typologically (or what Elmer Martens calls "symbolically") to future realities in Christ who is our "Land." It is the nature of typology that the type is real and historical and not just abstract symbolism. Yet at the same time it is inferior to the antitype which generally is "bigger than life" and has transcendent qualities. In the New Testament the Kingdom of God is the corresponding blessing, or antitype, to that of the physical turf or "land" in the Old Testament. Christ has removed the geographical boundaries of the B.C. land and expanded them so that now the promised land is the "new heavens and the new earth." The "land" of Psalm 37:11 has a New Testament expansion in Jesus' promise that now the meek will inherit the "earth." The Old Testament promise to Abraham included the land of Canaan but in Romans 4:13 we see his inheritance expanded to the "world" (*κόσμος*). Likewise the Old Testament saints mentioned in Hebrews 11 died in faith, not yet having received the complete fulfillment of the promises made to them. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that they looked

beyond these promises of earthly land, recognizing themselves to be strangers and pilgrims on earth, and instead "desired a better, that is, a heavenly country" (11:13-16). For Old Testament people the land of Canaan was their gift of grace that they received from their loving God but for New Testament people Christ and the eternal life in heaven that we have through Him is the gift of grace that comes from our loving God (John 3:16). For Old Testament people the land was the place of abundant life; for New Testament people our abundant life is found in Christ and eventually with Him in the new heaven and earth (John 10:10). The Old Testament people found their land to be the place of rest, New Testament people find their rest in Christ and in the place that He is preparing for us (Hebrews 3-4). Elmer Martens sums it up well.

It is quite as though land in the Old Testament were a prelude in symbolic terms of a new age in which the gift, the promise, the blessings--in short, a quality of life enriched by the God-dimension--would be the possession of the believer.<sup>4</sup>

When Yahweh made His gracious covenant promises to His people He promised them "seeable," coram hominibus blessings together with forgiveness and salvation, the coram deo blessings. Our focus has been on the "seeable" blessings of the land which were and continue to be fulfilled in degrees. Here on earth in time and space there will always

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<sup>4</sup>Elmer A. Martens, God's Design (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 258.

remain a sharp distinction between what we know to be true by faith and what we experience in reality but in the eschaton this difference will be no more. As believers in Christ we fully know right now a restoration of paradise with regard to our relationship with God but in heaven we will know it fully with regard to the good life in the land as well.

#### The Recipient of the Promises

It has become evident in this study that there is little value in attempting to sort out the individual from the community in terms of who is promised prosperity at any given time in the history of Israel. The promises of prosperity as types of all the promises of God's grace in Christ are always applicable both to the individual and to the corporate body of believers which is made up of individuals in the una sancta. The individual and the whole community can be treated as a corporate personality, including the ancestors and posterity. "It is not correct to set the individual in fundamental opposition to the collectivity."<sup>5</sup>

Since the point has been made that God's promises of prosperity are covenant promises, it follows that the recipient of the promises must also be a covenant person. Others may experience prosperity but only by virtue of God's long suffering and goodness and not because of His promise. To

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

the unbeliever He promises only wrath in the end. To the covenant person, the one justified by grace through faith, the faithful person, He promises blessing.

Furthermore we have evidence that the faithful person described in the Old Testament ultimately points to the Faithful Individual. Especially in the writings of Solomon where wisdom is frequently personified, we can begin to see "divine hypostasis."<sup>6</sup> As righteousness, blamelessness, humility, spiritual poverty and the like are epitomized in a person, we are directed to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. When the faithful, righteous person is promised prosperity he or she prospers in Christ and in a sense becomes a type of Christ. Apparently even Satan understands this to some degree for he used the promises of Psalm 91:11-12 to tempt Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:6). As the wise are promised prosperity in Proverbs 8:17-19 or in 14:24 or even in Ecclesiastes 10:10, we must first see wisdom personified in Jesus Christ so that the wisdom that is rewarded is not human wisdom but rather spiritual, divine wisdom and the reward is in Christ in whom is wisdom and who is Wisdom. Even if a king is promised prosperity as in Psalm 21:1-8, we must remember that it is only because the King of kings has prospered and the very ends of the earth are His possession (Ps. 2:8). Thus in both the Old and the

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<sup>6</sup>Horace Hummel, The Word Becoming Flesh (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 402.

