Scene 2 - God Scatters the Nation

1. The Nation divided
   - predicted - 1 Kings 11:9-13; 30-39
   - accomplished - 1 Kings 12:19-24

2. Israel (10 tribes in North) removed and scattered
   - predicted - 1 Kings 14:7-16
   - accomplished - 2 Kings 17:6-18

3. Judah removed and scattered
   - predicted - 2 Kings 21:10-15
   - accomplished - 2 Kings 25:7-21 & 2 Chron. 36:15-21

This removal of God's people from the land continued for 70 years according to Jeremiah 25:11,12 & 29:10-24 (See also Psalm 137)
A BRIEF REVIEW OF SCENE ONE

We have just studied Genesis 12:3 through 1 Kings 10, which constitutes Act 1, Scene 1 of God's redemptive drama. As we traced this record, we were looking for something which would tie all the books together; we were looking for a common denominator which would allow us to "collapse" these various books until we came up with one basic topic. It was soon evident to us that God was doing ONE main thing throughout all these various chapters: He was building a great nation!

Hopefully, the above exercise has established in the reader's mind the validity of our thesis that the Bible's oneness is found in the historical acts of God. That is, God's intervention in history constitutes the foundational UNITY of Scripture.

Too often, the Christian layman cannot get a handle on Scripture, either because of its voluminous text or because he cannot see how such diverse material could be interrelated. Genesis 12:3 through 1 Kings 10 may have posed the same problem if we had not set out to trace God's acts. Now that our task is complete, we can look back on these many pages of Scripture and say, "Wow! I can see it now. This large segment of Scripture is no longer baffling or overwhelming to me. I can tell you what is happening in these pages; God is fulfilling His promise to Abraham to build a great nation."
If you are able to say in your own heart, "Yes, I see the unity, too!", consider it no small accomplishment! Not only have you gotten a handle on a large portion of Scripture, you have also grasped a 2000-year sweep of history! That is, the building of the nation covers some 2,000-plus years in the historical record. (Compare that to North America which celebrated 200 years of nationhood in 1976!)

![Diagram showing Abraham and Nation]

We were also looking for PROGRESS in Scene 1, and saw how God began with one man in building a nation and prospered him until Israel became a great people! It wasn't just the increase in numbers, however, that demonstrated progress in God's desire to build a great nation from Abraham. Other progressive elements included the acquisition of land, the giving of the Law, political leadership, etc. In other words, all the things that make up a nation (people, land, government) began to unfold before our very eyes as God carried out His desire through Abraham and his seed.

We will be looking for UNITY and PROGRESS in Scene 2, but, first, two important aspects of the Nation Israel must be kept in mind in order for the reader to fully understand
the holocaust that will take place in Scene 2. First of all, it must be understood that Israel, politically, was a theocracy, the ONLY theocratic form of government ever to exist on the face of the earth! Secondly, the nation, theologically, was the ONLY means of salvation on earth! That is, from Abraham's day through the time of David, there was no other way to know Jehovah than through this magnificent nation! That makes Israel God's redemptive channel for all the earth!

1
ISRAEL: THE ONLY THEOCRACY ON EARTH!

2
ISRAEL: THE ONLY REDEMPTIVE CHANNEL ON EARTH!

In view of these two facts, Scene 2 is more traumatic than dramatic: an utterly shocking piece of history, a puzzle that staggers reason, a confounding narrative that pictures Jehovah doing the unthinkable!

Scene 2, in fact, will look like the most senseless reversal of progress imaginable! In a little less than 400 years, the nation—which took 2,000 years to realize a momentary glory—will be dashed to pieces....by the very One who brought her into her prime.

Scene 1: covers 2,000+ years. Scene 2: covers about 400 years.
The historical scope of Scene 2 covers events (what God has done) during the last years of Solomon's reign through Israel's dreadful captivity in Babylon.

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<td>Gen. 12-1 Kings 10</td>
<td>1 Kings 11-2 Chron. 36</td>
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It should be noted that the majority of the prophetic books fit into this time reference, but are not treated here since we are tracing the historical record, and because the primary content of the prophets is what God said ("Thus saith the Lord..."). We do acknowledge, however, that the prophets spoke to an historical occasion; hence, their messages will be examined in light of that, but as doctrine.

Finally, the demise of Israel, which we will record in three distinct steps, seems to happen "overnight" and in rapid succession because of our selective use of Scripture. This "appearance" is misleading; if any portion of Scripture seems to pull and tug in the realm of Jehovah's restraint, it is this one. That is, much divine pleading
forestalled Israel's meet punishment.

So then, with the above background fully understood, we are now ready to watch the curtain rise on Scene 2 and, to be sure, a dimly-lighted stage.

ACT 1-SCENE 2
GOD SCATTERS THE NATION

Scene 2, which hits the reader with bludgeoning force, is, as we have already stated, one of the most difficult parts of Scripture to comprehend, especially in light of God's patience and watch-care in Israel's behalf in Scene 1.

You will recall, at the close of Scene 1, that Israel's great king was enjoying a reputation that did not need to be enlarged beyond the facts nor the exceeding blessings of his God. Israel was excellent in her glory, and God was in her midst. Surely, this would have been the time to send the Savior-King, would it not?
As it was, the omnipotent God had already determined another course for the prosperous nation, and that not to be kept secret. Just as God had appeared to Abraham in Scene 1 to disclose His intent ("I will build of thee a great nation"), so God appears to Solomon at the beginning of Scene 2 to announce what He is going to do next.

Before we look at the announcement, however, we need to look at the opening line in Scene 2. True, Israel had achieved prominence among the nations and, yes, God dwelled in the presence of His people, but...

Such is the way Scene 2 begins:

"BUT king Solomon loved many strange women...and his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God."

--1 Kings 11:1ff

Do you know how critical this charge is in a theocracy, dear friends? Do you realize how tragic this is? Since God has chosen to work through a man, He must have a man whose heart is fixed. And look! Do you see the full implications of Solomon's actions here? To say only that Solomon has "sinned" is to render an indictment that betrays the outrageous insult of his trespass! You see, Solomon turned to another god! Do you realize that although David committed some grievous sins, he NEVER turned to another god!
As you can see in the illustration below, Solomon not only turned to another god, he turned to a plurality of gods! This was expressly forbidden by Jehovah in His two appearances to Solomon (2 Chronicles 3:1 and 1 Kings 9:2), and was also the binding force behind the Mt. Sinai Covenant and Jehovah's promise to establish His people in the land!

It is at this point that we stand on the verge of hearing Jehovah's word to Solomon regarding His plans for the kingdom. The hope of anything promising is certainly bleak in view of Solomon's flagrant apostasy.

"And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart was turned from the Lord God of Israel...wherefore the Lord said unto Solomon...I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant."

--1 Kings 11:9,11
A definition of the word "rend" will help us better understand why Solomon's ears undoubtedly smarted at the news of such discipline. The situation here is not merely that Solomon's actions have caused him to forfeit or surrender his empire, but that the kingdom is to be ripped out of his hands by a sorely aggravated God.

**RENED**: to tear apart or into pieces violently; split.1

Moreover, a most humiliating element of this judgment is that an outlaw—not an inlaw—will inherit the kingdom; it will be given to a servant. The identity of this servant is made known in 1 Kings 11:29-39, where the prophet Ahijah, through a symbolic act, discloses to Jeroboam, an Ephraimite, that ten of the twelve tribes will eventually be his. The postponement is due to God's grace in dealing with Solomon, and for David's sake. As such, the kingdom will not be split during Solomon's lifetime, but will be taken from his son (1 Kings 11:12). In addition, and because of His pledge to David that one of his descendants would always be upon the throne, God assures Solomon that his son would rule one tribe and the city of Jerusalem (where God is!). (See 1 Kings 11:36).

Before we continue, let's get this sober prediction firmly established in our mind. Depicted below is a graphic illustration of what God said He would do:

**THE SPLITTING OF THE NATION PREDICTED**

"I will split the kingdom!"
And now we must ask, how sure do you think God's word was in performing this matter? Do you think God spoke idle words? Indeed, Solomon's death is recorded in 1 Kings 11:43, and right on the heels of that news is the fact that his son, Rehoboam, has gone to Shechem for his coronation. The amazing thing about this move is the fact that "ALL Israel were come to Shechem to make him king" (1 Kings 12:1). That is, Rehoboam, at this point, had the full support of every tribe in Israel; they recognized that he was the legitimate heir to the throne.

Included among this loyal number is Jeroboam, who had fled to Egypt after Ahijah's prophecy provoked Solomon to seek his life. Now, along with "ALL the congregation of Israel" (1 Kings 12:3), Jeroboam petitions Rehoboam to relax the oppression and high taxation of his father's reign, a reasonable concession that would have secured Israel's loyalty to Rehoboam's throne ("Do this, and we will serve thee" --1 Kings 12:4)

Rehoboam's answer, which came three days later, struck the people as if they had been hit by an iron hammer. Author S.K. Mosiman explains the tragedy of Rehoboam's verdict to increase the peoples' affliction:

"The genial and imposing personality of Solomon had been able to stem the tide of discontent excited by his oppressive regime, which at his death burst all restraints. Nevertheless, the northern tribes, at a popular assembly held at Shechem, solemnly promised to serve Rehoboam, the Son of Solomon, who had already been proclaimed king at Jerusalem, on the condition that he would lighten the burdens that so unjustly rested upon them. Instead of receiving the magna carta which they expected, the king, in a spirit of despotism, gave them a rough answer..."
The uttermost consequence of this despotic pummeling was the predicted rupture of the kingdom! As Mosiman so adequately states it:

"The rough answer of the king was met by the Marseillaise of the people:

'What portion have we in David? Neither have we inheritance in the son of of Jesse:

To your tents, 0 Israel: Now see to thine own house, David.'"
(1 Kings 12:16) 4

Scripture tells us "There was none that followed the house of David, but the tribe of Judah only." (1 Kings 12:20). Immediately thereafter, however, the small tribe of Benjamin also joined league with Judah in support of Solomon's son. (1 Kings 12:21). The remaining ten tribes coalesced around Jeroboam, thus fulfilling "the saying which the Lord spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite unto Jeroboam the son of Nebat." (1 Kings 12:15). This disruption—so drastic and so definite—marked the first step in the decline of Israel's glory.

THE SPLITTING OF THE NATION FULFILLED

* Step 1 in the decline of the Nation Israel

10 tribes defect to Jeroboam (the NORTHERN KINGDOM)

Judah and the small tribe of Benjamin remain faithful to Rehoboam's SOUTHERN KINGDOM.

1 Kings 12:19-24
We would do well to pause a moment here and reflect upon the implications of what has happened, especially in light of God's projected goal of having all the earth filled with His glory. How can disunity among God's people--let alone a widening fissure in His redemptive channel--serve God's purposes?! One author reads the record of this event as being nothing short of Israel's epitaph.

"The division of the empire was one of the great turning points in Hebrew history. By one stroke it largely undid the work of Saul and David."  

Truly, if Israel's glory had been the work of David and Solomon, the future would be dismal indeed. But the building of the nation, and its eventual aggrandizement, you will recall, was Jehovah's doing. And wherever God is at work, there is hope.

THE PROMISE TO JEROBOAM

Do you remember Jehovah's offer to Jeroboam in 1 Kings 11:38? It is an extraordinary passage!

"And it shall be, if thou wilt harken unto all that I command thee, and wilt walk in my ways, and do that is right in my sight... as David my servant did; that I WILL BE WITH THEE, AND BUILD THEE A SURE HOUSE, as I built for David, and will give Israel unto thee."
Dear friends, do you realize what the phrase "I will be with thee" signals? A theocratic operation! And what about the phrase "a sure house"? It suggests that God is offering a perpetual dynasty to Jeroboam! In short, if Jeroboam will only meet the condition of obedience to the Lord during the days of his reign, there would be TWO theocratic operations facilitating the purposes of God!!! Two! Is that not progress?!

No one today would rejoice over a church split caused by rivalry and hostility within, now would they? But what if a church "split" because it was so prosperous, it was felt a mission church could be established elsewhere in the neighborhood? Such is the potential one sees here in God's bona fide offer to Jeroboam! God is not here setting aside Judah, from which will issue Israel's Redeemer-King; rather, He is offering Jeroboam, and the ten tribes, known collectively as "Israel", a duplicate mission with the House of David!

\[ \text{David's House} \]
\[ \text{Jeroboam's House} \]

What would you do with such an incredible offer? What do you think Jeroboam did with it? The first act of his reign is recorded in 1 Kings 12:28—a gross intrusion upon the grace of God! Despite the fact that Jehovah had promised the Northern Kingdom to Jeroboam (was not God's word enough?), the king feared that his subjects would return to Rehoboam's side if they were permitted to wor-
ship in Jerusalem, and so he set up altars of sacrifice elsewhere! As John C. Whitcomb Jr. observed:

"The greatest challenge that confronted Jeroboam...was...Jerusalem. Three times a year, in accordance with God's revealed plan, the nation went up to Jerusalem to worship Jehovah (Lev. 23; cf. Exodus 23: 17). As the Levites would instruct the people concerning the significance of the sacrifices, they would probably also take occasion to refer to Rehoboam as the legitimate Davidic king who reigned in Jerusalem. Before long, the people from the northern tribes might begin to draw certain conclusions concerning Jeroboam, namely, that he was both illegal and unnecessary." 6

As Matthew Henry notes, Jeroboam made sure his subjects would not defect by dissuading them from going up to Jerusalem. With great audacity and under the pretense of consulting their ease, Jeroboam tells his people, "You don't need to go to Jerusalem; it is too much for you to go so far to worship God." 7

Jeroboam not only set up national sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan, he also made two golden calves which were to represent Jehovah's strength and creative power, and also instituted a new, non-Levitical priesthood—all for the sake of his own security! Henry aptly describes Jeroboam's rebellion when he writes:

"He was distrustful of the promise of God, but he would contrive ways and means, and sinful ones too, for his own safety. A practical disbelief of God's all-sufficiency is at the bottom of all our treacherous departures from him." 9
Hopefully, by now, the reader is able to readily identify those elements in Jeroboam's life which limit God from working through him and which prohibit him from being a channel of blessing, first, to his own people, and, then, to the world.

As one author keenly noted:

"Divinely set apart for his task, and having the approval of the people, Jeroboam nevertheless failed to rise to the greatness of his opportunities." 10

Furthermore, Jeroboam's trespass was exceedingly awesome because of its corporate dimension. Scripture tells us:

"Jeroboam...made Israel to sin."

--1 Kings 14:16
Indeed, the ugliest thing about sin is that it is rarely, if ever, singular in its consequences. Jeroboam's unbelief and rebellion brought no soft answer from Jehovah. Rather, it brought upon the nation such a sore discipline as to be numbered among the most shocking events ever to take place on Planet Earth! In short, God gave Israel up! 1 Kings 14:15,16 predicts the uprooting of Israel from the land in fantastic imagery.:

"For the Lord shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water, and he shall root up Israel out of this good land...and shall scatter them beyond the river, because they have made groves, provoking the Lord to anger. And he shall give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin."

Look again at the force behind Jehovah's action:
Indeed, one cannot overstate the tragedy of this staggering event. It's not just that a nation is being uprooted and scattered, or even that God's redemptive channel is fragmenting; two-thousand years of Divine Activity is being obliterated! The entire Northern Kingdom is to be carried away into captivity by the Assyrian army!

Perhaps you are asking yourself, as did Israel then, would God really allow this to happen, let alone ordain it?! Just read 2 Kings 17:6-18, Israel's sober epitaph, if you have any doubt. So conclusive was God's judgment that the historian summarizes this most traumatic epoch in the life of Israel (the Northern tribes) with the simple statement:

"And so it was..."

The deportation of Israel marked the Second Step in the demise of the once glorious and divinely-destined nation. God had predicted the fall of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 14:7-16), and 2 Kings 17:6-18 marks the accomplishment of what was spoken!

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<td><img src="image" alt="Israel" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Israel, Judah</td>
<td>Step 1</td>
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"I will build..." | "I will split." | "I will scatter"
The fact that the Northern Kingdom was carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. may not seem so bleak if one recalls that Judah, after all, is the true theocratic dynasty, according to Jehovah's covenant with David. And Judah, or the Southern Kingdom, is, at this point, still intact.

To make a long story short, however, Scripture informs us that Judah, as much as Israel, offended the ways of God, and wearied the prophets who were sent to check her rampant folly.

"Yet the Lord testified against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets."

—2 Kings 17:13

Again, we must remember that history occurs within a time frame. So, too, we must remember that Jehovah's pleadings with Israel and Judah were not infrequent, nor were they spoken without an internal agony that stretched the forbearance of God and often mingled His message with convulsive weeping. (See Hosea 11:8; Jeremiah 12:7 and 31:20; and Isaiah 63:9).
Indeed, the passages we have cited above serve only to show that God did not crush "the dearly beloved of His soul" (Jeremiah 12:7) with an air of despotism. Rather, it was a very difficult thing for Jehovah to finally announce the inevitable action He would have to take against Judah:

**THE FALL OF JUDAH PREDICTED**

"And the Lord spake by his servants the prophets, saying, Because Manasseh king of Judah...hath done wickedly...and hath made Judah also to sin with his idols: Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle...and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of my inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies."

---2 Kings 21:10-14

Judah is the remnant, the surviving trace, of God's handiwork, and it too is going to be scrapped! Friends, this is an incredible event! Look again at the fate of Earth's only redemptive channel:

WIPE

FORSAKE

GIVE OVER
The destruction of a city they thought was inviolable, Jehovah's abandonment of the house that was to be His "forever", and the exile of the last remnant of God's people to a foreign land left the people of Judah inconsolable and numb! And no wonder! Matthew Henry explains the unfathomable and far-reaching consequences of this crashing event (the deportation of Judah to Babylon in 586 B.C.):

"Insofar as the human element is concerned, God's dealings with man in His earthward program are through Israel, and they are through Israel in her land. The chosen people and the Holy Land are inseparable; and when the people are out of the land, God's...program is temporarily held in abeyance." 11

Step Three in the demise of the great nation—the removal and scattering of Judah—signaled no less than the utter annihilation of God's redemptive program on earth! Not only was there no Northern Kingdom, there was now no Southern Kingdom. And, as far as the remnant was concerned, there was no hope and, in a very real sense, no God! (In his book, The Kings and Prophets of Israel and Judah, Charles Foster Kent notes that the Deuteronomic law made Jerusalem "the ONLY centre" where Jehovah could be rightly worshipped.12 Since that city was now leveled to its foundations, Judah faced a harrowing 70 years of silence and estrangement from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!)
The end of Scene 2 certainly is a bewildering one, isn't it? Israel no longer exists as a theocratic state, and God's only channel for making Himself known throughout the earth is shattered! Indeed, this crisis is so relevant to understanding the work of God that Scripture records this entire scene—from Solomon's reign to the exile of Israel and Judah—twice! It is as if God wants to make sure that the reader doesn't miss the significance of the events in this scene, and so the story is retold (underscored) in its entirety!