New Testaments, righteous people are forensically righteous. Their righteousness is not merited but rather given as a gift and is imputed by the decree of a gracious God. To both Old Testament and New Testament people alike, Yahweh says, "I have called you by your name, you are Mine" (Is. 43:1).

When believers wear the robe of Christ's righteousness they bear the image of Christ. In this way St. Paul can call the church which Christ has purchased and washed clean with His own blood the "body of Christ" (Eph. 5:25-27). The Old Testament "Church" was a type of Christ, Christ is the antitype, and now the New Testament Church continues to fulfill Old Testament prophecies until the last day. Believers then find their "wholeness consists of sharing the victory of Christ" but then also such incorporation into Christ must consist in a "readiness to share in His sufferings and a willingness to follow His example of sacrifice."<sup>1</sup>

#### The Grace Alone Context of the Promises

One of the chief problems associated with interpreting the promises of prosperity is the immediate impression that one gets that prosperity is promised as a quid pro quo reward for good behavior. Even when simple retributational theology breaks down one may still conclude that whenever a

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<sup>1</sup>Martin H. Scharlemann, Healing and Redemption (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. 112.

person does prosper in fulfillment of God's promise it is because he deserved God's favor. This of course flies in the face of one of the chief tenants of the Scriptures and of the Lutheran Reformation, namely, sola gratia, by grace alone. It is erroneous to conclude that the prosperity promised to those faithful to the covenant is reward for their faithfulness just as it is erroneous to conclude that those who receive from the Lord Jesus forgiveness, life and salvation have earned these blessings. Yahweh is the owner of all things and He reserves the right to freely distribute all things as He wills and as a sign of His favor. By the same token, however, it cannot be concluded that God's favor automatically also includes material gifts. Nor has one earned these gifts with one's own good deeds.

The Biblical view that Yahweh is Lord of all of life requires that we modify the "laissezfaire belief that the right to private property is absolute and inviolate."<sup>6</sup> We must recognize first of all that God alone has the absolute right to property and He therefore alone has the absolute right to give it or deny it to whomever He wishes by His gracious choosing. Secondly, prosperity is always an unmerited gift from a gracious God and a gift, by definition, is neither earned nor deserved.

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<sup>6</sup>Ronald J. Sider, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p. 115.

It has already been demonstrated that Yahweh uses prosperity to reveal and confirm the fact that He is in covenant relationship with people (Deut. 8:18). However, this is not the meaning of prosperity for all people. When unbelievers prosper it is because of God's providence and forbearance. God the Father as Creator and Preserver of creation opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing, good or bad, rich or poor (Psalm 104 and 145). He sends the rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45). This is simply "First Article of the Creed" theology. When the faithful prosper they too see God's providential care for all of life (First Article) but beyond that they see it in the light of God's covenant love for them as His people (Second Article). Material prosperity then is not a guaranteed sign of God's covenant love. But at the same time, when believers prosper they recognize it as coming not just from fate or luck or some impersonal "man upstairs" but rather from the God who has freely chosen them by grace and saved them with His redemptive acts. It is in this same light that the believer sees and accepts adversity for in His grace God also promises to use these sufferings for good and in fact to turn them into blessing. In this way the believer knows the highest form of prosperity. With Job the believer can confidently say, "Yahweh gives and Yahweh takes away, blessed be the name of Yahweh" and know that when one

is under the grace of God everything is blessing whether good or "bad."

The history of the world proves that wealth and prosperity can be just as much a curse as a blessing. People certainly can become pathologically obsessive about economic growth and prosperity. But for believers, any increase of material goods that God in His grace may grant is to be received as a gift and enjoyed responsibly. Never is it seen as a "reward" nor is it guaranteed now. For some believers it will be more "now" than for others. Indeed some of God's faithful servants may remain materially poor and see the fulfillment of the promises of prosperity as very "not yet." But the condemnations of the unbelieving rich found so frequently in the Prophets as well as in much of the Wisdom Literature (see for example Proverbs 15:16; 16:8; 19:1 and 28:6) demonstrate that this is far better than being one who lives in alienation from God and for whom growth in prosperity has become an end in itself.<sup>9</sup> In reality, they miss out on the best that God has to offer.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Scharlemann, Healing and Redemption, p. 112.

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed development of the now/not yet concept see Joni Eareckson and Steve Estes' book A Step Further (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 129-134. See also George Ladd's books The Presence of the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974); Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974); The Gospel of the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959); and Herman Ridderbos, The Coming of the Kingdom (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975). They also do well to note that Christians of all eschatological persuasions can agree that



Thus what at first may appear to be a reward for good deeds or a condition that must be met in order to obtain God's blessing, is, in actuality, merely accepting His grace by faith. When in the Old Testament we hear Yahweh saying "if you live in covenant relationship with me you will be blessed," it needs to be heard in the light of the New Testament promise "he who endures and remains faithful to the end will be saved" (Matt. 24:13; Rev. 2:10; etc.). The grace of God is universal and is applicable to all. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). But only those who in faith believe God's promise in the Gospel and live under His grace will benefit from it.

#### The Foretaste of the Fulfillment

It would be a mistake merely to spiritualize the promises of prosperity in the Old Testament. The history of interpretation shows that many have frequently taken this way out but it is a way that leads eventually to an unhealthy asceticism and a disdain for things physical.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly God provided His creation with a beautiful world and with the ability to enjoy it and such enjoyment is neither

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the Kingdom of God is only partly here and that more is yet to come.

<sup>11</sup>Scharlemann, Healing and Redemption, pp. 28-29, 41-42. See also J. A. O. Preus III's conclusions in "Liberation Theology: Basic Themes and Methodology," Concordia Journal 13 (June 1987).

sinful nor unspiritual but rather the intention of a loving God. The Bible teaches that God is the source of all blessing, the author of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17).

Walter Kaiser writes,

Material things, goods and natural resources are in and of themselves "good," for they are all made by God: that is the constant refrain in the creation narrative of Genesis 1--"and God saw that it was good." . . . Neither the idolatry of things nor asceticism are the Biblically approved response to wealth and possessions. . . . the Old Testament is not embarrassed by affluence. Affluence, when God is pleased to bestow it, is a gift of God--never in itself an evil. . . . The only concern that the Old Testament continually repeats is that men and women will be tempted with the gift of affluence to forget God.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than spiritualizing the prosperity promises we see them as prophecy. Old Testament promises of prosperity in a sense were prophecies of what we will enjoy in heaven. Even so we can expect to see some foretastes of these New Testament eschatological realities today. When the Kingdom of God was "near" (Matt. 3:2) and indeed "among" (Luke 17:20-21) the people in Jesus' day there were healings and miraculous provision for their needs. Glimpses of the eschaton broke into time when Jesus walked the earth. But now that Jesus has ascended into heaven is He not still with us always (Matt. 28:20)? Is the kingdom of God not also among us today in Word and Sacraments? Even so we recognize that just as poverty and disease were not completely removed from the planet when Jesus came so also today we continue to

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<sup>11</sup>Walter C. Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 210.

have "the poor with us" and, according to Jesus, always will (John 12:8). Thus in our century as well as in the first century we can expect that as a foretaste of heaven some will be healed, some will prosper, but there are no guarantees for any particular individual at any particular time. Furthermore the degree to which one may prosper in this life will always be just a token of what is to come. One's healing and even revival from death will always be only temporary. Only in the eschaton will the eschatological realities be fully realized.

Keep in mind that when we interpret Old Testament promises of prosperity as fulfilled in New Testament eschatological realities we must steer clear of two extremes. The one extreme would be, like Bultmann, to see the Old Testament as a failure and to see the New Testament as all eschatological and spiritual, that is, law versus faith. This may at first sound compatible with Lutheran theology but it is really much too etherial and platonic. It denies the reality of God's Kingdom on earth today. For one thing, God's provision and preservation of creation continues on in the New Testament (the "Kingdom of Power"). But furthermore God's Kingdom of Grace, His rule in, over and among His people through Word and Sacraments is certainly at work in New Testament times.