ACT 1: SCENE 2 -- GOD SCATTERS THE NATION -- (3 STEPS)

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<td>JUDAH</td>
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**SAID:** 1 Kgs. 11:9-13  
**DONE:** 1 Kgs. 12:19-24

1 Kgs. 14:7-16  
2 Kgs. 17:6-18  
2 Kgs. 21:10-15  
2 Kgs. 25:7-21

Gen. 12-1 Kgs. 10  
1 Kings 11-22  
2 Chron. 1-36  
story told 2x!
It is at this point that one must ask, Why did God build the nation only to destroy it? It almost seems senseless, doesn't it? If you hold, as Israel did, that the building of the nation was God's ultimate end, then the outworking of this scene is, indeed, berserk. But, ah, the building of the nation is NOT the climax of God's redeeming efforts! God is headed where? To all the nations; He wants to be enthroned upon the praises of ALL peoples!

So keep the goal in mind, and keep an eye on the scattering; it may prove to be good. It may prove to be good because, whether we see it or not, God is always moving forward. And He can even use His discipline as a forward step! As Whitcomb so wonderfully reminds us:

"Despite its sad note, the history of Kings and Chronicles is important to our understanding of God. Here we find a bewildering array of kings and prophets and clashing nations; and yet through it all may be seen the guiding hand of One who changes not and who accomplishes unerringly His sovereign and redemptive purposes in history." 13
NOTES
SCENE II
(pp. 231-252)


4Ibid., p. 1593.

5Charles Foster Kent, The Kings and Prophets of Israel and Judah (from the Division of the Kingdom to the Babylonian Exile), (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 7.


8Mosiman, p. 1594

9Henry, p. 380.

10Mosiman, p. 1593


12Charles Foster Kent, The Kings and Prophets of Israel and Judah (from the Division of the Kingdom to the Babylonian Exile), (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 3.

Scene 3 - God restores Israel to the land for the coming of Messiah

1. The Temple and city of Jerusalem is rebuilt (Ezra and Nehemiah)
   - only a remnant or minority return
   Ezra 9:8, 13-15
   - these are now under Gentile rule
   Ezra 9:9, Nehemiah 9:36,37

2. God providentially preserves His people in Persia (Esther)

3. Messiah comes to provide salvation for the world; the grounds for all God has done or will do
   - Matthew 1:1;17 Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Before we begin to trace the historical activity of God (the unifying grid of Scripture) in Scene 3, the final segment of Act I, it behooves us to note and explain the unusual grouping of books which comprise the scope of this scene.

Scene 3, in that it deals with the Nation Israel and her return from captivity, is a logical sequel (note the progress here!) to the previous scenes in Act I, which also focused upon the nation.
Scene 1, you will recall, began in Genesis 12 with God's promise to make Abraham a great nation, and ended in 1 Kings 10 with the glorious reigns of David and Solomon.

The scope of Scene 2 began with Solomon's apostasy, recorded in 1 Kings 11, and concluded with the fall and exile of Judah, as recorded in 2 Chronicles 36.
And now we come to Scene 3. We've already noted that this concluding scene deals with the nation and her return to the land. If you are familiar with Bible survey, you know that the primary books dealing with restoration and rebuilding are Ezra and Nehemiah. It stands to reason, then, that these two books, which follow 2 Chronicles, would commence Scene 3. What may seem atypical—and rather surprising—to the reader is the historical scope of this final scene dealing with the unique nation of Israel! Do you know where the end of Scene 3 comes? Look at the scope of this scene pictured below. Do you see anything unusual?

Note that Scene 3 embraces the New Testament! We will talk about the implications of this in a moment, but, first, you might be wondering what happened to all those Old Testament books that follow Ezra and Nehemiah! Why aren't the poetic and prophetic books included in Scene 3? Do they not make up the remainder of the Old Testament canon?!
We need to remember that our Bible is not arranged in chronological order (in historical sequence). Rather, the various books are grouped according to literary genre (hence, the "Law" or Pentateuch, the books of history, the books of poetry, the books of prophecy, etc.). This need not pose a problem for us. In fact, it is easy to observe, if one has an idea of the general content of these books, just where they fit in.

Take, for example, the books of poetry. With the exception of Job, what two figures were the primary authors of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon? David and Solomon, correct? That means the poetic books "fit into" what scene? Scene 1! The book of Job, since it is one of the earliest works in the Bible, would actually precede Scene 1, but is grouped with David and Solomon's writings because of its poetic nature. Likewise, the prophets, since they spoke of the coming judgment of God to an erring Israel, fit into which scene? Scene 2, of course!
You can see from the above illustration, then, that we have not ignored, omitted nor bypassed any of the Old Testament in an effort to fuse Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther with the Gospels! Rather, the Gospels logically "connect" with these three historical books, both in sequence and content! That is, in Ezra and Nehemiah, we find the captives returning to the land to rebuild the Temple, and Max I. Reich explains how the Gospels uniquely climax this operation!

"To the prophets...the exile appeared as a necessary prelude to the re-establishment of a holy community in the city and land of their fathers. And it is clear they expected the Messiah to appear during the life-time of the restored Jerusalem and of the new order set up by the exiles who had returned from Babylon." 1

Do you see what the above author is suggesting? The Temple was rebuilt in preparation—and expectation—of Messiah! Therefore, the Gospel record is seen as a continuation and completion of the event begun in Ezra! From the standpoint of the historical record, then, there is no "break" between the Old and New Testaments! Events in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are presented as the fulfillment of God's prior activities, not a new, detached operation!

If the scope of Scene 3 bothers you, because we have included part of the New Testament, we suggest you look at Matthew 1:17 which gives the same historical groupings for Scenes One, Two and Three as those already designated in our text!
Matthew, in giving us this sweeping genealogy, is showing the division of history from the time of Abraham to the coming of the Messiah. If we would chart these divisions, they would look astoundingly familiar.

In tracing out the unity of Scripture, of course, it is our intent to show how the various books of the Bible hold together. We are looking for "oneness" in the historical record, and Matthew's Spirit-breathed divisions only
show that Scripture itself does not impose a break in God's redemptive work, nor does it separate the activities of God into two distinct canons.

THE HISTORICAL OPERATION OF GOD

Again, we are not emphasizing this point so people will begin to dispute the man-made divisions in our present-day Bibles, but our purpose is to show the amazing unity (connecting relationships) that exists within the entire Biblical revelation!

Moreover, even if we leave the present order of the various Bible books intact, we still find a continuity between the concluding book of the Old Testament and the first book in the New Testament!

MALACHI
--ends with the promise, expectation of the Messiah.

MATTHEW
--announces the advent of that very same Messiah!

= no break in the historical record!
Maybe now you can see why we suggested earlier that the division between Genesis 11 and 12 constitutes the most radical break in Scripture. God's real—and continuous—program begins in Genesis 12. Genesis 1-11 is mere introduction.

Scene 3, then, is unique in that it joins the Old and New Testaments together in so far as the redemptive activity of God is concerned. It also marks the end of ACT I in God's redemptive drama. ACT II will feature a new thing in the program of God!

Before we examine the actual content of Scene 3, it might help if we, once more, reviewed the historical books as they trace the unfolding of redemption. Perhaps the illustration below will help the reader see the similarity of subject matter in Scenes One, Two and Three which make Act I so cohesive in nature. Also—if you use the unifying principle we stated earlier in the text—you should be able to collapse these three scenes (or topics) into one. (We will find out the "one" event of Act I later!)
THE HISTORICAL BOOKS AS THEY TRACE
THE UNFOLDING OF REDEMPTION

Finally, the chart below, which includes Scene 2 as a point of reference, will aid the reader in tracing the historical movement of the scene we are about to study. The symbols in this drawing will, of course, make more sense when we see their actual relationship to events in Scene 3.

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<td>1 Kgs.11-2 Chron.36</td>
<td>Ezra-Neh. Gospels</td>
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</table>
As the curtain rises on Scene 3 (the Book of Ezra), only a pile of rubble sits center-stage. There are, as yet, no actors—although one can sense their soon appearance. Even the lights, increasing in brightness, seem to hint that something good is about to happen.

And yet, as one sits in the audience, waiting, one can hardly keep from reflecting back upon that frightful, crashing event that brought Scene 2 (1 Kings 11-22; 2 Chronicles 1-36) to such a spectacular close.

Indeed, it wasn’t just that the curtain had fallen
on a most dismal situation; that occurs in many dramas. But Scene 2 was most bizarre, and it is imperative that we understand its significance in light of what God is going to do next.

For many, Scene 2 was like watching a magnificent set collapse unexpectedly, scattering the players hither and beyond, and smashing to bits even the most insignificant prop. And the most startling thing was seeing the Director, obviously weary of finishing such an ill-fated production, walk off the set—seemingly forever!

Do you remember the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion, that bitter and incriminating sop which God had thrust upon His rebellious and erring children? We are, perhaps, too removed from the event—even too removed from the theology then—to tremble at its dread and harrowing consequences!

But Judah, in "that place beyond the River", wept sore, and God's people became like exiled pallbearers, looking across to Zion, that beloved city, now a desolate grave. Death had come to everything redemptive (the theocracy, the presence of God, the sacrificial system) because of Judah's sin! Indeed, Psalm 137 captures the groanings that could not be uttered...groanings of a broken spirit.
"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Do you realize why being in a strange or foreign land was so devastating to the exiles? What had God said regarding Zion (Jerusalem)?

"I WILL PLACE SALVATION IN ZION...

FOR ISRAEL, MY GLORY."

--Isaiah 46:13

Do you understand the sore situation the exiles found themselves in because of this? H.A. Ironside states their problem succinctly:
"Jerusalem (was) the only place on earth to which a grateful people could scripturally bring a sacrifice for sin." (our emphasis). 2

Henry, along these same lines, gives this explanation of why the prisoners of war could not sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. :

"It is the Lord's song; it is a sacred thing; it is peculiar to the temple-service, and therefore we dare not sing it in the land of a stranger, among idolators." (again, our emphasis) 3

Look now! Do you enjoy singing the songs of Jesus at First Presbyterian? Yeah, sure do! It's great fellowship to sing with fellow-believers, is it not? But, wait! do you not sing the songs of Jesus at the airport...or while vacationing in France? What's this about the Temple, the Temple, the Temple?! Dear friends, if the idea of "Jerusalem only" bothers you, and you want to challenge it, it could be that you don't understand the Old Testament operation. You see, we are so used to New Testament Christianity that we take all we know and place it on everything "back there". But it wasn't then the way it is now!

You see, if a foreigner wanted to know Jehovah, what did the Israelite tell him? "Oh, that's great! You just stay here in Assyria and worship Jehovah." No, no! What he would say would be something like this: "That's great,
my friend! Our God--Jehovah--has revealed to us a redemptive operation. Will you come to Jerusalem--where Jehovah has placed His Name--and there offer a blood sacrifice for the atonement of your sins? (OT salvation)?" What if the foreigner responded, "No, I won't do that; it seems rather silly to me", do you think he will be numbered among God's people?

We hope we haven't overstated the importance of Jerusalem, and, particularly, the Temple, but we feel the activities of Scene 3 will be better appreciated in light of this. And, yes, we leave a lot of room for God's grace here! We wouldn't want to be so dogmatic as to say, "No Temple, no salvation", but keep in mind that the Temple is, in the Old Testament economy, the place where Jehovah's redemptive operation became functional!

And also keep in mind that Scene 2 recorded the utter destruction of that channel! How could one make atonement for sin, or meet Jehovah when the only legitimate means for doing so was leveled to the ground? And for how long was it leveled to the ground?! Seventy years!

For seventy long years, what was happening in God's redemptive program? Nothing! There were no sacrifices for the atonement of sin because there was no place to offer them! Jerusalem was wasted; it lay in ruins! The Temple had been burned to the ground! Could we say, then, that for 70 awesome years, salvation was temporarily suspended?

That's a strong statement, we know. But to the Israelite, it was that devastating. As far as God's people were concerned, God had decreed:
"There is no other PLACE under heaven given among men, whereby they must be saved."

Do you understand now both the sting and the sorrow of Judah's captivity? If this truth is not at the heart of the people's agony, then the depths of their self-indulging grief make no sense. You see, Jehovah had put His Name in Jerusalem, not Babylon. He had agreed to meet His people in Jerusalem, not Babylon. He had instituted sacrifice in Jerusalem, not Babylon. It was despairing for the captives even to turn their eyes toward the Temple because there was no Temple!

Are we really suggesting that salvation came to a halt for 70 years because of this? Again, we acknowledge that God operates in grace. Perhaps during this 70-year period, if some among the Babylonians desired to know Jehovah, their captives may have said, "Jehovah has made atonement of your sins possible through a blood sacrifice in the Temple at Jerusalem, but, as you know, the Temple is destroyed. But, if there were a Temple yet standing and you could, would you be willing to make a sacrifice for your sins?"

Jesus dealt with this same problem in John 4:20-21 in talking with the woman from Samaria. Do you remember the conversation? The woman told Jesus, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain (in Samaria), but ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Do you know how Jesus responded to her statement? "Salva-
tion is of the Jews. God has revealed Himself in Jerusalem. But a day is coming (it's not here yet!), when going to Jerusalem will not be paramount."

Jesus was alluding to Act II, when God's redemptive enterprise would radically change. But it had not changed yet, and so, in Scene 3, we are faced with the fact that Jerusalem was yet the only place of worship that complied with the law of God!

In reality, the above issue is one we still face even today. For the Old Testament believers, it was a matter of bringing the heathen-seeker to Jerusalem. You can protest, "But what if that person couldn't go to Jerusalem, yet really desired to know Jehovah? Would God overlook 'him'?!" This is a deep theological issue. We face it in our missionary outreach today. What about the heathen? Are they really lost if we don't bring the news of salvation to them? What if one of the hidden people whom we have not yet reached with the Gospel longs to know the Lord; can he know Jesus apart from our reaching him with the Good News? That is, if we suspended the missionary enterprise for 70 years, would men still be saved? That, of course, is a question you will have to wrestle with on your own; we interject it here only to show you how important the Temple was in the Old Testament economy.

And with that background, you can see why the return from captivity was so crucial! And, hopefully, you will begin to see the wonder and uniqueness of Ezra and Nehemiah, the introductory books to Scene 3! Dear friends, God is moving again! The books of Ezra and Nehemiah testify to the marvelous fact that God is about to do something to rectify the dark situation in Jerusalem!
THE REBUILDING OF JERUSALEM & THE TEMPLE

One of the amazing and personal aspects of Scripture is the fact that the Omnipotent God, who doeth wonders in the earth, stoops down from on high to whisper to His own, "This is My next step!"

And so it was, in the midst of the Babylonian captivity, God spoke to His scattered nation, and said:

"You will be in Babylon for a life-time. But then I will come and do all the good things I have promised, and bring you home again. For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

--Jeremiah 29:10-11
(The Living Bible)

The realization of this word from God is found in the first few verses of Ezra, that wonderful book that introduces us to Scene 3 in God's redemptive drama. The 70 years of captivity, which can be likened to an abnormally long intermission in God's program, have been fulfilled. The pile of rubble still sits center-stage as Scene 3 begins. But now, in urgent stride, a royal page emerges from the wing, carrying the following important proclamation.
"Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem...and build the house of the Lord God of Israel...which is in Jerusalem."

--Ezra 1:2,3

The first verse of Ezra tells us that God stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to do this..."that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled."! Do you know what God is doing?! He is restoring His redemptive channel! Cyrus has authorized the return of God's people to Jerusalem for the purpose of rebuilding the Temple!

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE = REDEMPTIVE CHANNEL RESTORED!

Did you note what Cyrus said? This is really some claim! "The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and...hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem." Babylon, that formidable empire,
had fallen, and all the nations of the then-known world were under the sway of Persian rule. Do you see where we are in our chart for Scene 3?

Keep this chart in mind; we've yet to unveil some peculiarities regarding it. But let's get back to Cyrus' claim that God charged him to rebuild the Temple. Just where do you suppose Cyrus got such a "revelation"? Might we suggest that it was probably from the book of Isaiah and that sublime prophesy that names Cyrus as God's chosen servant 100 years before he was born! (See Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4). You can be sure the emperor's mouth dropped open wide as he read of his God-ordained destiny!

And so the people of God--once "impounded for their trespass" \(^4\)--trek to Jerusalem to begin a good work, and in God's power. It behooves us at this point to note the amazing similarities between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah since they both pertain to reconstruction efforts in the Holy City. These two books, often called the "twins" of the Old Testament, are almost identical in content and outline!

In Ezra 1-6, we learn that the Temple in Jerusalem is completed after 70 years. Parallel to this is Nehemiah 1-6, which deals with the reconstruction of the walls around
the city. In Ezra 7-10, we read that Ezra, a ready scribe in the law of Moses, sought to teach Israel the statutes and judgments of God. Likewise, in Nehemiah 7-14, the law is again disseminated among the people of God in Jerusalem. The illustration below serves as a quick review of these "twin" books:

You will note in the above illustration that we emphasize the altar as well as the Temple itself. That is because the altar—not the foundation, nor the walls—was the first thing the returning exiles resurrected from the heap of rubble. Do you know why? Because that is where true worship begins; that is where one meets God; and that is where sacrifice for sins is made!

Ezra 3:3

Altar built first

House built second
It's obvious that the Temple was important (it's God's redemptive vehicle), but of what import was the law? Do you remember our earlier quote from Reich? He said the exile "appeared as a necessary prelude to the re-establishment of a holy community in the city". What Reich is suggesting here is the fact that true worship involves walking in the ways of God—and the Law was a tutor in this! As you can see, then, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah report on the progress of two vital elements in God's ongoing work of redemption.

They also give prevalent testimony to the fact that God is working supernaturally in Jerusalem!:

Ezra: "The hand of God was upon me to build the house of God."

Nehemiah: "And so the walls were rebuilt because the good hand of God was upon me."

Do you see the implications of this? Jerusalem is re-inhabited; the Temple is rebuilt; the walls are repaired; and God is acting on behalf of His people! That is great, isn't it? But let us ask one highly significant question: Is this (Scene 3), the same as that which we saw in Scene 1?
Is this..........................the same as this?

Has God, indeed, restored the theocratic state we saw under David and Solomon? Turn, if you will, to Ezra 9:8 (also, verses 13-15):

"And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place..."

Do you know what a remnant is? It's a small number; a minority. Ezra here is thanking God that a few Israelites were able to return to Jerusalem! Moreover, Ezra likens this remnant to a "nail in his holy place." Do you know how small a nail is, proportionately, to a building? Friends, this is a puny operation!

And, look! Who is ruling in Jerusalem? Is there a theocratic leader? Is the throne of David occupied? Listen to Ezra's testimony in Ezra 9:9 (see also Nehemiah 9:36, 37):
"We are bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia...to set up the house of our God...and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem."