The other extreme overcorrects and falls into the trap of making the New Testament gospel into a social

gospel, or an economic gospel of material prosperity, which focuses exclusively on the this-worldly application of the gospel as if there is no difference between the Old Testament kingdom of God with its special earthly perspective and the New Testament kingdom of God. In the Old Testament there was little if any distinction between church and state, between sacred and secular, but this is no longer true in the New Testament. Jesus' kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36). His ultimate goal, though it is God pleasing, is not just good government and good business here on earth, but rather a people who believe in Him as Savior and Lord and will dwell with Him eternally in heaven.

Having asserted that we can expect that there will be some straightforward, here and now, foretastes of fulfillment of the promises of prosperity in the lives of some people, it also is true that believers may experience a foretaste of the fulfillment in ways that are not so obvious and may be overlooked. It is important to recognize that New Testament believers experience a significant degree of fulfillment in the *KOΙΝΩΝΙΑ* of the church. This word, sometimes translated "fellowship" and sometimes "communion," all too readily suggests a purely horizontal and humanly contrived togetherness that is sometimes considered merely having fun versus being "spiritual." But in actuality, koinonia

denotes a relationship with our fellow Christians which certainly has its base in the spiritual, in our sharing

the blessings of our common salvation, communion in the body and blood of Christ, our oneness in Christ, our participation in His body and blood, our sharing of the Holy Spirit and His gifts. Equally certainly too, does this common participation lead to a new spiritual relationship with our fellow-believers, but at the same time it creates a relationship which finds its fullest expression in the material sphere.<sup>13</sup>

In other words the typological fulfillment of the land in the kingdom of God also carries "the social and economic thrust of Old Testament ethics into the New Testament ethics (namely fellowship) of practical relationships within the new Israel, the Messianic Community."<sup>14</sup> Just as God did not will that there should be any poor among the Israelites as they entered their new land, so also in the early church (in their new "land") they shared everything in common (cf. Deut. 15:4 with Acts 4:34). The description of the church not only in Acts 2 and 4 but also in Romans 12, 15; 1 Corinthians 8-9; Galatians 6; 1 Timothy 6; Philemon; Hebrews 13 and elsewhere in the New Testament, is nothing short of lavish and abundant when it comes to the wealth of love and care for one another which frequently expressed itself in tangible ways. "Certainly the church today need not slavishly imitate every detail of the life of the early church. . . . It is the Scriptural teaching, not the action

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<sup>13</sup>Reginald H. Fuller and Brian K. Rice, Christianity and the Affluent Society (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 39-40.

<sup>14</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 99.

of the Jerusalem church that is normative."<sup>15</sup> But at the same time we dare not merely dismiss the action of the early church koinonia as being only descriptive and not to some extent prescriptive for the church today and to see in this a significant corollary with the prosperity of ancient Israel.

With all this in view, the things of this world cannot anymore be seen merely as tools for carrying out personal purposes. The purpose of religion, much less Biblical religion, cannot be simply the securing of material blessings for ourselves. "This is precisely what the old nature religions sought to do, Baal worship, fertility cults and the like . . . as Luther put it . . . God didn't mean us to be fatted hogs."<sup>16</sup> Both the prosperity promised Israel in the Old Testament, and any foretastes of fulfillment the church experiences in the New Testament, are not for selfish pleasure but for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom.

Thus when one is a member of the Body of Christ he or she is ideally a part of a caring community in which those who have share with those who do not. But also in a more profound way than mere silver and gold, the New Testament believer in Christ shares in the blessings of the new

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<sup>15</sup>Sider, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup>Fuller and Rice, Christianity in an Affluent Society, p. 13.

creation through the ministry of the Body of Christ in word and sacraments. The sacraments are the "visible word" and are the physical tokens of the kingdom among us today. They are the "blessed-eschatological" water of life, and bread of life and wine of life of the new creation, given to us already. For example, Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14 promise us eschatological, life giving waters flowing from Jerusalem (the church) which we have already benefitted from in baptism. The bread and wine of the Eucharist give us the life-giving food of the eschatological promised land (cf. Amos 9:13-15). The various eschatological descriptions of feasting with God on His holy mountain (Ex. 24:11; Is. 25:6) can convincingly be connected with the Lord's Supper.<sup>17</sup> Jesus Himself apparently does this in Luke 22:16 when He says that the Passover meal (and particularly that one which He celebrated on the night of His betrayal and used to institute the Sacrament) will be fulfilled in the kingdom of God and in what Rev. 19:9 calls the "wedding feast of the Lamb."