--Ezra 9:9

Bondmen? Bondage? What kind of talk is that? Israel is back in the land, but something is different! Dear friends, we hope you have caught the significance of these two facts: 1. only a minority of God's people are in Jerusalem, and 2. for the first time in God's redemptive program they are subject to a Gentile power while in their own land! Arthur Kac explains how this situation will continue through two more world empires:

"The permission granted to the exiles to return to Judaea was a concession made by Persia to their religious aspirations only. Politically, the status of Judaea had not changed at all. It became an appendage of Persia which had taken over the domains of defeated Babylon. From Persia Judaea passed under the dominion of Alexander the Great, and after the dismemberment of Alexander's empire Judaea became a province of Rome."
It is perhaps difficult to see any progress in the above situation, yet there is progress in view of where we are headed. Where is God going? To the world. Be assured, dear friends, that we are getting closer and closer to that goal! But if, like Israel, you are only interested in building a society and maintaining it for yourself, sure, this situation will be frustrating. That’s why it is so important, at every stage, to keep God’s ultimate goal in view.

Now, let us ask another question. If only a minority of God’s people are back in Jerusalem, then where are the rest of the Jews? Where is the majority? Ah! Remember our diagram? Here’s where they are—scattered throughout the empire of Persia!
Do you know the extent of the Persian empire? The book of Esther—which we shall examine in a moment—says that King Ahasuerus reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over 127 provinces! Now, look! Do you realize that God's people are scattered throughout those 127 provinces?! Do you see anything here in light of where we are going?

Do you know why God wants His people scattered throughout the Persia Empire? Do you see now why the book of Esther is so important? Esther gives us the first infallible record of what is happening in a Gentile nation! Why do we need a book describing historical activities outside of Jerusalem? Because that's where the majority of God's people are; outside of Jerusalem!

Why didn't you have a book like Esther earlier in the program? You didn't have this situation!
We need to pause a moment and consider the book of Esther, probably the most peculiar work in the entire Bible. You will recall how closely aligned—both in content and outline—the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were. There was no question but what these "twin writings" were interrelated (and we are, after all, looking for relationships between and among the various books!).

But how similar is the book of Esther next to these historical records that tell us of the rebuilding of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem? Dear friends, there seems to be no relationship whatsoever! Depicted below are just a few of the more radical differences that we see between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the book of Esther. These differences—and they are profound—have caused many to conclude that Esther is incapable of being reconciled with the rest of Scripture. But we hope to show that it isn't as incompatible as one would think.

**EZRA**  **NEHEMIAH**  **ESTHER**

* God is mentioned throughout  
* "The good hand of God was upon us" = the power of God is at work  
* Takes place in Jerusalem

* God is NEVER mentioned!  
* There is no visible working of God!  
* Takes place in Neo-Persia!

To be sure, one redeeming factor about the book of Esther—and a fact which makes it "one" with Ezra and Nehemiah—is this: it IS an historical record! Let us reiterate our thesis that the unity of Scripture is grounded in the historical record. Merril Unger's comments on Esther
should show us how important this concept is in the ultimate acceptance of Esther or any other disputed writing.

"Despite the common critical contention that the story (of Esther) is legendary fiction, its historicity is supported... by its being entrenched in history and its being specifically dated... in the reign of Ahasuerus." 7

If we accept the fact that Esther is a legitimate episode in Hebrew history, then what is God doing in this record? Dear friends, it is here that the book of Esther becomes an enigma--because God isn't doing anything! Read it for yourself. Do you see any supernatural intervention anywhere in this strange history?

Look! When Haman schemes to have God's people (and they are never called God's people--not even once!) exterminated (Esther 3:7-15), what happens? The Jews (ah! that's what they are called more than 40 times throughout this record!) beseech the Lord, right? Absolutely not! Do you realize that prayer is not ever mentioned--even once? The people fast, but they don't cry out to God.

In Ezra and Nehemiah, when the enemy tries to hinder the work on the Temple or the walls, who brings deliverance? The testimony of both men is clear: "And the Temple was finished because of the good hand of God that was upon me"; "So the walls were rebuilt because of the good hand of My God which was upon me."

Now listen to the words of Mordecai, that godly Jew, after he convinced Esther to plead the Jews' cause before
the Persian king. He said, "If you hold your peace at this crucial hour, then so be it; God will bring deliverance through another means. But who knows but what Jehovah has brought you into the world for this very purpose?" Right? Wrong! Mordecai never even hints that God might be involved in the Jews' deliverance! Rather, he says, "Esther, if deliverance doesn't come through you, then it will arise from somewhere else." (Esther 4:14).

Moreover, God is not credited for bringing Esther to this strategic place and time in Jewish history; Mordecai merely asks, "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

And so, we ask the question that puzzles many: why isn't God's activity acknowledged in the book of Esther? Might we suggest that it isn't mentioned because God is not working there, pure and simple! Look! God never said He would work in Babylon, or in Assyria, or in Persia. He said, "I will work in Jerusalem." God's Name, God's power (supernatural activity) is in Jerusalem! The testimony of Ezra and Nehemiah, residents of the Holy City, was this: God is working supernaturally in Jerusalem!

"God is prospering the work!"

"Jehovah is working here!"

"God is rebuilding this through His people!"
But wait a minute! How can we say God only works in Jerusalem? God works everywhere, doesn't He? Yes, but His activities outside of Jerusalem are qualitatively different. Let us temper what we said about God not working in Persia. What we should have said was this: God is not working supernaturally in Persia. Do you see that?

God is not working here
supernaturally.............

God IS working here
supernaturally.............

If God is not working in a supernatural way outside of Jerusalem, then how is He working? Leon Wood gives us a tremendous clue when he states the uniqueness and contribution of the book of Esther:

"First, (the story in Esther) shows (that) a surprisingly large number of Jews yet lived in the East and, second, that God's special care was being extended toward these Jews of the East, even though they had chosen not to return to the homeland when given opportunity. This care, evidenced in the precise timing of events for the Jews' benefit, is in fact the outstanding feature of the story."
What do you call that when God so controls events that His purposes are accomplished? We like to picture it like this: God's right hand of power is working supernaturally in Jerusalem while His left hand superintends (naturally) nations, events and circumstances to the point that His purposes are fully realized.

G. Coleman Luck shares the awe of this situation depicted above when he says of Esther:

"The name of God is not used even once, but His hand is as clearly seen in this book as in any other in the entire Bible." 9

He also describes this superintending work of God in this precise fashion:

"Esther reveals "God's providential care for His people in their dispersion."" 10

Ah! So it's providence! What is providence? Is the term in your vocabulary? H.A. Ironside gives us a creative definition of the word "providence" when he says of Esther:
"(God) is behind the scenes, it is true; but, to use the expression of another, He moves all the scenes He is behind." 11

It is imperative that we understand the importance of God's special care over the "Diaspora", the scattered Jews. Again, we quote Ironside.

"The great subject of Esther is evidently the secret providence—a 'particular' providence, too—which is ever watching over the scattered nation during all the long-drawn-out 'times of the Gentiles'." 12

Dear friends, God's people will be under Gentile dominion until Messiah is established on the throne! Esther shows us that empires may rise and fall (Persia, Greece, Rome), but that God will not allow His people, whether existing as a satellite nation (i.e. politically dominated by another) or scattered to the ends of the earth, to be brought to nought!

And so we see in Esther, which records events in Persia, that God's providential control is holding onto His people. But why? May we suggest it is because He wants to use them...supernaturally...in another scene?

THE ROLE OF THE DIASPORA

We said earlier that we hoped to prove that Esther
is not at all incompatible with the rest of Scripture.
You see, we already noted, in an effort to point out
unity, how Ezra and Nehemiah follow in logical sequence
to the events of Scene 2. We also showed how they related
to one another. On purpose, we put Esther at a distance,
as if it had no relationship to Ezra and Nehemiah, nor to
any other book that gives us an historical account of God's
salvific work. But, we are about to see how Esther—though
peculiar and unique—fits hand in hand particularly with
Ezra and Nehemiah and the New Testament record!

Indeed, Ezra 1:4 shows us how the diaspora was
connected to events in Jerusalem. When we quoted Cyrus'
decree earlier, we only quoted half of it: his invitation
to those who might have a desire to return, voluntarily,
to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. For those who chose
not to return—and it was not mandatory—Cyrus gave these
instructions:

"And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

Do you see the role the diaspora played in Ezra
and Nehemiah's day? George Rawlinson explains:
"...from the time of the complete restoration of the Temple (B.C. 515), an annual payment was made by each foreign Jew towards the Temple service, which was collected in the provinces, and carried each year by sacred messengers to Jerusalem."(our emphasis)

You can see from this that the Jews in Persia were not detached from the enterprise in Jerusalem; they financed it in significant measure!

More than just a financial contribution, however, this supportive action intimately tied the greater Israel abroad with the Israel at home.

Jews in 127 provinces are tied to their kinsmen in Jerusalem
THE DIASPORA: ANOTHER STRATEGIC ROLE

Well, hopefully we have shown a connection between Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah by pointing out that the exiles were not oblivious to what was happening in Jerusalem. Their support for, as well as their affinity for, the work in Palestine demonstrates a constancy of action (= unity) in these three books.

But how can events "over there" in Persia have any influence on historical activity in the New Testament? Ah, my friends, if God, being the Director of this exciting drama that is unfolding before us, had stood with the captives who mourned by the waters of Babylon and had spoken the words we are about to share in an aside, Scene 2 would not have seemed so dismal. As Alfred Edersheim affirms:

"It were a one-sided view to regard the Babylonian exile as only a punishment for Israel's sin. There is, in truth, nothing in all God's dealings...exclusively punitive. That were a merely negative element. But there is always a positive element also of actual progress; a step forward, even though in the taking of it something should have to be crushed." 14

Surely, we know the negative element of the Babylonian captivity: God's people were being judged, punished, disciplined! But what good could have been intended from such a nightmare? You may not see it at first, but Esther 3:8 gives us the answer! Haman, obsessed with having all
the Jews exterminated, here gives the king cause to support his treacherous deed.

"And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them."

Now watch! If the exiles were not following the king's law, whose law were they observing? Remember Daniel, back in Babylon? He was thrown into the lion's den for not obeying the law of the land! Whose law was he honoring? God's law! Haman is indicting the Jews on the same count; they are observing God's law, not the king's!

We saw both in Ezra and Nehemiah that the Law was disseminated among the Jerusalem population. It was taught and explained day and night until the people became fully aware of their responsibilities under God. But what of the dispersion? How was it that they, too, were instructed in the ways of Jehovah?

Have you ever heard of the term "synagogue"? Do you know anything about the origin of the synagogue? According to Merrill Unger, synagogues, which were the "repositories of the Hebrew Scriptures", trace their origin to homes in Babylon. It was in the synagogues that the Jews who were scattered far beyond Palestine met for instruction in the law and the prophets.15
Moreover, says Paul Levertoff, who writes about synagogues in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE):

"All parts of the Diaspora were represented by particular synagogues (Acts 6:9)." 16 (Our emphasis)

So? So, do you see anything strategic in this wide-spread establishment of synagogues? Remember, God's ultimate goal is to reach the world with the redemptive story. Do you think these synagogues, which apparently grew out of the dispersion, will play a part in outreach when the time is right? Listen to the words of D.S. Gregory:

"The work of the period of dispersion may be characterized as missionary in its nature, and as intended to impress the world-religion, in the form in which it had been revealed to the chosen people, upon the pagan races, in order to prepare them for the reception of the Divine Saviour with his salvation." 17

Mind you, as Gregory points out, this stage is merely preparatory: Israel is not ready to go to the nations yet! And why not? They can't go until the end of Scene 3, that's why! An explanation for this hold up will be given shortly, but for now, just keep in mind that the synagogue will be a common institution in the Roman world. 18 Do you know what happens in
the Roman empire to further Jehovah's goal?

Remember now, Esther is the first historical record we have of events outside of Jerusalem. We know from Esther that the Diaspora gathered in small groups to study the law. But something else was happening to them as they came under the heel of Gentile dominion, first in Babylon, then Persia, then Greece, and, finally Rome. As one author observes:

"It was during this epoch that the Israelites ceased to be a provincial people, limited in their outlook to the narrow horizon of Palestine. Events over which they had little control brought them into close contact with the great world powers of the day, thereby vastly broadening...their relation to the human race." 19

Do you know how long the people of the dispersion were exposed to another culture? Many missionary appointees here in America, eager to infiltrate another culture with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, get frustrated if they don't have the language and the ways of the people down-pat in six months! God doesn't operate the way man does, however, and the dispersion is a case in point. Leon Wood tells us the following astounding fact.

"The Old Testament is silent regarding history after the time of Nehemiah. Approximately four centuries are passed over without any biblical notice, until the New Testament era breaks." 20
For 400 years, dear friends, God doesn't say or do anything; He merely lets His people rub shoulders with the Gentile world! These 400 years are also known as "The Silent Years" or "The Inter-Testamental Period." (The reader desiring more facts on this period should consult a Bible encyclopedia). We've diagrammed where the 400 silent years fit into God's program, so you will better appreciate when He speaks and acts again.

In summary, then, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah show us how God's people hastened back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and the city—all in preparation for the coming of Messiah. Esther shows us how the larger number of Jews, under God's care though at arm's length, were dotting the land with strategic beachheads (synagogues) for the eventual missionary thrust of Act II.

But Scene 3 is not finished. As we stated in the opening section of this scene, the Gospels bring the whole of Act I, not merely to a close, but to an exciting climax. It is in the Gospels that the Star Member of the cast makes His long-awaited appearance! And there is no moment more gratifying and precious for the Director than this.
The Coming of Messiah

We introduced earlier, as a prerequisite for studying Scene 3, the notion that there is no break in the historical activities of God between the Testaments. That is, the drama of redemption has no climax unless one allows the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John into the Old Testament script.

Unger, in fact, calls the Gospel record "an extension of the OT economy". Maybe it is because we have bound one drama in two volumes (OT/NT) that many view the Gospel record as if it commenced a new thing in the program of God, instead of seeing it as the continuation and climax of the historical operation God initiated in Genesis.

Unger suggests the following as the key to the correct interpretation of the Gospels.
"It is necessary to realize that the period described (in the Gospels) is culminative of the OT age, preparatory to and predictive of the new age, but not the new age itself." 22 (our emphasis)

What Unger is saying, basically, is this: the Gospels are the consummation of God's work in Act I; they do not constitute the beginning of Act II, although they are certainly foundational to the historical thrust of God's next step!

If you are looking for an internal validation that the Gospels mark the culmination of God's work in Act I, the opening verse of the book of Matthew seems to provide it. This book, which is characterized by the key word "fulfilled"23, summarizes the whole scope of God's redemptive program and ties it all together (unity) in one mere verse!

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

--Matthew 1:1

Do you see the marvel of this one-sentence genealogy? It shows us both the unity and progress of God's redeeming activities in Act I!
Might we further suggest that unity and progress are inherent in this verse because the plan of God was initiated in Abraham, revealed its potential in David, and found dynamic expression in Jesus Christ—whose life "was the revelation of God in action." 24

Moreover, as we discussed earlier, Matthew 1:17 seems to divide salvific history into 3 scenes which end at the coming of Messiah and His divine mission.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Generations</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14 generations</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>14 generations</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14 generations</td>
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Matthew 1:17
Perhaps it would be wise at this point to look at the Gospels in light of their relationship to the three books which introduced us to Scene 3 (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther), for it is here that the place of Messiah in God's redemptive program is clearly seen:

**EZRA AND NEHEMIAH: WHY JERUSALEM WAS REBUILT**

We've already noted that the twin writings of Ezra and Nehemiah give us an historical record of reconstruction events in Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile. To fully appreciate these efforts, one must understand the motivating factor behind this significant gesture.

You see, the minority band that returned to Jerusalem did not engage in reconstruction merely for the sake of resurrecting old and familiar edifices, nor to make their homeland a "livable" place again. As Samuel Dodds explains:

"The return was pre-eminently a religious move. Besides the visions of political independence which filled their minds, they felt that a new religious center must be established. The prophets had inspired them to believe that from Jerusalem, now called the Holy City, and from the Temple in Jerusalem would go forth an influence that would bring the world into religious subjection to them." 25 (our emphasis)

Reich also notes that "the hopes of the ancient people of God were wrapped up with the appearing of a Person" 26 and that the exiles who had returned "ex-
pected the Messiah to appear during the life-time of the restored Jerusalem."27

Maybe you didn't notice anything peculiar when the Temple was completed under Ezra, but do you realize that, unlike Solomon's Temple and the Tabernacle before that, the glory of the Lord did not come to abide in this second house?! Donald G. Miller explains this strange phenomenon when he states:

"The old temple was to be replaced by another and a better one. And that temple was the body of Jesus."28

We know from history that the Jews were ignorant of this fact. Nonetheless, as Reich points out so vividly:

"(For Israel)...The coming of Messiah is the coming of Jehovah also."29

So, you see, the purpose—the motivation—behind raising up the Temple in Ezra's day was nothing short of the expectation that God would again dwell among His people. That expectation, of course, was not realized until Christ—the Servant of Jehovah—came to the Temple more than 300 years after Ezra's time. Ironside gives us this sad note regarding the intervening years before Christ's advent.
"(Jesus was) crucified by the descendants of the very remnant whose zeal for God is commended in the book of Ezra."30

Before we deal with the Gospels in relationship to the book of Esther, let us look briefly at the Person and work of Messiah as He is presented in Scripture. Such an investigation will hopefully enable the reader to comprehend more fully the potential and strategic place the Jews abroad will have when Messiah's work is finished at the end of Scene 3.

THE GOSPELS: AN HISTORICAL INNOVATION

It would be an impossible task for us to present even an abbreviated "Life of Christ" at this point, but we do hope that the reader will see a new dimension and significance to the Gospel story and the Person presented therein as a result of this study.

To be sure, the impact of the life of Jesus is as incredible and indelible as it is divine. As one author notes:

"The shadow of the Christ extends backwards to the remotest horizon of history, and His influence, power and glory move onward to the culmination of all time and history."31
The Gospels, of course, tell us the dynamic story of the ministry of Jesus. And just so the familiar will not become common, let us ask an obvious question. The question is this: Is there anything in the structure of Scripture that indicates God wants to make sure we catch the prominence of Christ in His redemptive operation? Dear friends, God tells you FOUR TIMES, "Watch this!"

FOUR TIMES!

Remember when we looked at the Nation of Israel in her golden hour? We suggested at that juncture that one could not fully grasp the glory of this kingdom unless they saw two dimensions or pictures of it, and so we looked at the reigns of David and Solomon combined. Does this, then, help you to realize what an historical innovation the four Gospels are?

Unger gives us the reason why Christ's portrait is presented to us in four different records:
"So multi-faceted is the glory of Christ's person and so far-reaching are the ramifications of His finished redemption that one Gospel account could not portray His full-born splendor." 32

Since we are trying to make ourselves sensitive to those places in Scripture wherein God has underscored something, it is imperative that we do not miss this unprecedented focus on the life of Christ through over-familiarity!

Now that we have seen the uniqueness of the Gospel record, let us look at another aspect of the life of Christ.

THE GREATEST THING GOD HAS DONE

When we studied the development of the nation, it was very clear to us that God was doing this. Again, when that nation was destroyed, it was evident that God was doing this, although through the agency of Assyria and Babylon. Surely, Ezra knew a Greater King than Cyrus was behind the decree summoning God's people back to the land. One of the unique factors of redemption history is the intervention of God into the affairs of men.