The new creation, the new covenant, the new exodus, has dawned "in Christ." The "signs" of this eschatological reality are not the progress of social betterment but are the means of grace as signs of God's gracious will and marks of the Kingdom of Grace (A.C. VII, XIII). The Word and Sacraments are vectors of the transcendent realities of God's grace into the world order of time/space. These "signs" are so very appropriate since they correspond with the true freedom of the "Kingdom of

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<sup>17</sup>As of this writing, The Rev. Joel Lehenbauer is currently working on an STM thesis for Concordia Seminary in St. Louis on this very topic of Exodus 24 and "The Lord's Supper's Eschatology."

Glory" in which the present "Kingdom of Grace" culminates.<sup>18</sup>

The Holy Spirit provides us with the "sacramental dimensions of our life now; He assures us that 'in, with, and under' the visible phenomena of life God is at work in Word and Sacraments to heal and save men."<sup>19</sup> The prosperity that was promised to Old Testament saints was admittedly very physical and material because it was basically the promise of the enjoyment of the covenant land "flowing with milk and honey." But the antitype of the land in the New Testament, namely the kingdom of God and the new creation that is among us already in the sacraments, is nonetheless very real, very physical and very tangible, albeit often hidden. As the promised Messiah, Jesus came to establish a kingdom, but it is a kingdom that is unlike many expected. Among its signs are not only the "mighty works" which Jesus performed but also the new covenant blood of the Suffering Servent.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Paul L. Schrieber, "Liberation Theology and the Old Testament: An Exegetical Critique," Concordia Journal 13 (June 1987): 44.

<sup>19</sup>Scharlemann, Healing and Redemption, p. 93.

<sup>20</sup>For a fine discussion of the reality of the kingdom of God today and at the same time its hiddenness and its "not-yetness" see John Bright, The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), especially the last two chapters, pp. 187-274.



Consequently there may very well be times when the believer, like Asaph in Psalm 73 or Job, lacks prosperity in his life and thus begins to have doubts.

Occasional doubt at righteous recompense (Zeph. 1:12) comes to light with the advent of the time of the monarchy. No longer is it because of the moving toward vexation over the tracing of contradiction between teaching and experience. The complaint is now over the success and the pride of the self-certain wicked person (Ps. 1:14; Jer. 12:1f) and over the need of the suffering godly.<sup>21</sup>

But it is not the responsibility of human beings to define God in such a way that we can square Him rationally against the evils in our world. Asaph learned this in the sanctuary and Job learned it from Yahweh Himself. Instead God has already defined Himself, revealed Himself in history, in His Word (both incarnated and inscripturated) and we as human beings live with and accept without fully understanding at times the discrepancies between our life experiences and the promises.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 3rd ed., s.v. "Vergeltung Im AT," by F. Horst., p. 1345. "Zum gelegentlichen Zweifel an gerechter Vergeltung (Zeph. 1:12) tritt mit der ausgehenden Königszeit die nicht mehr wegzuschiebende Anfechtung über den spürbaren Widerspruch zwischen Lehre und Erfahrung. Es ist die Klage über Glück und Hof-fart der selbstsicheren Frevler (Ps. 10:14; Jer. 12:1f) und über die Not, die die Frommen leiden."