Look at the subject and verb of the following verses. These pertain to the life of Christ. Do you see anything exciting here?
Galatians 4:4 - "But when the right time came, GOD/SENT his Son." (Living Bible)

Acts 2:22-24 - "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which GOD/DID by him in the midst of you: Him...ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom GOD/HAT RAISED up..."

2 Cor. 5:19 - "GOD/WAS in Christ RECONCILING the world unto himself..."

Look! Here is our thesis:

EVERYTHING THAT GOD HAS EVER DONE, OR EVER WILL DO, INCLUDING THE FINAL GOAL, STANDS ON THIS: THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS!

Do you see where we erred in our drawing depicting God's redemptive work through Scene 3?
As we traced through the historical record, were you fascinated when God brought Israel out of Egypt? when Jericho fell? when the judges were raised up? How does the Cross compare to these events? Dear friends, don't view the Cross as just another event! :

A wrong view of the place of the Cross in God's program:

Do you see it? The Cross is not another event that happened at a particular moment in time! It is the GREATEST THING GOD HAS EVER DONE! It is the undergirding, the rock, the foundation for all that God has done or ever will do!

The true place of the Cross in God's program:
Indeed, one author captures the magnificent accomplishment of Jesus' death when he declares:

"His cross of shame is His everlasting pedestal of glory." 33

Do you see why the cross is an eternal pedestal of glory? Robert Evans makes this crucial observation about the cross:

"The crucifixion of the Son of God marked the high-water mark of man's sin and iniquity. It involved the crime of the ages, and yet, by the sovereign grace of God, it was made the channel and means of the greatest blessing to the human race." 34 (our emphasis)

Do you hear something wonderfully familiar in the above testimony?

Gen. 12:3

"And in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

Acts 3:25 gives us a more specific rendering of God's promise to Abraham:
"God (said) to Abraham, In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed."

--Acts 3:25

The Living Bible says that, at the right time, God sent forth His Son, "born of a woman, born as a Jew,"35 to bring God's salvation to the Earth.

Moreover, we read in Galatians 3:16 that Christ and Christ alone is the seed of Abraham through whom God would express and demonstrate the full measure of His love for mankind.

"Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'AND TO SEEDS,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'AND TO YOUR SEED,' that is, Christ." (NASB)

Ah! now we see it! This had been Jehovah's intent for Israel, that Great Nation which launched the hopes of God toward Planet Earth. This is the reason He called a people to Himself, to be holy and blameless and pure in seed. This is why He attended a faithful few, the remnant, and preserved them while empires fell. It was all for this: that Messiah might come through Israel, yet to the world. Jesus was God's confirmation that "salvation is of the Jews." (John 4:24)
Remember the Jews scattered throughout the Persian empire in the book of Esther? We said that God seemed to be "holding onto them" providentially until the time came when He would use them supernaturally. Do you know why He couldn't use them then, as well as through the Grecian and Roman empires? That is, why didn't God's nation dispersed among the nations tell those they touched about God's wonderful salvation? Dear friends, they did not evangelize the nations because they did not have anything to tell! How could they proclaim what, at that point, had not yet been provided?

But now, at the end of Scene 3, God, in Christ, provides salvation for the world! That supreme act was the whole purpose and thrust behind Scenes One, Two and Three. In fact, if we were to collapse these three scenes into one, we could correctly state that God's activities from Abraham until the coming of Messiah were all to this end:
Now, what does this provision mean in terms of God's scattered people? It means that the Gospel (=the account of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection) already has an established audience throughout the world via the synagogues raised up by the Jews during the dispersion!

The synagogue, you will remember, was a common institution in the Roman world. But more than that, they were, according to Unger, among the first places the Christian gospel was proclaimed!\(^{36}\) (See Acts 9:20; 13:5) Isn't it wonderful how God used the chastening of Israel as a means for penetrating the Roman world with the message of salvation? (We will see the actual out-working of this in ACT II).
THE COMING OF MESSIAH COMPLETES ACT I

In looking at the Gospels, we have tried to ascertain Messiah's place in God's redemptive program. Let us again reiterate that the Cross—which reconciled men back to God—is the greatest thing God has ever done. Let us caution, too, that it isn't the only thing God has done, which is often the way New Testament believers look at it.

We believe the three scenes we have examined, when put together, give us the total gospel. That is, if the "Good News" is the fact that salvation has been provided, one must go back to Abraham to fully understand the birth of such glad tidings. We believe the "Good News" really started there—for that is when the Everlasting God of heaven stooped down to assess the misery of man, and knew He couldn't fully express His all-encompassing concern unless He—very God—stepped down to become very man, and to touch the hearts of men with His unsearchable love and His unspeakable gift!

If you agree with us that Act I began with Abraham, let us now show you why we believe it climaxes with the Cross. Look at Hebrews 9:26, which speaks in reference to the Messiah.

"...He (Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." (RSV)
The NASB renders Hebrews 9:26 in this fashion:

"...But now once at the consummation He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

The King James Version uses the misleading phrase, "the end of the world." We say that is misleading because the world did not come to an end when Jesus died on the cross. But what did? Could we suggest the following?:

"(Christ) has appeared once (this will never be repeated) at the end of the age (at the end of Scenes 1, 2 and 3) to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

The Cross does not constitute the end of the world. It is the consummation of an age, a dispensation, of ACT I, if you will. When Jesus cried out on the Cross, "It is finished!", what was He referring to? Did His death preclude any further activities at God's initiative? Oh, no! He wasn't suggesting that God's redemptive program had come to an end; we still have ACT II and ACT III, you know. God didn't quit working after the cross!

So what was finished? May we suggest that salvation was accomplished; a Savior had been provided for the world; a means to save mankind to the uttermost!
When we had you pin-point the subject and verb in three different Bible passages earlier, we were trying to show you that the cross was something God did. The Messiah accomplished the work of God! We would like to interject here the concept that the Cross (representative of Jesus' life and redemptive mission) was also something God said.

Since Jesus' words were the Father's words (see John 8:28; 12:50 and 14:10), we know that God intended to say something to all of humanity through His Son. The book of Hebrews bears out this point:

> "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..."

(NASB)

What God had spoken heretofore was not as extensive nor comprehensive—nor as revealing—as what God ultimately wanted to say through Jesus! What did God communicate to us through the Cross? He said magnificent things, such as "I love you", "I have redeemed you", "I will sanctify you". In fact, God said so much through the Cross that it took the epistles to fully explain the love expressed therein!

It is our opinion that the two unifying principles of Scripture (what God did/what God said) gloriously converge in the life of Jesus. We believe the diagram below shows how the Messiah is the center of all God has ever
said or done from eternity past to eternity future:

ETERNITY PAST

God speaks...

having spoken has spoken

God works...

ETERNITY FUTURE

Ernest F. Scott suggests that Christianity ties the whole Biblical record together around the fact that the Cross is the watershed and glory of God's Earth-bound pleasure; it is the event through which God spoke most conclusively, thereby drawing together the ages of time and eternity. He says:

"Christianity...declared that what the prophets had foretold had now been realized. Jesus was the Messiah in whom God had achieved his work for man's deliverance. In the light of Old Testament thought we can see what was involved in this Christian belief. It rested on the conviction that God speaks to men in events, and that all previous events had been pointing forward to the decisive one in which he would finally reveal his purpose. Paul speaks of his own generation as that in which 'the ends of the ages have met together.' (1 Corinthians 10:11). It was like the knot which tied the whole past of humanity to its whole future. The ages before had been travelling towards this manifestation of God in Christ, and the ages to come were to start from it."
The illustration below depicts Scott's idea (and Paul's) that the Cross ties together past and future ages.

The Cross, or Christ's death, of course, is an act, an historical event. But Jesus' life, and what He spoke, also ties history and ages together in that His life summarized (fulfilled) the past and explained, in seed form at least, the future.

Knowing the impact of both the life and death of Christ on future ages (including ACT II and ACT III), it almost seems impossible to say, "The Cross is a reality;
ACT I is finished." And yet, that is where we are. The Messiah has come. He lived. He died. He was raised from the dead! He is the permanent, redemptive solution to Jehovah's ongoing program. And here is the great historical fact of ACT I: God has provided salvation for the world!

***

Well, the lights have been dimmed again. You have just witnessed a scene in the redemptive drama that was so tremendous, the Director felt compelled to show you four different versions of it, back to back! Perhaps, in light of that, you may be wondering what is going to happen in ACT II. The stage hands sure seem pressed to get new scenery erected, and there seems to be a lot of shuffling and talk going on backstage, doesn't there? Well, let us say only this: ACT II is a radical change from ACT I. Oh, yes, one more thing. Don't be surprised if the Director, in looking for an understudy in this next Act, summons you to the stage!
While we could not exhaustively cover the impact of the Cross in God's redemptive program on the preceding pages, we believe this illustration, which shows how the Cross is foundational to Act II and Act III as well as the Consummation of all things, will convince the reader that the Cross is the most important thing God has done or ever will do on Planet Earth!
NOTES
SCENE III
(pp. 252-312)


4Ibid., p. 892.

5Ibid., p. 3.


10Ibid., p. 71.

11Ironsle, p. 66.

12Ibid.


15Unger, p. 461.


18Unger, p. 461.


20Wood, p. 411.

21Unger, p. 466.
22 ibid.

23 Luck, p. 163.


26 Reich, p. 11.

27 ibid., p. 3.


29 Reich, p. 27.

30 Ironside, p. 9.


32 Unger, p. 511.


36 Unger, p. 461.

37 Scott, p. 150.
ACT II - Jesus Christ builds His Church as the channel for proclaiming salvation to the nations.

1. New channel promised: Church -- Matt. 16:13-19; Matt. 28:16-20
2. Old channel set aside -- Romans 9-11
3. Nature of new channel
   Three figures:
   Temple -- Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:5,6
   Body -- 1 Corinthians 12:12
   Flock -- Acts 20:28,29

In contrast to the nation of Israel, the Church is:
   International or Gentile instead of Jewish
   Local rather than centralized (Jerusalem)
   Non-political instead of political
(outline continued)

The Church, in contrast to the Nation Israel, is more suited to carry out God's pleasure in Scene 4.

4. Jesus Christ builds this new channel from seeds in Israel -- Acts 1-12

- He sends for the Spirit to empower the Church for its new work -- Acts 1-2
- Believers continue in the Temple at Jerusalem-- Acts 2:46; 3:1; 4:1; 5:42.
- The number of believers multiplies--Acts 1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7
- Christ moves them out to Judea and Samaria-- Acts 8:1; 8:31
- Christ calls Paul as Apostle to Gentiles (Acts 9) and opens door to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11; 18)
- Christ establishes a Gentile church at Antioch-- Acts 11:19-26

5. Christ begins to go to all the nations--Acts 13-28.
This activity continues through our day!
As He has in all the previous scenes, God introduces us to ACT II by publishing His next move. Likewise, and consistent with His method of operation thus far, He entrusts men to execute the details of His ongoing plan.

THE DIVINE PLAN:
Matt. 16:13-19; 28:16-20
Before the curtain rises on Act II, however, we would like to cover some important introductory matters. And so we begin with the necessary question: Do you know the next step in God's operation?

Surely, if you are a New Testament believer, Jesus' announcement in Matthew 16:18 is probably already on the tip of your tongue—without our even turning to the actual text! But, shhh, don't say the words yet!

You see, we are familiar with Jesus' declaration because this is where we live; Act II involves us! The plan Jesus unveiled to His disciples at Caesarea Philippi long years ago is still operating at this very hour! And perhaps because this scene has already enjoyed such a "long run", if you will, we have fallen into the trap of assuming that God has always worked through the (shhh!).

But He hasn't! And that is why the opening lines of Act II constitute one of the most contrary, sudden, divergent and mysterious dictums ever spoken by Divine initiative. Throughout Act I, Palestine—the Nation of Israel—has been the stage (the only stage!) for God's redemptive activities! With that thought in mind, listen to the new manifesto:
Church? The term is not an enigma for us, but, oh, what a puzzle for the disciples! What did they know about the church prior to this? Do you realize that not one Old Testament prophet ever said a word about the church? In fact, the entire Old Testament record is mum on the subject! And of the four Gospels, only Matthew uses the term.

But, ah, there are counter statistics, as Alfred F. Kuen notes below:

"Several hundred passages in the Bible speak of (the church); the book of Acts relates how the churches were founded; the epistles, all addressed to churches or to their leaders, give a great deal of consideration to the problems of the church; and it is still to the churches that the Spirit of God, in the Apocalypse, addresses His final revelations."

Are you beginning to sense that these two reports are incongruous; that there is, after all, a disparity in the Biblical record? To be sure, each canon seems partial to its own particular channel
Indeed, one of the conspicuous features of the New Testament canon is the fact that reference to the Nation of Israel is almost nil beyond the Gospels! Sure, a few chapters in Acts treat of this once prominent and exclusive channel, and "the ancient worthies of the old dispensation"—the 144,000 Jews who will be sealed for an evangelistic witness in the end times—are mentioned a couple of times in Revelation, but if it weren't for Paul's vital three-chapter treatise on the fate of "God's glory" in Romans 9-11, we would not even know that such an entity was yet in the purposes of God!

Why is New Testament Scripture so mute on the Nation? Why? "Oh," you say, "it's because Jesus is doing a new thing; He's building a church." But why is Jesus doing that? What happened to Israel, that redemptive arm in ACT I, that it is no longer the sphere of God's earthward affections and actions in ACT II?

Ponder the question below carefully, for herein is the crux of the problem in integrating Scripture.
In the previous section, we tried to show how the Gospels logically fit into ACT I, and suggested, on that basis, that the Old Testament really does not climax until the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah is incorporated into the scope of its canon. That is, there is no real difficulty with relating and integrating the Gospels with all the prior Old Testament writings.

The critical problem in integrating the two canons occurs, rather, AFTER the Gospels, and centers around the momentous change in channels in God's redemptive purposes!

The biggest problem in integrating Scripture is here!
Truly, some of the greatest theological debate today focuses upon the change in God's redemptive channel. And those who live in the Church Age—you, we—are caught in the midst of this controversy. For example, how would you answer the following questions should someone approach you regarding them?

* Is the Church the "New Israel"? That is, have the promises to the Nation and its role in the redemptive enterprise been turned over to the Church forever?

* Why didn't the prophets anticipate the Church in God's redemptive purposes? Does this factor not prove that the Church Age is an after-thought, a parenthesis, in God's salvific work?

* If the Nation is truly defunct as God's redemptive arm, then what is to be done with the many prophecies regarding her restoration to the land and her future glory therein?

* If Israel is, indeed, to return to the world stage, why is the New Testament so silent regarding such a comeback?

* Is not the character of God found wanting if one sees God's promises only in relationship to a "spiritual" Israel (which could include the Church) and not a national Israel, whereof the promises seem to speak?

If the above questions perplex you, and you are faltering in your confidence that God's revelation is without question one continuous record, we believe ACT II will have you exclaiming with the Apostle Paul: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33)
It is our contention that the radical shift in channels found between ACT I and ACT II is really not as abrupt nor as confounding as it initially appears. We believe this transition is smoothly executed and documented in Acts 1-12, which devotes itself to tracing the weaning of the Gentile church from its mother church in Jerusalem! In short, we believe the first twelve chapters of Acts show us the great transition from the Nation as God's redemptive channel to the Church as His new arm of universal outreach.

Probably because of our bias toward the Church, however, we see Acts 1-12 as solely a record of the early growth of the Church. In actuality, it is not exclusively that. Therefore, we challenge the reader to look for the Transition; to trace the development of the early Church, yes, but, also, to mark those events which point to Israel's diminishing role in God's new operation on earth.
Part of our objective for this present scene is to show the reader how Scripture anticipated and explains this otherwise baffling change, in addition to documenting it in Acts 1-12. Once all these facts are before us, we believe they will show that God, most assuredly, is continuing on (implying unity) in His program, and that even this radical change in channels is not out of joint with His overall purposes.

**THE SCOPE OF ACT II**

The illustration below is designed to help the reader see where we are in tracing God's redemptive activities thus far. In addition to depicting the main historical focus of each scene, the chart also lists the Bible books that pertain to each.
You can see from the above illustration that the book of Acts comprises Act II of God's unfolding drama. Indeed, the reader should note that the book of Acts is the only historical record in the New Testament besides the Gospels! In view of that fact, let us explain, then, what we mean when we designate the scope of Act II as "Acts 1-28 and following" (Acts 1-28ff).

Since we are tracing the historical activities of God, the phrase "and following" is not a reference to the epistles, which are exclusively doctrinal in nature. Likewise, the book of Revelation is not intended since it
is prophecy rather than history.

Might we suggest that we have designated the Church Age as "Acts 1-28ff" because we do not believe that the historical record of the Church ends in chapter 28? That is, we believe that the Divine activity recorded throughout this book continues in glorious power today. Jesus is still building His Church! As Everett F. Harrison notes:

"What Jesus began by His earthly ministry is seen as carried forward through the agency of the Holy Spirit working through the Church." 4

In that regard, then, the book of Acts is an open-ended history. Yes, the canon is closed in terms of the book's 28 chapters, but, in another sense, successive episodes are still unfolding as Jesus continues, even in our day, to build His Church. Were this latter history of the church's growth incorporated into Luke's work, it would, most probably, include familiar names, such as Origen, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Moody, Graham--and your own!
Let us say one more word about the scope of Act II. We have listed the book of Acts as the sole script for this new action in God's redemptive drama (see above chart), but, in reality, it is the gospel of Matthew which embeds the seed of this dynamic operation. Therefore, we believe that one cannot study the history of the growing Church (the book of Acts), without first considering its inception in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew 16:13-19
28:16-20
Acts 1-28

The above illustration should remind the reader of the progressive nature of Scripture. That is, whenever God speaks or acts, He begins with a seed, and that seed, although very small, contains all the elements which will gradually unfold until maturity. In this respect, then, the Gospel of Matthew gives us Jesus' promise of a new channel, while the book of Acts documents the progressive fulfillment of that promise.

In like manner, the fate of the old channel, Israel, which is recorded step by step in Acts 1-12, is announced in seed form in Jesus' parable of the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-39).
The reader is asked to keep this progressive aspect of Scripture in mind, for when the curtain rises on ACT II, we will, of necessity, look first to several introductory (seed) passages before picking up the actual historical momentum of this scene as recorded in the book of Acts.

These introductory passages, then, include Matthew 16:13-19 and Matthew 28:16-20, both of which deal with the promise of a new channel; and Matthew 21:33-39 and Romans 9-11, both of which tell us something about the old channel, Israel, being set aside.

In addition, we will be looking at several passages in the epistles which describe the nature of the new channel and show how it is perfectly suited for its mission in Scene 4. It is only after these matters have been tackled that we will trace what God is actually doing through this new channel (Acts 1-28).

Finally, and this is the point we have been aiming at all along, even though these introductory/explanatory passages listed above do not constitute ACT II proper, we will include them as the needful setting from which will spring the true theater of action.

Well, we've just got a moment or two before curtain time. Let us remind the reader that ACT II is what God is doing TODAY! We are part of its history! And don't forget that any of us could be chosen as an understudy for this particular performance, so let's be prepared.

Ah, there's the curtain!
As the curtain begins to rise on Act II, let us say something about the setting. Jesus is talking with His disciples, and is about to tell them His next move. When Act I closed, you will remember, Jesus—the promised Messiah—had been sent to that small minority of Jews in Jerusalem and had been rejected by them. He was then crucified.

Do you see where we are in God's program? Matthew 16:13-19 takes place before Jesus treads the path to Golgatha. God has sent His Savior into the world. He has been circulating among the multitudes, doing miracles and wonderful signs. And now, Jesus turns to the disciples and poses this important question (Matthew 16:13):

"WHOM DO MEN SAY THAT I THE SON OF MAN AM?"
The disciples give the various reports circulating throughout the community; all of them wrong! Then Jesus zeros in on His intimate band of followers and asks:

"BUT WHOM SAY YE THAT I AM?"
--Matthew 16:15

Jesus is not here engaging His disciples in some irrelevant rap session in theology. The question was an unsettled issue from the beginning of redemptive history when Pharaoh, king of Egypt, smugly retorted to Moses, "Who is Jehovah, that I should harken to His voice to let Israel go?" (Exodus 5:2, ASV, 1901).

Jesus is addressing the men who have walked with Him, toiled with Him, ministered with Him. And now He wants to know: "Do you know who I am, really?" It is here that Peter gives his historic confession of faith:

"THOU ART THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD."
--Matthew 16:16


"Jesus couldn't turn His face resolutely to the cross until His disciples had a true apprehension of His Person."
Another author fortifies MacDonald's contention with the following remarks.

"Why is the identification of Jesus as the Christ so climatic (here)? Partly because Jesus was sent to Israel (xv. 24), and to fulfill his mission needed recognition as their authoritative head; and partly because he needed a group aware of his crucial role in Israel and banded together to witness to it. Death is impending (vs. 21); his remaining time for ministry is limited; Israel as a whole has not responded to his message (xi. 20-24); he needs a core group, convinced that he is Israel's God-sent leader, to carry his work forward among Israel and in the world. Peter's confession shows that the disciples have reached a stage at which he can begin to teach them what lies ahead."

We have emphasized the above facts because they are extremely pertinent to what Jesus is about to relate to Peter. The disciples are ready to hear what lies ahead and Jesus tells them in a statement that is short, yet comprehensive and genuine and to the purpose.

"I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH."
Listen! Do those words have a familiar ring to them? Have we heard anything like them before?

**ACT I:** (Genesis 12:3)  
**ACT II:** (Matthew 16:18)

The Divine Plan  
"I WILL MAKE... A GREAT NATION."

The Divine Plan  
"I WILL BUILD... MY CHURCH."

Surely, you see a similarity in these two programs, but do you see a difference, also? We alluded to the fact that a new cast might be involved in Act II, but what have we here? A new Director!

**ACT I:** "(JEHOVAH) WILL MAKE (NATION)."

**ACT II:** "(JESUS) WILL BUILD (CHURCH)."
Jesus is in charge of this new production! This is no amateur play; it is the Father's redemptive program—the greatest drama ever written! The transfer of management is recorded in Matthew 28:18, the section wherein we also find the Great Commission. For now, we will just focus on verse 18:

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had directed them...And Jesus came and said unto them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'"

In ACT II, then, the Father relinquishes to the Son that unbounded power and command whereby God entered human history and brought ACT I to glorious completion.

Matthew Henry views this new operation from within the confines of our thesis (unity = God's intervention in history) when he states:
"The Builder and Maker of the Church is Christ Himself... and building is a progressive work."8

Well now, let us return to Matthew 16:13-19 for some further insights into this new channel promised by our Lord.

THE TIMING OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Too often, students of the Bible trample underfoot the very seed-bed of God's activity because they ignore the historical setting of a passage. Because the Bible is a record of God's intervening acts at a given time in history, context should be treated with the same respect as content. This is particularly true regarding Jesus' announcement of the Church.

Let us explain. You see, Jesus said, "I will build My Church" before His death and prior to His actual rejection by the Nation as a whole. So what does that tell us? According to Harold J. Ockenga, it assures us that:

"The church was no afterthought of God, but it was part of His great plan to reach the whole wide world with the Gospel of redemption."9
Too often the Church Age is looked upon as "a parenthesis in God's plan"--something He had to do quickly in view of Israel's "surprise" rejection of the Messiah. But it is absurd to think that the actions of men could ever catch God off-guard. Aldoph Saphir cites an Old Testament prophet to affirm this truth:

"The testimony of Zechariah is that the final conversion, repentance, and glorification of Israel would be connected, not with the acceptance of the Messiah at the first advent, but with the acceptance of a rejected Messiah, when they shall look upon Him whom they had pierced."11

God knew there would be an interim period between the first and second advents, and He designated that age as "the times of the Gentiles". (Luke 21:24)

In the New Testament, too, the Apostle Paul negates the idea that the Church was a sudden interjection into God's plan. As he writes in Ephesians 3, the Church was purposed by God long ages ago, but the plan was not revealed to men until ACT II. (The Church was a mystery; "a divine truth once hidden, but now revealed."12)

We are belaboring this point because we believe it is erroneous to view the Church as throwing the divine unity of Scripture out of whack. On the contrary, we believe the Church corresponds beautifully to its mission, and is "an institution suited to spiritual power and universal destiny."13
Likewise, we believe that the Nation was the appropriate channel for Act I in that "of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ." (Romans 9:5, RSV) Saphir celebrates this contribution in poetic crescendo:

"Israel's history, Israel's Temple, Israel's Scripture, Israel's glory, what is all this compared with the last privilege enumerated, 'of whom, concerning the flesh, Christ came, who is God over all, blessed forever'? If you want to know what is the greatness of Israel, read the first and second chapters of the Gospel of Luke—that Gospel which is written to show the universality of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the Gentiles; and there you will see what the angel said who came down from heaven; what Mary said who was filled with the Spirit of God; what Zachariah said when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him—what burst forth in all the songs of praise and gratitude—what aged Simeon said, who took up the child Jesus into his hands: 'It is the God of Israel who hath visited and redeemed His people.'"

We have not, as yet, gone into great detail regarding the ways in which the Church is suited for the job that must be done in Act II. That will come later. For now, we would like the reader to ponder an editorial set forth by Robert Evans in his book, The Jew in the Plan of God.

"If we fail to see that both the Church and Israel have each its distinctive place in the plan of God, we are liable to be confused about God's redemptive program which is for the human race and spans the ages. The mission and glory of one does not conflict with the other...each occupies a different place in the economy of God."
So far, we have only dealt with a segment of Christ's promise in Matthew 16:13-19. It is important to remember here that God notifies His saints of His next step before He does it. So it was that Jesus told His disciples His intent for ACT II when He said to them, "I will build My church."

That, however, was not all Jesus said. He also told the disciples something of the method of construction that would be employed, in addition to naming some of the characteristics of this new channel.

To be sure, the construction plans are terribly brief; Jesus makes reference only to the foundation! This is in stark contrast to the building of the tabernacle, for which we have three chapters (see Exodus 25-27) of minute instructions pertaining to its materials, furniture, and arrangement!  

Look, too, at the "blue-print" for Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 3-4). Talk about detail! Many of us skip over these 39 verses in our Bible reading because all they talk about is length and height and breadth and cubits, cubits, cubits!

And now we come to the Church, and Jesus gives only one word regarding its construction! Have you ever wondered about that? The difference has to do with the nature of the Church. You see, the tabernacle and the Temple were constructed by men, according to God's direc-
tion. The Church, on the other hand, is a "tabernacle not made with hands" (Hebrews 9:11). It is not constructed by men, but, rather, with men, and is, therefore, a living organism. This concept is important in regards to Jesus' statement about the Church's foundation.

There are several interpretations given for Jesus' address to Peter after he made his historic confession of faith ("Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.") But what did Jesus really mean when he turned to Peter and said:

"Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church."

--Matthew 16:17,18

Before we present our own view of what is meant by "this rock", let us list some of the prevailing interpretations of this phrase. In brief, there are theologians who insist that Christ Himself is the Rock, while others say Peter's confession of faith--not Peter himself--is the foundation upon which the church is built. Roman Catholicism maintains that Peter, as an individual, is indeed the foundation, particularly since the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given to him (see Matthew 16:19). (For further discussion of this issue, see Footnote 17 at the end of this chapter).

It is not our intent here to argue for or against any of these theories. We would, however, like to point
out that Scripture makes one other reference to the Church's foundation in Ephesians 2:20. There the apostles and prophets are set forth as being the foundation and Christ, the corner-stone.

Our own proposal is that Jesus is here duplicating the same method of operation which the Father employed in ACT I. Remember Jehovah's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3?

"I WILL MAKE OF THEE A GREAT NATION."

In ACT I, God began with this tiny seed, this man Abraham, and He built a great nation. Could it be that in ACT II Jesus begins with this small group, these who have declared Him to be the Son of God, and from this seed builds His glorious Church?
to work progressively and, also, that He accomplishes His purposes through men, not creeds or institutions. These factors are certainly inherent in our proposal that the apostles form the foundation of the Church. Robert Saucy gives a detailed interpretation of this controversial passage below:

"It is...probable that the 'rock' upon which Christ predicted He would build His church was a reference to the apostle Peter as the leader and representative of the apostles. Throughout the history of the church the 'rock' has been variously interpreted as a reference to Peter, Peter's confession, Christ, or all the apostles. The most natural interpretation, however, would appear to be the best. Using a play on words, Christ calls His disciple Peter (Petros) which means 'a rock' and then adds, 'upon this rock (petra) I will build my church', which would most naturally mean 'upon you.' The change of Greek words from petros to petra is best explained by reference to the meaning of the words. Petra denotes a massive rock which would be suitable for a foundation, while petros means a stone. Petra, however, being feminine, was not suitable as a name for Simon, so he is called by the masculine petros. While in other places Scripture calls Christ a rock (1 Co 10:4; Ro 9:33; 1 Pe 2:8), this does not preclude this term being attached to the apostle, even as the concept of the foundation can apply to both."18

Saphir takes the above argument, mixes it with salt and tears, and cries out:
"Who has converted you, pagans, into worshippers of God and Christ? Have you not derived everything from the apostles? Are you not built upon the foundation of the apostles?"

If you are not pondering these things in your heart with great thanksgiving unto God, perhaps you need to be reminded of where the Gentile (that's us!) stood in God's program in Act I. Ephesians 2:11-12 tells the grim story. Contrast where we stood in Act I with where the Israelites stood in Act I, and you will see our staggering poverty:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT I: THE ISRAELITES</th>
<th>ACT I: THE GENTILES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Their special privileges:</td>
<td>Our sorry position:</td>
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<tr>
<td>* the adoption</td>
<td>* cut off from Messiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* the glory</td>
<td>* alienated from Israel</td>
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<tr>
<td>* the covenants</td>
<td>* strangers to the Covenants</td>
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<tr>
<td>* the giving of the Law</td>
<td>* having no hope</td>
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<tr>
<td>* the service of God</td>
<td>* without God</td>
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<tr>
<td>* the promises</td>
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<td>* the fathers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>* Christ in the flesh</td>
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</tbody>
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(See Romans 9:4-5)

But, ah, something happens in ACT II to change all this! And the change—no, the revolution—begins with eleven unknowns in the Israelite world!
When Jesus said, "I will build My Church" in Matthew 16:18, He was announcing a progressive work. That is, in five mere words Jesus covered the entire scope of ACT II! Everything else we find throughout the New Testament is either an expansion, explanation or documentation of that seed truth!

So it is that in Matthew 28:16-20, we find another word, a further explanation, regarding this new, dynamic operation. Before we look at the content of "The Great Commission", however, let us establish the context, the soil from which all seed-truth sprouts.

Indeed, the timing of Jesus' announcement here is just as important as it was in Matthew 28:16-20. You see, Jesus said, "I will build My Church" before He went to the Cross. We noted that this factor negates the idea that the Church was an after-thought in God's program. The Great Commission, on the other hand, does not come until after Messiah's death, burial and resurrection, and just moments before His glorious ascension into Heaven.
Do you know why this is important? Dear friends, prior to the Cross, the work of salvation had not been completed; it is the death and resurrection that makes "Go ye therefore" at all possible! Jesus could not commission His disciples to proclaim salvation (ACT II) until salvation had first been provided (ACT I)!

John F. Walvoord shows the relationship between ACT I and ACT II, and also gives The Great Commission in a nutshell when he says:

"The world-wide results of (Jesus') death and resurrection (ACT I) must now be publicized (ACT II)."20

Floyd V. Filson states the impact of this truth upon Israel's history in these phenomenal terms:

"The mission to Israel must now become a world-wide mission."21

The shocking dimensions of this Commission may escape us (since we "live" in ACT II), but they were absolutely revolutionary to the Jewish disciples. Commentator Richard C.H. Lenski tells why:
"Hitherto men were welcomed when they
came to Israel, God's people; now the
people of God are to go to men every-
where."22

Do you see the radical change here?! Look! In
ACT I, where had God placed salvation? In Jerusalem!
There was no other place to meet God, to know Him, to
worship Him than where He had decreed.

ACT II is a different story completely! In Matthew
16:18, Jesus had said to Peter:

"I will give unto thee the keys (note
the plurality) of the kingdom of hea-
ven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind
on earth shall be bound in heaven:
and whatsoever thou shalt loose on
earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Merrill F. Unger notes in his Bible Handbook that
"Peter used these keys in opening gospel opportunity to
Israel at Pentecost (Acts 2:38-42), to the racially mon-
gel Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17), and to Gentiles at Caes-
sarea (Acts 10:34-44)."23

Do you see the implications of the above facts?
The Samaritans and the Gentiles at Caesarea came to know
the Lord outside of Jerusalem! God is working through a
new channel in ACT II, and men will come to know about
Him and His redemptive work in Jesus Christ wherever
He plants a (shhh!) in the community!
As our readers have probably noticed, we have been prohibiting the verbal expression of the word "church" in this section of our text. This has been deliberate on our part. Too often, our closeness to a situation prevents us from standing in awe of the fact that we are, somehow, an actual part of it!

So it is with ACT II. God is not working through the Nation Israel here; He has introduced something totally new. We need to appreciate that, and, also, to marvel that we, who heretofore had no place in God's salvific purposes, are now employed to carry out His Divine Will. The Great Commission was not for the disciples only; the assignment is also for the Church "until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 - NASB)
Indeed, Charles Hodge lists the priority function of God's new channel in these few words:

"It is the first and most pressing duty of the church to cause all men to hear the gospel." 24

In a word, then, the participants in ACT II are involved in PROCLAMATION, but not apart from the finished work of Christ (Israel's Messiah) in ACT I! Jesus Himself links these two distinct, yet interdependent, operations in John 20:21, which is illustrated below:

**GOD'S REDEMPTIVE PLAN**

**ACT I:**

"As the Father hath sent Me...

thru the NATION

to PROVIDE salvation,

**ACT II:**

even so send I you..."

thru the CHURCH

to PROCLAIM salvation.
Do you see the thrust of ACT II? The strategy is to go to all the nations of the earth; to make disciples of all nations. As Owen L. Crouch so aptly states it:

"What was for all nations should be announced to all nations, not kept by one." 25 (emphasis in original text)

And now we ask, do you think ACT II and its global endeavor has anything to do with Jehovah's ultimate goal?

"AS TRULY AS I LIVE, ALL THE EARTH SHALL BE FILLED WITH THE GLORY OF THE LORD."

---Numbers 14:21

Ah, with every new step it seems we're moving closer and closer to the realization of God's earth-ward desire! But, look! reaching the ends of the earth is no overnight task; what is to guarantee the success of this operation? Did you catch what Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 28:20?
That statement should sound familiar. God spoke those precious words—"I am with you"—to Moses and Joshua. In fact, whenever God is active in human history, we have the testimony of His presence, His enabling power. When Jehovah raised up judges, for example, Scripture tells us that "The Lord was with the judge." (Judges 2:18) You see, it is not like our God to abandon natural men to do a supernatural job.

Therefore, when Jesus says, "I am with you", He is really communicating this astounding truth: "No one less than I myself am with you" and I will build my church"! The phrase "I am with you" is God's guarantee that He is doing the work, although through human agents.

And here's more good news. Jesus didn't say, "I know this is a big operation, so I'll help you get started at least." No, straight through to the finish, He will be at work! "I am with you...until the end of the age" = "I will be working along with you until this operation is complete; until the curtain falls on Act II"!

This is some scene to be involved in, isn't it? Scripture tells us that Abraham rejoiced to see this scene; that the prophets made inquiry and searched diligently for when this glorious part of God's drama would unfold. Likewise, the angels, who already encircle the throne of the omnipotent God, crying out, "Holy! Holy! Holy!"—even
these yearned to see this spectacle on earth! (See John 8: 56; 1 Peter 1:10-12).

Do you understand now why the Apostle Paul anguishes so much over the fact that Israel—the Nation—loses the lead role in God's redemptive drama at such a crucial point? God is finally going to the world—but He has determined to replace the original cast! And God forbid that we Gentiles get so carried away with a sense of stardom that we forget that Israel has always held center stage in the purposes of God! Always!

**WHY ISRAEL LOST THE ROLE**

Have you ever wondered why God chose not to use the Nation of Israel to do the job we have described above? We would like to suggest that the reason is both spiritual and practical. As we stated earlier, this transition in channels is one of the most controversial and perplexing aspects of Scripture. Nonetheless, we believe there are explanations for it, both from the mouth of our Lord, and also from the Apostle Paul. Jesus addresses the problem in parable form in Matthew 21:33-39, while Paul gives a most insightful explanation of the transition in Romans 9-11.

As we study these significant sections, keep in mind that both address the issue as a spiritual problem. Following this discussion, we will tell why Israel, from a practical perspective, was set aside from doing the work
of the ministry in ACT II.

THE PARABLE OF THE VINEYARD

Matthew 21:33-39—which is, by the way, a scenario of ACT I—is perhaps one of the most important passages in Scripture in which Jesus Himself clearly spells out the reason for the transition from the Nation to the Church in ACT II. Or, as Matthew Henry asserts, "This parable plainly sets forth the sin and ruin of the Jewish nation." 27

Indeed, those who are familiar with this particular portion of Scripture will not soon forget its grave conclusion nor its ironic twist as to what party returns the smarting and irrevocable verdict against the nation! We shall look at this indelible aspect in just a moment, but, first, it behooves us to define the term "parable".

**Parable** (pär'á-b'l, likeness), a comparison of two objects for the purpose of teaching. 28

In the more usual and technical sense of the word, "parable" ordinarily signifies an imaginary story, yet one that in its details could have actually transpired, the purpose of the story being to illustrate and inculcate some higher spiritual truth. 29
Rather than have the reader consult Scripture at this point, we will publish the parable of the vineyard below, with the interpretation of key figures incorporated into the text. We do this in order to help the reader negotiate both the continuity of the story and its intended meaning. Further comment will follow.

A PARABLE
(Matthew 21:33-39)

There was a certain householder (Jehovah), which planted a vineyard (redemptive channel, or, in this instance, the Nation Israel), and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen (Jewish religious leaders), and went into a far country:

And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants (the prophets) to the husbandmen (Jewish religious leaders), that they might receive the fruits of it.