<sup>22</sup>For a helpful discussion on this from someone who has wrestled with the discrepancies in her own life see Joni Eareckson's and Steve Estes' book A Step Further (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

### The Future Fulfillment

Throughout this study it has been evident that there is a certain amount of fulfillment to the promises of prosperity in the lives of those who received the promise. Frequently those promised prosperity experienced it to some degree in their own life time. At the same time, however, there is always a disturbing number of those who do not experience the prosperity as promised. Even those who do prosper rarely experience prosperity to the fullest extent that it is promised. "Along with the signs of God's goodness, along with sunshine, growth and prosperity, peace and protection, etc.," there are also "terrifying signs of God's wrath, such as thunder and lightning, earthquakes, floods, epidemics and hard times, wars and destruction." There is a "double manifestation of grace and wrath in the life of the Church and of individuals."<sup>21</sup>

All this leads us to conclude that the complete fulfillment of the promises of prosperity is always put off until a later time. In fact, when we understand the realities promised to be types of greater future realities then it stands to reason that the achievement of the type will still leave one longing for the fuller reality that is the antitype. The Christian experiences this kind of a tension

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<sup>21</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, 4 vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3:175.

everyday of his life. On the one hand there is the promise that in Christ all sin is washed away and "in Him we are the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). But on the other hand who can deny his present sinfulness. All Christians are simul justus et peccator (simultaneously a sinner and a saint).<sup>24</sup>

We are all new creatures in Christ. But at the same time, the old Adam lives in us and must die daily in repentance. We are new and we are still old. Like the prophetic message, it is a case of being in death and yet having a life out of death. That new life - every part of it, not just the transformed will - is ours only by grace and only through faith<sup>25</sup>

Not only do human beings remain sinners even when justified, but likewise the world in which we live continues to be sinful and fallen, reflecting more of the curse than of God's original created order. As long as those promised prosperity expect to receive that prosperity in this sinful fallen world the experience of it is bound to be dampened. Just as God sends rain on the just and unjust alike, so also the just and unjust, those promised prosperity and those promised cursing, will from time to time experience both. In the normal order of things, there is little to suggest that a particular trouble can be linked with the consequence of a particular sin. Life is not always "fair." As Habak-

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<sup>24</sup>For an elaboration of this concept see pp. 242-245 of Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

<sup>25</sup>Ronald M. Hals, Grace and Faith in the Old Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), p.83.

kuk learned, "no completely satisfying answers to the perplexities of life are possible this side of the grave."<sup>16</sup>

The typical syllogism: 1) God is all powerful; 2) God is love and good; 3) there is evil in the world; therefore God is either not all powerful or not all loving and good is a logical fallacy. The conclusions are false alternatives. God is also patient and long suffering, graciously refusing to intervene at times into human history with His wrath over evil for the sake of the lives of the sinners, giving them in effect a probation period in which to repent. Furthermore, God is just and holy and must punish the sinner as well as the sin unless that sin is covered with a blood sacrifice, that is to say unless someone else's blood is shed in substitution for the sinner, life for life. "In the last analysis it is the Lord of all life who decides that some of His children. . . must go through the school of suffering and ill health to keep them mindful of their final salvation."<sup>17</sup> Suffering and the apparent failure at times for God to fulfill the promises of prosperity does not mitigate against the existence of an all loving and all powerful God. It simply means that faith is the "substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). At the same time we can be confident that

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<sup>16</sup>Daniel J. Simundson, Faith Under Fire: Biblical Interpretations of Suffering (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).

<sup>17</sup>Scharlemann, Healing and Redemption, p. 95.

the Holy Spirit is "engaged right now in providing certain small installments of our final destiny."<sup>21</sup>

However, having said this there remains a need for a word of caution. Just because faith is the evidence of things not seen does not mean that faith can make something happen completely in the "now" when it is reserved for the "not yet." It is somewhat like sanctification. Merely believing and claiming by faith that one will never sin again does not make it possible this side of heaven. We try our best and with the power of the Spirit we do good works which flow from our faith but these are really only small installments of the perfect good works which we will be able to do in heaven.