And the husbandmen (Jewish religious leaders) took his servants (the prophets), and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.

Again he (the householder: Jehovah) sent other servants (prophets) more than the first; and they did unto them likewise.

But last of all he (Jehovah) sent unto them his son (Christ, the Messiah), saying, They (the Jewish religious leaders) will reverence my son (Christ).

But when the husbandmen (the Jewish religious leaders) saw the son (Christ), they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.

And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard (the Nation), and slew him.
Unger gives us a shorter synopsis of events in this parable below:

"The householder (God) planted a vineyard (Israel, Isa. 5:1-7). The servants were the prophets, who were ill-treated. Finally, God sent His Son (Messiah) and they put him to death."30

Note the final and most heinous deed of the Nation, for herein is the reason why reference to the Nation is conspicuously absent in the New Testament. Saphir explains the tragic consequences of Israel's baneful action:

"With the rejection of Jesus of Nazareth, Israel ceases to have a history."31

Did you catch that? Israel ceases to have a history! The Nation has rejected both her Author and the One who has supernaturally intervened in her daily affairs, making her history synonymous with the acts of God! Oh sure, we have ensuing reports of this people from ancient historians through to the media-scribes of this century, but the glory of God's elect nation has departed--forever!--from the pages of Holy Scripture! This is no light thing.

Moreover, we learn in verses 40 and 41 that Israel brought this formidable doom upon herself! In verse 40, Jesus turns to the audience of Jewish leaders and asks
them what should be done about the despicable behavior of the husbandmen in His parable:

"When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?"

The Jewish leaders, totally ignorant that the parable's indictment is against them, reply:

"He (the householder) will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their season." (verse 41)

Do you see the ironic outcome of this parable? By their own words—in their own estimation—the Jewish leaders ignorantly condemned themselves; they judged themselves unworthy to carry out God's redemptive work! In verse 43, Jesus reiterates the sentence which the leaders themselves thought meet for the crime!

"Therefore I say unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given unto a nation bringing forth the fruit thereof."

And there you have the crux of the parable's message. As Unger explains:
"Jesus showed that the kingdom of God in the larger sense of spiritual light and salvation would be taken away from Israel nationally and given to the Gentiles." \(^{32}\)

The three steps that brought Israel to this tragic hour are listed below for our consideration:

1. Jehovah had chosen Israel as the channel of redemption for all the earth

2. The Jews rejected Christ; they are laid aside as God's redemptive channel

3. The kingdom of God is given to another people; the Church is now the channel through which God will accomplish His will

In contemplating the above action, God forbid that we, the Church, should say in our hearts, "Justice has been done!" Harold R. Cook cautions that the Church is not exempt from suffering the same fate which fell upon the custodians of our faith. Sobering words, these, and true:
"God's elections are always for the channeling of blessings. The favored group that forgets this will soon lose the favor." 

Keeping the above truth in mind, consider the illustration below which depicts the transition in channels according to Jesus' words in Matthew 21:43. Take note that the Church now has what Israel had. The Kingdom of God has been given to the Gentile nations, and Israel has seen her final hour upon the stage.

In ACT II, then, Israel is an empty shell—no longer used of God. And that is where she remains TODAY! Her engagement has been canceled, and the curtain has risen on a new cast of performers. And here's the rub that we in the Church are so insensitive to, but apart from three isolated chapters in the entire New Testament, there is no further explanation of this—and no anguish!
For those who long to fully understand "the love that drew salvation's plan," the epistle to the Romans becomes an indispensable text, particularly chapters 9 through 11. It is here that Paul, agonizing over Jewish unbelief, sets forth a presentation of the gospel as select in focus as the Cross on Mount Calvary and as broad in scope as God's impassioned sovereignty.

Romans 9-11 also gives us one of the most superlative explanations for the switch in channels that occurs in Act II, and is the only New Testament word which addresses itself to the aftermath of Israel's fall.

And what a one to address such an issue; a man jealous toward the glories imparted to the Nation, yet equally zealous in his conviction that the setting aside of Israel was both just and profitable in God's overall purposes.

Indeed, the opening lines of chapter 9 show that Paul is deeply troubled over the outcome of Act I. His kinsmen did not embrace Christ and have been set aside as the servants of God, while a people who did not even know Jehovah in Act I are given their former privilege of holy service.

Hodge explains that the Gentiles' acceptance of the Gospel was the most unlikely thing one could imagine! Nevertheless, he argues—as does Paul—that:
"The Gentiles, sunk in carelessness and sin, have attained the favour of God, while the Jews, to whom religion was a business, have utterly failed."35

What a humiliating indictment against Israel! Pride knows no more grievous wound than this--to see another milk with pleasure that which the other esteemed exclusive, yet common. Paul realizes how Gentile privilege would smart in the eyes of his brethren and so he tries to soften the blow by saying, "But wait! Don't forget your exclusive position in the old economy!" (Romans 9:4,5). His attempt to console, however, turns out to be an ineffective salve.

In actuality, Paul's burden in Romans 9:4,5 is not so much for his brethren as it is for God's reputation. That is, he doesn't feel he must enumerate the Jew's blessings under the old economy to ease the pain of their loss; he is trying to show them how faithful God has been in the past. He is troubled by the outcome of ACT I, not because his own people are made to look bad (they accomplished that on their own!), but because the outcome of ACT I calls into question the character of God!

You see, the setting aside of Israel, from the Jew's perspective, implied that Jehovah had reneged on what He had promised He would do through the nation! (Does that issue have anything to do with the unity of Scripture?)

While the majority of the Jews may have been lamenting, "Why has God done this to us?!", the apostle cries out, "Don't pin your own failure on God; He hasn't done this!" The whole of Romans 9-11, then, is Paul's answer to the Jew's preposterous charge that Jehovah has failed them.
WHY THE CHALLENGE TO GOD'S FAITHFULNESS?

Perhaps only a Jew living in the first century after Jesus' death could explain to us the degree to which Paul's enumeration of the Nation's privileges in Romans 9:4-5 smacked of falsehood and betrayal on God's part.

You see, by virtue of Israel's displacement as God's chosen nation, these "immutable favors" were rendered null and void. Or so it seemed to the Israelites. You may have thought the same had you been nursed on the promises and covenants made to the fathers. For sure, God had never (never!) said anything to the Nation about a Gentile channel. In fact, Israel's pre-eminence in the plan of God was a foregone conclusion... if one believed in the veracity of God's word.

So then, what had God said to Israel that made the Nation so sure of herself? And, conversely, what had God said to Israel that did not come to pass, thus casting doubt upon the integrity of His person? We shall deal with two specific items: 1. The promise to Abraham regarding the Nation, and 2. The promise to David regarding the throne. Perhaps if you see these particular promises "in writing", you will understand why Israel saw her being set aside as a breach of promise, and that most critical!
1. The promise to Abraham regarding the NATION.

"Thus saith the Lord, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinance of the moon and of the stars for a light by night....If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall cease from being a nation before me forever." (Jeremiah 31:35-36)

The Living Bible says, "I am as unlike-ly to reject my people Israel as I am to do away with these laws of nature!"

2. The promise to David regarding the THRONE.

"And the Lord said unto (Solomon), 'If thou wilt walk before me, as David thy father walked...then I will establish the throne of thy kingdom upon Israel forever, as I promised to David thy father, saying, There shall not fail thee a man upon the throne of Israel.'" (1 Kings 9:3-5)

(The last words of David included these found in 2 Samuel 23:5, NASB:

"Truly is not my house so with God? For He has made an everlasting covenant with me, Ordered in all things, and secured; For all my salvation and all my desire, Will He not indeed make it grow?"

)
Dear friends, we cannot realize the Jews' anguish here without considering this: The sun is still in orbit, and has been since it was first spoken into existence; and the moon and the stars have not failed, but ISRAEL DID CEASE TO BE A NATION BEFORE GOD! Moreover, as one of the prophets predicted, ISRAEL HAS BEEN WITHOUT A KING FOR MANY DAYS" (Hosea 3:4)! Do these facts reflect upon the validity of God's promises?

How does this problem affect your trust in God to bring things to pass in this day? What about His assurance to have the Earth filled with His glory, or the more immediate goal of building a Church that can storm the very gates of hell? Paul is dealing with a critical issue in Romans 9-11! It is no light thing to call into question the character and faithfulness of the Most High God! We can surely profit by heeding his argument and seeing the resolve of this critical issue!

As Matthew Henry notes, there are two things which the Jews stumbled at in terms of God's salvation—justification by faith without the works of the law, and the admission of the Gentiles into the church. Stated in other terms, the Jews were questioning God's righteousness and sovereignty! Have you ever secretly accused God of being unfair (unrighteous) or questioned His right to do things His way (sovereignty)? The issue is brought a little closer to home using these terms, isn't it?

**ISSUE 1: IS GOD UNRIGHTHEOUS?**

Paul realizes that, from appearances' sake, it does look as if God has reneged on His promises to Israel.
The list of special favors in Romans 9:4-5 were, after all, addressed exclusively to the Israelites, and no one else. The real question, then, was how could God continue to bless a people who had been cut off from Him, and who were thus no longer in a position to enjoy the blessings of His favor? Paul answers this serious dilemma with a principle enunciated way back in Numbers 23:19:

"God is not a man that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

(From NASB)

Listen, Paul says, God is not a liar. He doesn't back out of His promises. He is trustworthy, faithful, righteous, true! And to make circumstances (what seems to be) more reliable than God's immutable character is a repeated blaspheme of clay-imprisoned mortals!

And so, in Romans 9:6, we really find Paul beginning his argument with a conclusion. He says:

"It is not as though the word of God has failed." (NASB)

Now how can Paul, himself a Jew and therefore a recipient of the promises, how can Paul assert that God has not failed to keep His word? The reason is found in Romans 9:6b: "They are not all Israel which are of Israel." Charles Hodge clarifies Paul's intended meaning:
"The reason why the rejection of the Jews involved no failure on the part of the divine promise, is, that the promise was not addressed to the mere natural descendants of Abraham."37

If we were to bring Paul's observation home today, we would say, "Not everyone in the church is a Christian." You have to remember, then, who Paul is addressing in this section; it is NOT his kinsmen in general, but those who "would not submit to the terms of salvation presented in the gospel".38 As far as Paul was concerned, therefore, the Jews who missed obtaining the divine promise were the ones who pursued "self-sought, not blood-bought, righteousness."39 (See Romans 9:31-32)

And what about those who did embrace the Messiah? We in the Church are quick to quote John 1:11, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not", and too often ignore the "But" in verse 12, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." As Harold J. Ockenza notes:

"It was no inconsiderable number (of Jews) who believed upon Jesus Christ when He was here upon earth and immediately following His crucifixion and resurrection."40
Those Jews who embraced Christ during the First Century A.D. certainly did not cry out, "God has been unfair to us!" They received the promise, and the blessings, and the unspeakable gift of God! Like Paul, their testimony was "Surely the Word of God has not failed!"

**ISSUE 2: IS GOD NOT SOVEREIGN?**

Paul realized that his brethren considered God's actions unjust because they were having problems in the area of perception—circumstances aren't always what they appear to be—but they were also stumbling over the Potter-clay issue. (They were misperceiving their position in relationship to God!)

To the Israelite, religion and nationalism were synonymous; they were greatly offended that their pearls (spiritual privileges) should now be cast before swine (the Gentiles). Not only did they consider God's allowing Gentiles into the fold as being unfair, they went so far as to challenge His right to extend His mercies to another people!

Paul's answer to this latter charge is simply, "God is sovereign; He can do whatever He desires to do!" According to Hodge, the apostle's argument in Romans 9 shows that:

"God has mercy upon whom he will have mercy. He calls men, therefore, from among the Gentiles and from among the Jews indiscriminately. This is the conclusion at which the apostle aimed. The Gentiles are admitted into the Messiah's kingdom, verses 25, 26; and the great body of the Jews are excluded, verse 27."41
Harrison notes that God's setting Israel aside and favoring the Gentiles should have come as no surprise to the Jews since He did not take such action "without first proclaiming His purpose through His mouthpieces, the prophets." Paul documents the fact that Gentile favor was in God's plan long ago by citing Hosea and Isaiah (see Romans 9:25-29). These prophets, you will recall, are from Scene 2!

At the beginning of this section, we implied that the disciples would have been shocked by the term "church" since there is no mention of that word in the entire Old Testament. Gentile favor, on the other hand, is a different story. In Romans 10:19-20 Paul takes us all the way back to Scene 1 to show that God had told Moses (1) that a day was coming when He would make Himself known to a people who did not know Him!

But wait! God revealed His outreach to Gentiles even before Moses' time. Remember the promise to Abraham? God did not say, "And in thy seed shall all the families of Israel be blessed"; He said, "And in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Friends, Genesis 12 is the beginning of God's redemptive activities upon the earth; you can't go back any further than Abraham, because everything began in Abraham! Act II is NOT a parenthesis, nor an action by hindsight, nor a jolt in the normal operations of God; it is the actualization of something He decreed long ago which moves onward to the fulfillment of His glorious desire!
Hopefully, by now, the reader has reached a stage where he recognizes some principles we have suggested in terms of how God works. In the case of Gentile favor, we have seen how God first stated His intent through a spokesman before actually performing it. God tells us what He is going to do before He does it!

Likewise, His statement or operation begins as a seed, which contains in compacted form all that will later unfold and grow to maturity:

Scene 1: Genesis 12:3
"All nations shall be blessed through Abraham's seed"

Act II
"The Jews' Messiah makes salvation available to all nations."

In addition to arguing on behalf of God's righteousness and sovereignty, then, Paul is also trying to show us a unity in God's operation. All that has happened, he says, is according to the divine purpose. God didn't set Israel aside just for discipline's sake anymore than
He sent Judah to Babylon only as a punitive measure.

Friends, there is a forward movement here—a great, progressive advance! And for those who don't see it, Paul graciously spells it out in Romans 11, where we shall now focus our attention.

ROMANS 11: THE JEW & GENTILE IN GOD'S PLAN

We noted earlier that Romans 9-11 was crucial to understanding God's plan. Of a truth, these three chapters are nothing less than God's explanation of ACT I and II and their relationship! Indeed, the big issue of unity in the Scriptures is over how Israel (ACT I) and the Church (ACT II) relate in the purposes of God.

In Romans 9, Paul showed us that God did not break His contract with Israel because His contract was not addressed to the biological descendants of Abraham. The real child of Abraham was the one who, by faith, trusted in Jehovah and His promises.

In Romans 10, Paul's address is to those Israelites who did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God. This is the Israel that was cut off, set aside, rendered an empty shell! Paul repeats over and over again the reason for their fall: they trusted in works and tried to establish a righteousness of their own, instead of looking to the salvation of God. Paul concludes, therefore, that Israel has failed, not God.
In Romans 11, Paul deals with an issue that goes beyond whether or not God has failed Israel. You see, at this point, a Jew could say to Paul, "O.K. So God's promises were to those who exercised faith, and those who tried to attain good standing with God on their own merit brought about their own doom. But now what? Put this thing together so it makes sense. There are too many loose ends!"

In a superb fashion, Paul begins to do just that—to tie the whole thing together! He tells us the place of the regenerated Jew and the rejected Jew in God's future workings, in addition to explaining how the Gentile fits into this magnificent operation. In one mere chapter, Paul takes three controversial entities and truly shows how "all things work together for good... according to (God's) purpose" (Romans 8:28)!

**QUESTION: HAS GOD CAST AWAY HIS PEOPLE?**

Paul's first question in Romans 11 may seem redundant in view of the fact that he has already distinguished between true and false Israelites. in Romans 9:6 ("They are not all Israel, which are of Israel.")
The paramount issue behind Paul's question becomes more clearly defined when one alters the wording a bit. Paul is not asking, "Has God cast away the Nation?", so much as he is asking, "Has God cast away true believers?" It is the latter meaning which brings forth Paul's emphatic "God forbid!"

You see, if the question remains, "Did God cast away His people (Israel)?", both reality and God's revealed word would dictate "Yes!" for an answer! The Nation had been set aside and, moreover, the prophets said she would be set aside! But, ah, did God cast away those who really knew Him? No, not one!

Paul calls these true Israelites "a remnant according to the election of grace" (11:5) You will remember that God worked through a remnant to restore Jerusalem and the Temple for the coming of Messiah in Scene 3. Do you think God will work through this remnant here in Act II? Dear friends, who do you think made up the membership roll of the early church? The disciples were Jews, or shall we say, the disciples were part of the remnant!

Do you see the continuity in God's purposes here? All those Israelites who knew Jehovah or believed in Christ in ACT I are where in ACT II? In the Church!

I

II

[Diagram]

CHURCH

False Israel
Paul likewise sees his own conversion as living proof that God has not set aside His people. Indeed, many writers view Paul as a prototype of Israel in the last days. Saphir elaborates:

"The Apostle of the Gentiles combines in his own person the most lucid illustration of Israel's past history, ending with the rejection of Jesus the Messiah, and of Israel's future conversion by the self-manifestation of Christ, and subsequent unbroken devotion and service to their divine Lord."43

Paul concludes, therefore, that the setting aside of a great number of Jews poses no disruption in God's program, because the believing Jews—the real, saved, spiritually-regenerated Israel—are preserved in the Church. Only the empty shell has been cast away, and that not permanently!

QUESTION: WAS ISRAEL'S FALL WITHOUT PURPOSE?

In Romans 10:21, we learn that Israel was cast away because of REBELLION and UNBELIEF—the two things which hinder God from working through human instruments. But Paul takes great pains to let us know that Israel was not set aside just as a punitive measure. God has never "waited for the moment" when He could swoop down on His own people, sorely reduce their ranks, and then
"finish them off" with one merciless, bludgeoning stroke! The Babylonian captives, you will recall, had such a misconception of God, even though He had promised full retribution only upon their captors ("For I am with you," declares the Lord, "to save you; For I will destroy completely all the nations where I have scattered you, Only I will not destroy you completely. But I will chasten you justly, and will by no means leave you unpunished."
--Jeremiah 30:11, NASB)

Paul's argument, then, is that Israel did not stumble just so God could justifiably set her aside for her insurrection! God-applied correction is ALWAYS constructive; God would use Israel's fall in two very positive ways. That is, God had a pre-ordained purpose in setting Israel aside. According to Paul, Israel was set aside so that:

1. **SALVATION COULD COME TO THE GENTILES**

2. **SALVATION COULD COME TO THE CASTAWAYS (ISRAEL)**

Matthew Henry explains the first result of Israel's fall this way:

"By the divine appointment it was so ordered that the gospel should be preached to the Gentiles upon the Jews' refusal of it. And so it was..."44

It should be pointed out that while Israel's...
rejection of the Gospel did open the door of opportunity to the Gentiles, it wasn't only their rejection that necessitated the Nation's being set aside for the proclamation part of God's plan to reach the world. We will elaborate upon this a little later, but for now the comments of Hodge introduce a very provocative thought:

"'But through their fall, salvation has come to the world.' The Jews, even those who were professors of Christianity, were, in the first place, very slow to allow the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles; and, in the second, they appear almost uniformly to have desired to clog the gospel with the ceremonial observances of the law. This was one of the greatest hindrances to the progress of the cause of Christ during the apostolic age, and would, in all human probability, have been a thousand-fold greater, had the Jews, as a nation, embraced the Christian faith."