Prosperity if not redefined must at least be read in the context of all of Scripture. In his commentary on Psalm 1, Martin Luther, in keeping with his theology of the cross, reminds us that what to some may appear to be adversity may in fact be God's blessing, albeit hidden and given with His "left hand."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>There is a great deal that could be said about Luther's Theology of the Cross and how it relates to this topic. The basic thesis is that the Christian life is "hidden," including his happiness, and therefore apprehended by faith. Only life under the cross can bring true happiness. God gets to His proper work only by way of His alien work. For an excellent and enlightening presentation of Luther's Theology of the Cross, especially as it relates to suffering, prosperity and happiness see Walther von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), especially chapter

Beware that "prosperity" is not understood as prosperity of the flesh. This prospering is hidden; it is so deep within the spirit that if you do not hold fast to it in faith, you might rather call it the greatest adversity. . . . So you are witness to the greatest of all miracles when you hear that everything prospers which the blessed man does. For what is more wonderful than that the believers increase when they are destroyed, that they multiply when they are diminished, that they overcome when they are subdued, that they enter when they are cast out, that they are victorious when they are defeated.<sup>10</sup>

The eschatological blessings that are hidden under the form of present sufferings will, however, one day be manifest in a way that no one can deny or question. In the meantime believers today must take God at His word and trust that all things do indeed work for good (Rom. 8:28); that Yahweh's chastening is an expression of His love (Prov. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:3-11); and that it is good to be afflicted (Psalm 119:71). The faithful believer is simply exhorted to have endurance and in the end he will receive the consummation of the promise (Heb. 10:36).

Perhaps in protology we have a clue to eschatology. Just as God looked at all that He had made before the fall into sin and said "this is good" and indeed "very good," so also one day God and man will be able to stand together in intimate communion, survey the "world" around them and

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III "Life Under the Cross," pp. 112 - 143.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Luther, "Works on the First Twenty-two Psalms" (1519-1521) Luther's Works, American Edition, vol. 14, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 304. (See also the Weimar Edition, Vol. 41, p. 31).

declare again this is very good. "What God gave to the world with His blessing at creation recurs again" in the pictures of hope that the Scriptures give to us. "Just as at the beginning of creation there is no sign of any ascetical withdrawal from the world which God has graciously blessed, so too there is no sign of it as the perspective closes."<sup>11</sup>

Thus the ultimate fulfillment or consummation of the promises of prosperity is yet to come. Those who interpret these promises must always be careful not to diminish the this "not yet" aspect. This is the basic fallacy of faith healing, prosperity theology, "health and wealth gospel," and the like. We need to see that the health and prosperity that are ours today by sight are like the good works that we do today. They are only partial and imperfect. There is still and always will be a "not yet" in this earthly existence. This is the theology of the cross versus the theology of glory which expects to have it all today. Any victories over sin and Satan that result in healing and prosperity for the believer today must be seen only as if it were D-Day and that we still "live in sight of an immanent V-Day which has already been achieved."<sup>12</sup> If, as was the case with Jesus' disciples of old, we too today are called upon by Him to "deny ourselves," it does not mean that the New Testament, in contrast to the Old, rejects "healthy

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<sup>11</sup>Zimmerli, The Old Testament and the World, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup>Scharlemann, Healing and Redemption, pp. 86-88.

realism" but rather in the "presence of the revelation of Ultimate Reality all less than ultimate realities such as family and business ties have to be seen for what they are-- not ultimate but penultimate realities."<sup>33</sup>

As fallen sinners in a sinful fallen world we are bound to see some divine promises only partially realized. What we experience in the "now" often points us to what is "not yet." In the kingdom of God we walk by faith not by sight. But it is important that we recognize that there is a difference between the vertical promises (coram deo) and the horizontal promises (coram hominibus). Those vertical promises which have to do with one's relationship with God and eternal salvation are true today and completely. Forgiveness and eternal life are the believers present possession in full. As Paul Speratus wrote in his great reformation hymn, "Salvation unto us has come by God's free grace and favor."<sup>34</sup> These are promises that we truly can "claim" even when we do not feel as if they are true or do not see physical evidence. But the coram hominibus promises (i.e. sanctified life, perfect health, perfect fertility, material

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<sup>33</sup>Fuller and Rice, Christianity and the Affluent Society, p. 25. The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, 4 vols., ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 4:73-74 contains a helpful discussion about the theology of reward beginning with the teaching of Jesus and continuing throughout the New Testament. Sometimes they speak of reward in this life but largely they refer to the hope of future reward in heaven.

<sup>34</sup>See Lutheran Worship hymn number 355 (emphasis added).



abundance, peace with one's neighbor, etc.) are experienced partially now and completely only in the eschaton when the believer is no longer part of the old fallen world. Claiming that these things are true in this life when they are clearly not is not faith but fantasy.

In the meantime we recognize with St. Paul that this present suffering is still not "worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed" in heaven (Romans 8:18).<sup>35</sup> Regardless of what life is like today, in Christ we have God's promise that in the end He will right all wrong and there will be no more pain, death, mourning, or tears (Revelations 21:4) for there will be no more curse (Revelations 22:3-5). In that great "Day of Yahweh" there will be no more need for sun or moon and there will be no more need for promises.

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<sup>35</sup>Although St. Paul does not use the word "heaven" in this context it is important to understand that the fulfillment of the promises of prosperity is not found in a millennial kingdom on earth. This is a "Jewish opinion" (Augsburg Confession XVII) that is based on the failure to see Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in Christ and His Church but instead looks to the Jews and to the physical turf of Palestine as the place of fulfillment. It is based on a literalistic interpretation of Scripture and fails to see the typological interpretation of the Old Testament in the New. A helpful article in this regard is "Israel: The Land and the Scriptures" by Richard C. Oudersluys in Reformed Review 33 (Fall 1979): 3-15. See especially p. 11-14 about the new Israel and how "Eretz Israel falls into silence in the New Testament not because there it is spiritualized or literalized, but because it is fulfilled and replaced by the new earth." (p. 14).

APPENDIX

The following is a listing of the promises of prosperity found in the Old Testament. (English Bible verse numbers)

|                       |                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Gen. 12:1-3, 7        | 16:5-11              |
| 13:15-16              | 20-21                |
| 15:5, 7, 15           | 22:26                |
| 16:10                 | 25:13                |
| 17:1-8, 20            | 33:19                |
| 21:18                 | 34:4-10, 15-22       |
| 22:17                 | 37                   |
| 26:1-5, 24            | 68:6                 |
| 27:28-29              | 72                   |
| 28:13                 | 81:10                |
| 32:9-10, 12           | 84:11                |
| 35:10-12              | 85:12                |
| 48:14-20              | 91                   |
|                       | 92:12-14             |
| Ex. 3:8, 17, 21-22    | 103:3                |
| 15:26                 | 112                  |
| 20:12                 | 113:7-9              |
| 23:20-31              | 115:12-16            |
|                       | 128                  |
| Lev. 26:1-13          | 132:13-18            |
|                       | 144:12-15            |
| Deut. 1:11            | 146:7-9              |
| 4:40                  |                      |
| 5:16, 33              | Prov. 2:21           |
| 6                     | 3:2-10, 16, 33       |
| 7:12-24               | 4:10, 22             |
| 8:1, 7-10, 18         | 8:18, 21             |
| 11:8-11, 13-15, 21-27 | 10:3, 6, 22, 27      |
| 28:1-14               | 11:25, 31            |
| 29:9                  | 12:21                |
| 30:5, 9, 15-16        | 13:21-22, 25         |
| 31:20                 | 14:11, 24, 32        |
|                       | 15:6                 |
| Joshua 1:7-9          | 17:8                 |
| 10:25                 | 19:23                |
| 24:4-15               | 20:13                |
|                       | 22:4                 |
| 1 Sam. 2:4-10         | 24:3-5               |
|                       | 28:8, 16, 20, 25, 27 |
| 2 Sam. 7:9-16         | 31:11                |
|                       |                      |
| 1 Kings 8:30-61       | Eccl. 10:10          |
| Ps. 1:1-3             |                      |

Is. 3:10  
30:23-26  
33:24  
35  
40:31  
49:19-20  
51:1-3, 14  
58:10-12  
60:5-7, 9, 11, 16-20  
61:5-7, 9  
65:17-25

Jer. 23:3  
31  
50:19

Ezek. 28:25-26  
34:11-31  
36:8-15, 28-38

Hosea 2:14-23  
14:4-7

Joel 2:18-27  
3:18-20

Amos 9:11-15

Obad. 18-21

Micah 4  
7:11-20

Zeph. 3:13

Hag. 2:7-9

Zech. 1:17  
8  
9:16-17  
14

Mal. 3:10-12  
4:2

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