When one ponders the outcome of Israel's fall, it almost seems impossible that so much good could come from an action that Satan probably saw as a tremendous success! Did you catch the two points we enumerated? Through the Jews' rejection of the gospel, salvation came to the world...and to the castaways!

Remember Paul's lament in Romans 9? He was concerned for his kinsmen who did not embrace the Messiah. He could rejoice over the many who came into the Church, but what about the multitudes who stood outside the pale
of redeeming grace? Can someone who has gained all gloat over someone who has lost all when it comes to experiencing the new-every-morning mercies of the Living God? No way! But Paul can express hope for his brethren because of God's carefully designed plan. Martin Luther explains how Gentile acceptance of the salvation of God would serve to thin the ranks of Jewish apostasy:

"The Apostle (Paul) preached to the Jews and was rejected (Acts 13:46). Therefore he magnifies his office among the Gentiles, in order that they, (the Jews), might be provoked to emulation. For what we despise when offered to us, we commonly esteem when others take it..." 46

Hodge warns Gentile believers not to get caught up in pride because they are being used of God to provoke His former people to belief. His comments are vital to understanding the overall purposes of God in this present scene.

"Paul had said that the conversion of the Gentiles was adapted and designed to bring about the restoration of the Jews. These two events, instead of being at all inconsistent, were intimately related, so that both ought to be kept constantly in view, and all efforts to promote the former had a bearing on the accomplishment of the latter. This being the case, the Gentiles ought to consider the restoration of the Jews as in no respect inimical to their interests, but on every account most desirable."47
Indeed, in his grafting analogy (Romans 11:16-27), Paul sets forth the intimate relationship between the Jewish castaways and the Gentile converts which Hodge suggested in the previous quotation. This "mystery" (11:25), which shows how Israel is to be grafted back into God's program, dispels forever the notion that the Church Age constitutes a second operation in God's salvific plan! The illustration below depicts the view which Paul was anxious to discredit among Gentile believers:

A Wrong View of God's Redemptive Plan

First Operation
The Nation

→

Second Operation
Gentile Converts

Jewish castaways

Paul urges the Church to recognize that Jewish apostasy, which necessitated the setting aside of the Nation temporarily, did not mean Israel was out of the program finally! Paul wants the Church to look at the overall plan of God, and his big question pertains to the castaways:
Paul's answer to the above question is a resounding "No!", and the reason for his evaluation is given in Romans 11:25-26, which guarantees that God will one day graft Israel back into the olive tree (God's redemptive program), just as the Church (wild olive branches) were grafted into a Jewish "trunk".

Paul warns the Gentiles not to be high-minded regarding their apparent upstaging of Israel because their participation in God's drama is by grace. As Ockenga explains:
There is an implication given in Scripture that due to the unbelief of the Gentiles the time is coming when they should be cut off. "If thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shall be cut off." There is a time when Gentile privilege shall come to an end. 48

Paul's concern is simply to make Gentiles (the wild branches) aware that they, too, will suffer the fate of the original branches (Israel) if they turn from the grace God is now offering! In fact, Paul warns, it will be easier to graft back in the original branches than it was to graft in wild ones!

"For if thou (Gentiles) were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree (i.e. Israel): how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?"

Well, let us not concentrate on Paul's warning so much that we fail to see the wonderful mystery which he has revealed to those who long to know salvation's plan. Paul's real purpose for interjecting this Jewish section into a Gentile epistle is to show how God's redemptive program is ONE operation, not two!

According to Paul, different players may appear at various stages of the production, but the drama--
the progressive movement of God in history—is ever the same. There is a continuity in God's earthward activities, in His plan to woo back an estranged humanity; and to that end alone are nations, events, men and angels marshalled along the line of history which will bring "that day" to pass.

So it is, as you study the illustration below, you just might hear Paul's "Hallelujah!" in the background, and may, for the first time, understand why he exalts so in God's exceeding mercy!

A True Picture of God's Plan

ACT I
Jewish remnant

ACT II
Gentiles

ACT III
All Israel shall be saved!

castaways

= unbelief

= "The Times of the Gentiles"

----- = the remnant becomes the first congregation of the Church!
ISRAEL'S SETTING ASIDE: A PRACTICAL CONSIDERATION

We suggested earlier that Israel was set aside in ACT II for both spiritual and practical reasons. Indeed, her atrocious performance in ACT I not only brought the curtain down on God's redemptive drama, it opened the stage to a totally amateur cast!

But one cannot say here that the Director dismissed His original crew only on that basis! Yes, one could point to Israel's unfaithfulness throughout ACT I, but God's nature is such that He remains true even when His people falter (2 Timothy 2:13 says, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself"—NASB).

Moreover, Augustin Cardinal Bea, in his book, The Church and the Jewish People, argues this crucial point:

"Even after the condemnation of Jesus, God did not in any way reject the people he had chosen. On the contrary, he continued to offer them the Gospel of salvation. The apostles spent the first decades of their ministry preaching to the Jews of Palestine and when they began to go beyond its borders, they addressed themselves in the first place to the Jews of the diaspora."

50

Bea's observation coincides with our thesis that other factors were obviously involved in Israel's
being swept from the stage of God's redemptive drama. It is our belief that practical considerations also played a part in the transition from the Nation to the Church in this present scene. That is, we hope to show the reader that the Church pre-empted the Nation in this new phase of God's program for the simple reason that it was more adaptable for world-wide missions than was the Nation!

We earlier quoted Owen L. Crouch's assessment that the church is "an institution suited to spiritual power and universal destiny." Two questions must be entertained in view of this statement; one, what features inherent in the Church made it a more suitable vehicle for proclamation, and, two, what aspects of the Nation sorely limited its success for furthering the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth?

**A CHANNEL IS A MEANS, NOT AN END**

As we study the similarities and differences between the Nation and the Church, let us not focus on the controversy over the transition to where we miss the wonder of it! Each entity has been specially designed to facilitate the ongoing purposes of God, and each channel remains a means, not an end, to those glorious purposes!

In that respect, let us acknowledge that God made a Nation to serve His purposes in ACT I (the provision of a Savior). He did not build a Church in ACT I! Conversely, let us acknowledge that Jesus vowed...
to build a Church—not a Nation!—to fulfill the task assigned in ACT II (the proclamation of salvation). We conclude from these individual, deliberate actions that the transition we see in ACT II is not really as controversial as it is made out to be, and that God has fashioned each channel to fit its particular task.

HOW ARE THE NATION AND CHURCH ALIKE?

There are three major figures used in Scripture to illustrate the basic nature of the Church. Surprisingly, these three figures could just as easily be describing the Nation! When God began to raise up a great nation in ACT I, we looked for certain developments or characteristics that helped us determine when Israel became a bona fide state. Our focus, then, was on things such as the acquisition of land, the establishment of a government, etc., for these, indeed, are the things that make up a nation.

Now, we are watching Jesus build a Church, and we need to know what to look for in order to determine at what point the Church comes into being. The three figures we are about to consider tell us something about the nature of the new channel. Since these particular features are also inherent in the Nation, you might want to ponder why Jehovah did not use the Nation to forward His program in ACT II!

In brief, then, the nature of the new channel, according to the references we have listed below, is
likened to:

1. a TEMPLE (Ephesians 2:11-22; 1 Peter 2:5,6) 
   (a BUILDING also applies)

2. a BODY (1 Corinthians 12:12)

3. a FLOCK (Acts 20:28,29)

Are these figures precious to you, or are they common words that hold no special importance? Does it mean anything to you that God has described you as a temple, a body, a sheep? Look! The Church is a temple (building) IN WHICH GOD DWELLS; a body WITH CHRIST AS ITS HEAD; a flock UNDER THE CARE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD!

Do you now see the outstanding motif in all three of these figures? They speak of the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church. (A temple without the presence of God's glory is like a house with no one living in it; a body without its head is purely absurd; and a flock without a shephered spells formidable doom). They also show Christ's authority, but in intimate association with believers. (He is our Head, our Shepherd; an invincible Leader who has been given the right and power to command, determine, and judge things heavenly and creaturely!)

Lastly, these figures show that we are an integral part of God's work, a unified, though diversified, body, fully equipped for the ministry through the Spirit-imparted gifts (theocratic enablement!). As one author has said,
"No one of you is everything, but everyone of you is something!"52

Whew! The Church is one incredible entity, isn't it? Printed below is a functional definition of the Church, gleaned from the figures we have just discussed. See if you note any similarities between the Nation and the Church in this definition:

A GROUP OF PEOPLE, DIVINELY FAVORED AND EQUIPPED, GATHERED TOGETHER (UNIFIED) UNDER ONE HEAD TO SERVE AS GOD'S INSTRUMENT OF REDEMPTION

The definition could apply to the Nation equally well, couldn't it? You can see from this that the Nation and Church are very similar in nature. But let us make a very important observation: THEY ARE ALIKE, BUT NOT IDENTICAL! There ARE differences in the two channels, and it is these specific differences which make each channel ideal for its own particular task. As we study the building of the Church, let us not be so anxious to jump over to what God is doing through the Church that we fail to first see the unique nature of this new channel!

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND NATION

We've already seen how the Nation and the Church are alike, but now, it behooves us to see how they are different from each other. When Crouch hailed the
Church as an institution suited to spiritual power and universal destiny, he was actually addressing the nature of the Church and those unique aspects which qualify it for an exclusive mission (in this case, the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world).

As you know, it was—and is—our contention that Israel was set aside from doing the task of evangelism in ACT II for practical as well as spiritual reasons. We believe the reader will concur in our stand after looking at the Church and seeing what elements about this channel made it the most likely, and the most practical channel for God's work in ACT II.

THE FIRST DISTINCTION

In Acts 14:21ff, we find Paul retracing the steps of his first missionary journey as he heads back towards Antioch, the home-base for his extensive undertaking. As we read this account, we note that Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga and Attalia. More specifically, they ordained elders in every church throughout these various regions. (14:23)

So? So there seems to be a church in every locale visited by the apostles! Do you know what that says? Remember God's warning to Israel in Deuteronomy 12:13? He said, "Thou shalt not worship Me in every place, but only in that one place (Jerusalem) where I have put My Name"! The first distinction of the Church, then, is that it is a LOCAL body.
It is important to remember here what Jesus meant when He said, "I will build My Church"! He definitely was not talking about a central shrine. Under the old economy, God's dwelling place was in Zion (Psalm 76:2), but, now, under the new economy, Jesus would be everywhere men were gathered in His Name!

Why the radical change? Again, we would like to suggest both spiritual and practical reasons. Donald Miller targets Israel's spiritual failure in this area when he notes:

"The old Temple had failed to achieve the ends for which it had been built. Instead of being the place where God met man, it had become an impediment in the way of their meeting."53

Even in Jesus' day, the Temple stood as a monument to the Nation's new form of idolatry (see Matthew 12:6; Mark 13:1; Luke 21:5,6). F.F. Bruce also notes that Stephen, the first martyr of the early church, was one of the few to recognize that the gospel meant the setting aside of the temple order as a way of approach to God.54

From a practical standpoint, too, the decentralized places of worship were better suited for accomplishing the new mission of reaching the world for Christ. Under the old economy, a proselyte (a non-Jew desiring to embrace Israel's religion) had to come to Jerusalem's Temple. And it's not that Israel was lax in trying to convert Gentiles to Judaism! Jesus, in Matthew 23:15, assails the scribes and Pharisees who "compass sea and land to make one proselyte." While His remarks are derog-
atory in this instance, we quote them only to point out this: the proselyte was brought back to Jerusalem.

You can see what a problem this might pose in ACT II, where the "whosoever will" aspect of the gospel made it a world-wide campaign. Can you imagine Paul trying to transport believers in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidia, etc., to Jerusalem, and, beyond that, gathering them all inside the Temple?! A local outreach was the more feasible means for accomplishing the task of evangelism.

There's another point to consider. In ACT I, the Nation was God's redemptive channel. Do you see the limitation imposed by such a channel in terms of what God is doing in ACT II? How many nations did God raise up to execute His divine will in ACT I? Only one! By contrast, in ACT II, the redemptive channel is the Church. How many churches are there involved in accomplishing the divine will here?

It was Jesus' desire that a church be established everywhere, in every locale ("Go ye therefore into all the world"), so that, through this local body, the Gospel could be proclaimed and men could be saved. Since the church is God's specific channel of redemption in ACT II, it is imperative that it be planted everywhere and anywhere a Gospel witness is lacking!

On that basis, do you know what constitutes a mission field? If there is not a local, indigenous ("living naturally in an area"), evangelizing body in a particular geographical area, that district, or community, or tract is, in fact, THE mission field!
To measure the success—and wisdom—of this new plan, consider how many churches exist in your own community. Do you know how many churches exist in Columbia, South Carolina, for example? Only one. Everyone—the entire population—attends First Baptist Church. Right? Oh, no! Jesus' success in building His Church is particularly evident in America where we find, almost literally, a church on every corner!

The next time you walk to church or drive to its location within a matter of minutes, remember that it wasn't always so. There was a day you would have been required to go...to Jerusalem! As you ponder that thought, perhaps you will see afresh the wonder of God's redemptive outreach in ACT II! And perhaps you will see how perfectly suited the Church is for God's purposes in this present day!

**THE LOCAL CHURCH: GOD'S MEANS FOR OUTREACH**

Numerous communities within a given nation

The church, implanted in each community, serves as an evangelistic outreach to that area

**Advantages:**
- numerous
- local
- indigenous
- non-centralized places of worship
THE SECOND DISTINCTION

The second advantage which the Church has over the Nation in terms of ACT II is found in Ephesians 3. There Paul talks about a "mystery"—a revelation that wasn't made known before, but which has been revealed to him in respect to the present age (verse 2). What had been revealed to Paul that no one knew prior to this? That Messiah would come? No; the Jews had known that.

Was the "mystery" the fact that the Gentiles could now come into the Church? No; that wasn't new: the Gentiles could come in under the old economy as proselytes. But look! Here's what was heretofore unknown—and would be a shocking revelation to the Jews:

"That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs (equal heirs!), and of the same body (fellow members!), and (fellow) partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel."

--Ephesians 3:6

Do you see the implications of the above verse? The Gentile would no longer have to "become a Jew" or a "perfect Israelite" (a proselyte converted to Judaism, who received circumcision, and observed the whole law of Moses) in order to know God and the realities of His salvific blessings!
Israel was national, sectarian, ethnically limited. The Church, on the other hand, was a new sociological entity, cosmopolitan and not racially-bound! We could say that it was international in contrast to Israel, which was definitely national. Paul's revelation meant that the church was now open to all peoples; it was no longer a "Jewish" entity!

In conclusion, then, we would observe that a staunch nationalism would hinder the spread of the Gospel among the diverse ethnic groups throughout the world (which is why we believe the Nation was not a practical vehicle for the task!), but the Church could serve as a channel "cross-culturally valid and which (could be) implanted and grow in any human culture."!

THE THIRD DISTINCTION

The final distinction between the Nation and the Church which we shall elaborate upon is found in Acts 12: 1-6. In this account, we read how Herod persecuted the church, and violently slew James, the brother of John. Realizing such action made him popular with the Jews, Herod also seized Peter and cast him into prison. When the Passover was finished, Peter was to be delivered unto death.

Would you say the Church had fierce enemies? Remember what David did when his enemies were gathered against him? He summoned his armies and whipped his opposition sore! Do you know what the church did when James was killed and Peter was grabbed up for the same
fate? Acts 12:5 says that every available Christian was armed with a club for the purpose of beating Herod to a pulp—right? No! Acts 12:5 says "prayer for (Peter) was being made fervently by the church to God" (NASB)! Prayer? Now that's a strange way to react to unjust aggression, isn't it? Why do you suppose the church prayed?

Let's bring the situation a little closer to home. Let's say the United Methodist Church downtown is vandalized during the night. When the church custodian discovers the situation the next morning, he calls one of the church officers who is stunned by the news. "That's okay," says the officer, "I'll have a posse rounded up in less than an hour. No one is going to do that to our church, and get away with it, I'll tell you that right now!"

The story above, of course, is absurd. The church today does not take the law into its own hands any more than the early church did! But why? Unlike the Nation Israel, the Church has no civil authority, no civil government! She is non-political in nature and, as such, begs the protection of the civil authority where she is planted. Do you see how this would be an advantage? No matter where the church is planted, it is dependent upon the government of the host country for protection and jurisprudence and, hence, poses no threat to national security.

On the other hand, Israel, with her military arm, could hardly step foot into another land without causing alarm among the very people with whom she may have wanted
to share the Gospel! Moreover, history has shown what ill results when the Gospel is mixed with politics or when the Church takes up the sword! God has done the Church a favor by performing "anthropological surgery" to remove her powers in the civic and military realm.

We hope you can see, from the above study, that the Church hurdles the obstacles which would have prevented Israel from doing the best possible job in ACT II. The Church enjoys three unique aspects which are dichotomous to the features of the Nation: she is universal (or international), decentralized (or local), and non-political. Hodge captures the ideal nature of the Church for the work in ACT II when he says:
"There is nothing, as was the case with Judaism, which binds it to a particular people. All its duties may be performed, and all its blessings enjoyed, in every part of the world, and by every nation under heaven."58

Let us remind the reader that our intent in setting forth the differences between the Nation and the Church was to help explain the transition in channels that takes place in ACT II. There can be little question that the Church is perfectly adapted to be used as a channel for what God is doing in Act II. Likewise, we hope the reader has seen that other than spiritual reasons necessitated the setting aside of the Nation.

So far, we have tried to explain the transition; our next step is to trace the historical unfolding of this one-time baffling step in God's redemptive movement on Planet Earth. Acts 1-12 shows God changing His channel—gently! The remarkable smoothness of this transition speaks for the unity between ACTS I and II, and also shows a forward step of actual progress!

We should note here that Acts 1-12 shows how Jesus built the new channel He announced in Matthew 16:18 from seeds in Israel! It isn't until Acts 13 that this channel, fully mature and fully Gentile, goes to the nations!
As we study the book of Acts, we will be looking at what Crouch aptly describes as "the growth pains of (the Gospel) becoming embodied in a church." Note that the phrase "growth pains" infers that we will be tracing a progressive thing as we watch Jesus fulfill His promise to build His Church.

In fact, we will be seeing progress from two perspectives; one, the weaning of the Church from its Jewish origins (the Transition!), and, two, the actual development and maturation of the Church from its inception in a Jewish womb.

In respect to the latter objective above, the reader should keep in mind that "God's purposes in the Church are Gentile-ward." Consequently, as we look for a "mature" Church in Act II, we will be looking for a Church that is purely Gentile and which is characterized by the three distinctives which we believe qualify it as the better channel for proclaiming salvation to the world.

Therefore, rather than tracing the geographical spread of the Church in Acts 1-12, our primary focus will be on those historical moments in which the Church emerges as a de-centralized, international, non-governmental body! In short, we will be looking for that new channel which Jesus thought was perfectly suited for the immediate goal of world evangelism. (The ultimate goal, remember, is that the inhabitants of Earth might all reflect the holy
A WORD ABOUT THE BOOK OF ACTS

Before we get into the text of that marvelous book that "tracks the progress of divine history from Jerusalem to Rome"\(^5\), it behooves us first to consider both the title and the purpose of this most strategic volume.

There is perhaps no book in all the Bible that is so difficult to pin down in terms of a title as is the book of Acts. The content suggests several possibilities, including "Jesus Builds His Church", "A History of the Early Church", "The Geographical Spread of the Gospel" or its two most common titles, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" and "The Acts of the Apostles".

While each of these titles is correct in essence, we are drawn to Everett F. Harrison's conclusion that any title other than the Acts of the Apostles "fails to convey any suggestion of necessary human participation in the events that are to be recounted."\(^6\) Harrison is simply upholding our own contention that God seems always to work through a man!

Henry Jacobsen, in his book, The Acts—Then and Now, expands this concept of God working through human agents to include today's Christians:
"Before Jesus left His followers, He gave them a plan of action for doing God's work. This plan is a sort of geographical outline of The Acts. Christians were to witness first in Jerusalem (chaps. 1-7), then in Judea and Samaria (chaps. 8-12), and then in the uttermost parts of the earth; Asia Minor (chaps. 13-15), Greece (chaps. 16-23), and Rome (chaps. 24-28).

That's only the beginning, too. The Acts doesn't tell anything about taking the Gospel to northern Europe, to the other continents, and to the islands of the sea. But then... The Acts is an unfinished book. You and I, hopefully, are still involved in carrying out the Lord's commission."

Without question, then, the book of Acts is our debut on the stage of God's unfolding drama, and should be read in that light. It not only is an open-ended history, it is the only historical book in the entire New Testament canon besides the four Gospels! Everett F. Harrison explains why this fact is so crucial:

"Without the Book of Acts it would be hard to make sense out of the New Testament. The gospels end with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The epistles, mostly by Paul, are largely doctrinal in nature, with only an occasional biographical or historical reference. So we ask all sorts of questions. What did the apostles do after the ascension? When was the Church founded? Who was Paul? How were the churches established to which the New Testament letters were written? These and other questions are answered in the book of Acts. Acts provides an account of the origin and early development of the Christian Church and serves as a historical bridge between the gospels and epistles."
We should be reminded that Luke's writing not only serves as an historical bridge between the gospels and the epistles, it also serves as a bridge between ACT I and ACT II! Remember our summary titles for ACT I and II? From Luke's standpoint, the Gospel tells of how salvation was provided in the Person of Jesus Christ (ACT I), while the book of Acts, the sequel to the gospel accounts, tells how this salvation must now be proclaimed to "all other regions which were far distant and separated from God" (ACT II). Crouch captures the unity of the drama in this fashion:

"In the Gospel of Luke the author portrays the good news of redemption as it was wrought out in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate God, as He tabernacled in human experience in the land of Palestine. The facts of the Gospel had to be accomplished in His person.

"In the Book of Acts Luke continues the story of how Jesus, the ascended, exalted Christ, gets the good news of redemption out to all the world."66

In short, the book of Acts offers a continuity to the drama we have been studying, and is the historical outworking of the Transition necessitated both by Israel's unbelief and the Nation's inappropriateness as a channel
for evangelism. As we have stated before, our primary purpose in looking at Acts 1-12 is to trace this transition in which the Church replaces the Nation in the purposes of God.

In order to make the Transition and the eventual maturation of the Church clearly tangible to the reader, we will mark the specific steps in this process, just as we defined the various stages (founding fathers, tribal framework, people, land, etc.) which led to Israel's becoming a bona fide nation in ACT I. Keep in mind, however, that our commentary will only be skeletal, and will only touch those aspects wherein the Church gains pre-eminence over the now rejected Nation.

ACTS 1-12: JESUS BUILDS HIS CHURCH FROM SEEDS IN ISRAEL

STEP ONE: THE FOUNDATION LAID
(Matthew 16:18)

The first step in constructing any edifice, of course, involves the laying of a foundation or underlying support. As we already saw in Matthew 16:18, Jesus implied that Peter, in some respect, would be an integral part of that foundation upon which the Church
would be structured. We have already covered the debate that surrounds Jesus' address to Peter ("Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church."), but, for the sake of review, we would like to quote a source which depicts the apostles as the intended foundation, which is our thesis, too. According to Eduard Schweizer, author of a commentary on the book of Matthew,

"The 'rock' is Peter himself, not his confession. Only on this interpretation does the pun (petros-petras) make sense. Matthew imputes no merit to Peter for his strength of faith, since faith comes not from the will or from actions, but from God. As the first apostle to experience the miracle of faith, he remains the 'rock', even when he turns into a 'stone of offence'. In this sense all the apostles and (New Testament) prophets are the foundation-stone on which the church is built (Ephesians 2:20; cf Revelation 21:14)."

Let us also reiterate here our proposal that Jesus is duplicating the Father's method of operation in ACT I, and will build His Church from this "seed" group of 12 men, just as the nation had its origin in Abraham and his 12 sons.

STEP TWO: POWER TO DO THE JOB

(Acts 1 and 2)

When Jesus revealed His master plan for ACT II in Matthew 28:18-20, He spoke to men fully aware of the
fact that Messiah had exclusively restricted his personal ministry to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."68 The marching orders of the Great Commission, then, were a startling revelation for this small band of Jewish men!

Truly the thought of evangelizing even a neighborhood block (when is the last time you made that endeavor?) would scare anyone who looked to their own adequacy to do the job. The disciples, who faced the prospect of knocking on doors everywhere, may have capitulated from their task if Jesus had abandoned natural men to do a supernatural job.

In Acts 1:4, however, we learn that the disciples had been instructed by the risen Christ to remain in Jerusalem until the fulfillment of their Lord's promise, "Ye shall receive power!" (Acts 1:8)

In Acts 1:14, more than 120 disciples are gathered in Jerusalem "devoting themselves to prayer" and waiting for divine empowering. These 120 knew Jesus, and had put their faith in Him! And so we ask, is this a church? Ah, it is a church in seed form! Do we say that only because the Holy Spirit has not yet descended? No, we say it is a church in seed form because it is still in Jerusalem and is solely Jewish in composition!

In light of the above, we would like to say something about Pentecost, which many theologians hail as "the birthday of the Church." It is true that the Church increased greatly in numbers on the Day of Pentecost, but let us remind our readers that it still was restricted to Jerusalem and still remained sectarian in membership!
F. F. Bruce makes this comment concerning the 3,000 souls who were added to the Church on the Day of Pentecost:

"The people from these many lands who heard the disciples speaking with tongues were... Jews or proselytes. (Why?) Apart from the intrinsic improbability that the evangelization of Gentiles should be in view at such an early stage in the narrative of Acts—long before this revolutionary act is introduced with a fanfare of trumpets in chs. 10 and 11—there is the consideration that the Greek word translated 'devout men' in v. 5 appears in the New Testament to be reserved as an epithet for Jews."

Let us not forget, as we trace the Transition, that we are looking for a Gentile Church. From Bruce's comments and others, we conclude that the Church Jesus promised to build was not "born" on the Day of Pentecost. Rather, Pentecost marks the conception of the Church which is yet to be delivered from its Jewish womb.

Pentecost is important in another respect to the embryonic church. It did mark the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and, according to G. Campbell Morgan, a new course for God's redemptive activities:

"Such a day as this had never dawned. This was the beginning of a new departure in the economy of God; not a new departure rendered necessary by the failure of the past, but a new departure rendered necessary by the accomplishments of the past."
Morgan is acknowledging that what Jesus accomplished on the Cross (forgiveness, atonement, reconciliation) paved the way for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and even demanded it! The ultimate desire of God is an earth filled with His glory. To this end, He filled men with His Spirit!

**STEP THREE: NUMBERS MULTIPLIED**


One cannot help but see a similarity between the Nation and the Church when it comes to an increase in numbers! When the children of Israel sojourned in Egypt, their numbers multiplied exceedingly until "the land was filled with them"! (Exodus 1:7)

Since a nation is, by definition, "an aggregation of people organized under a single government"71, you can see why people were instrumental to God's purposes in ACT I.

In ACT II, the expanding Church Roll is equally vital to God's immediate purpose. The Church is people reaching people for Christ. God's desire for ACT II is that His people, the Church, might reach all the peoples of the world with the Gospel message. It is God's ultimate desire to have the entire earth inhabited by people who are walking in His love.

So? So, the primary reason for Luke's mushrooming
statistics is to show that *people* are involved in what God is doing and that *people, people, people* are being saved!

The fellowship that started with 12 (Matthias was selected to fill the vacancy left by Judas Iscariot), and then grew to 120 before the day of Pentecost (which added another 3,000), registers another 5,000 in Acts 4:4— in addition to gaining "multitudes" (Acts 5:14) and "a great company of priests who were obedient to the faith" in Acts 6:7! Even by the most conservative estimate, then, the number of believers now following "the Way" had to be at least 10,000!

And do you know where they were meeting? Acts 2:46 tells us that the 3,000 added to the Church at Pentecost continued to meet daily...*in the Temple!* Likewise, the 5,000 mentioned in Acts 4:4 were converted to the faith after hearing Peter and John preach...*in the Temple!* In Acts 5:21 the apostles, after a miraculous escape from a public jail, resume teaching the multitudes...*in the Temple!*

Now, look! The Temple guards could handle 12 men filled with the Spirit, but what happens when that number increases to 5,000 or 10,000?! Don't forget the Temple hierarchy was vehemently opposed to the message of Christ! How could Christian Jews, who embraced a message and a Person despised by their brethren, continue in the Temple?

Do you see what is going to have to happen if the Church is to grow? Just as the Nation Israel could not remain within the nation of Egypt in ACT I, so the Church
could not remain within the Temple. There cannot be some-
thing new inside an old structure. The old ways of Israel
(the sacrificial system, e.g.) were still being observed
by the Temple proponents and, hence, could not co-exist
with Christian beliefs.

As Crouch observes, these "old Jewish forms" included
a salvation that was "national, sectarian (and) restricted"72--
a channel hardly adequate for a love that embraced the world!
From a sociological standpoint, then, the believers in
Christ had to get out of the Temple! As Howard A. Snyder
explains:

"The old Judaism could not contain the
new wine of the gospel of Christ. The
Christian faith would have to burst
the old wine skins of Judaism."73

Indeed, if a hospitable atmosphere still existed
between the two groups--or even an air of tolerance--it
was soon to be extinguished forever when Stephen, a
hellenistic Jew, charged the Jewish leaders with "Temple
idolatry". The leaders, sorely enraged by Stephen's
speech, drove him outside the city and stoned him to
death.

Before he died, however, the first martyr of the
Church not only saw the heavens open, he witnessed the
doors of the Temple being slammed shut forever to those
who preached the Cross!
The believers who had met in the Temple prior to Stephen's death were not only Spirit-filled and of the same mind in matters of doctrine, they were unified to the point that those without their circle may have felt like outsiders!

In general, the more united a group becomes, the more "exclusive" it appears to the onlooker, and the larger such a body is, the more threatening it seems to foreigners. It is no wonder, then, that the Church was confronted with such stormy persecution during its Temple stay!

But it wasn't just the multiplication and unification which disturbed the Temple leaders. A group that is large and unified is one thing, but when you add order and formalization to it, look out! The election of deacons (Acts 6) may not seem a hostile maneuver to us, but to the Jewish leaders any appearance of organization would be viewed as a threat to their own well-being.

The first seven chapters of Luke's treatise show us that the Church weathered many assaults by the Jews (opposition always arises where God is at work!), but his history is wanting in that it is "restricted to primitive Jewish Christianity and developments in the Jerusalem area."74 Indeed, if the gospel is to go to the regions
beyond, the people need to get out of the Temple and its host city, Jerusalem! Acts 8 shows us what prompted the reluctant weaning:

"And on that day (the day Stephen was stoned to death) a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."

Whether these persecutions were a result of the antagonism stirred up by Stephen, or whether they were just God's way of working out His purposes, one thing is certain about their impact. Calvin explains the end of such thrashings:

"Persecutions...do not so much break off the progress of the Gospel, but rather become aids to its advancement, according to God's wonderful purpose."

The persecutions that followed Stephen's death found Jewish Christians bolting across the border lines of Palestine into the virgin territories of Judea and Samaria! This is the first time in the historical record of Acts that God's people are outside Jerusalem! Would you call this a progressive step?

It not only was a progressive step, it was a
successful one in terms of the Gospel! Indeed, the reception of the gospel among renegade Jews in Samaria is evidenced by the testimony in Acts 8:6 which says "the people with one accord gave heed" to the Christian message delivered by Philip.

Philip was also to be instrumental in a conversion that would profoundly extend the Gospel's reach into the world--the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 8:26-39. Calvin comments that "although just one man, the eunuch held such an influential place in the kingdom that his faith was certain to breathe its fragrance far and wide."76

So it was that the persecution resulted in local bodies being established throughout Judea and Samaria. Confirmation of this fact is found in Acts 9:31, where we learn that the "church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria...was multiplied." In short, we have at least three churches outside the locale of Jerusalem--a tremendous milestone for the advance of the Gospel.

But, at this point, we still don't have the Church of which Jesus spoke, for the above membership is still a Jewish affair. God is, however, effecting the Transition, and something is about to happen in Acts 9 that will add spectacular momentum to it!

We turn our attention to that important road going into Damascus.
STEP FIVE: EMBRACING THE GENTILES
(Acts 9; 10:1-11; 18)

In our day, almost every student of the Bible can retell the events surrounding Acts 9. The story here is so much like a vivid newspaper account that one could easily clip the page, stand on a streetcorner waving it in the air (as did former news pedlers), and cry out, "Implacable Adversary Converted Near Damascus!"

Indeed, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is more than just front-page news! As Calvin explains:

"The calling of Paul ought to carry just as much weight with us as if God openly proclaimed from heaven that the salvation once promised to Abraham and his seed belongs to us today, as if we derived our origin from Abraham."77

Did you catch Calvin's emphasis? He said the calling of Paul was the earth-shaking event of the time! We have the steps leading to Paul's conversion so down-pat that we can recite them as if we were telling our own salvation experience. The man lived to ravage the Church (he breathed threats and murder against it constantly!) until his confrontation with the glorified Christ. Who cannot recite his humiliation, his three days of blindness, and his desire to know God's will for his life?
But look! Others had been converted prior to Paul's experience—and others would follow. So why the focus on this one man? Why don't we have a detailed account of the conversion of one of the "great company of priests who were obedient to the faith" in Acts 6:7? Wasn't it just as radical for a priest to come to know the Lord as it was for a Pharisee?

Might we suggest that the thing which distinguished Paul's conversion from that of other religious leaders was his calling. So often, we are mesmerized by the dramatics of Paul's conversion that we miss his exclusive commission! No other convert—whether scribe, priest or Sanhedrin member—ever was given the commission which was entrusted to Paul!

To Paul alone belonged a task which heretofore had been hid from the sons of men, which only God knew in past ages, which even the prophets were kept in ignorance about, and which the heavenly host eagerly awaited to see fulfilled! Paul was to be a light to the Gentiles! He was to blitz the highways and by-ways of humanity, compelling those once "far off" from God's invitation of grace to come into the eternity of His love!

Do you see any progress in God's program with the calling of Paul? Don't forget what we are looking for in ACT II. We are looking for a purely Gentile Church! While this phenomenon is still down the road a little, you can certainly see how Paul's conversion and commission would facilitate the realization of this spectacular goal!
In addition to calling Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles, God opened the door to non-Jews via a novel situation involving the Apostle Peter. As we read the story of Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10), we need to keep in mind that the apostles had been instructed to present the Gospel to the Jew only. That they had done so is evidenced by the fact that Peter's fellowshiping in the house of a Gentile was looked upon by his comrades "almost like a monstrosity".

We are all familiar, of course, with Peter's vision at Joppa in which he sees the sky open and a sheet-like object with non-kosher foods spread out on it settle to the ground (Acts 10:11). Peter is instructed by a voice to kill and eat this food which, to a Jew, was considered unholy and unclean.

Peter was not being rebellious when he defied the command, saying, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy or unclean." (Acts 10:14). In other words, Peter was pleading, "Don't make me do this awful thing. My Lord had commanded us long ago not to eat the food of the Gentiles! I do not want to disobey Him!"

Nevertheless, the voice reiterated the command two more times before the sheet was lifted back into the sky, and Scripture tells us that Peter was "greatly perplexed" as to what the vision could have meant. (Acts 10:17) It is at this point that several of Cornelius' friends summon Peter to Caesarea because Cornelius had been directed by an angel to call Peter to his house! (Acts 10:22).

Before Peter leaves with the men, however, the Spirit tells him not to have any misgivings about going to the home of a Gentile. It is perhaps at this point that Peter
realizes the meaning of the vision—a revelation of shocking consequence to a Jew! You see, God was not trying to tell Peter that it was okay for him to indulge in ham sandwiches; the food was representative of a people! Peter declares this revelation in Acts 10:28 where he says, "God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean."

Have you ever tried presenting the love of Christ to someone you refuse to dine with because you think that person is beneath you? The Jews had been forbidden to eat with Gentiles because the act involved such intimate fellowship! But, now, the opportunity to fellowship with Gentiles, to have genuine contact, was judged not only right, but essential, to the furtherance of the Gospel!

We are told in Acts 10:44 that the Holy Spirit fell upon those gathered at Cornelius' house. That is, for the first time in God's program, the Holy Spirit was imparted to Gentiles! As Peter's Jewish entourage looked on in disbelief, Peter shrugged off their doubts and baptized the new converts.

Moreover, after Peter returned to Jerusalem, both the apostles and his brethren opposed his actions in Caesarea. Peter gives a splendid defense, saying, "God imparted His Spirit; who was I that I could stand in God's way!" Peter was acknowledging that it wasn't his idea to open salvation to the Gentiles, it was God's idea—and he wasn't about to contest it.

In Acts 10:18, then, we have a very historic moment in the drama of redemption! Scripture says the apostles and Peter's brethren "quieted down" after they heard Peter's remarks and concluded; "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life!"
After reading Acts 11:18, where the apostles and Jewish Christians side with Peter's observation that God has opened salvation to the Gentiles, verse 19 almost seems to rescind their conviction!

Why? Because we read that "those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone"! (NASB) Matthew Henry explains this strange account:

"They preached the word to none but to the Jews who were dispersed in all those parts. They did not yet understand that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs, but left the Gentiles either to turn Jews, or else remain as they were."79

But, ah, in verse 20, we read that the men of Cyprus and Cyrene, apparently burdened for their own people, came to Antioch and "inaugurated a new era by preaching not only to Hellenist Jews but to 'the Greeks also'."80 So great was this ingathering that the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to size up the situation. He was so impressed, he left for Tarsus to look for Saul, and the two returned to Antioch, where they continued to meet with the church for an entire year!"
Do you know what you now have in Antioch? Something so significant has happened here that Scripture makes this important observation:

"The disciples were first called CHRISTIANS in Antioch."
--Acts 11:26

Dear friends, the establishment of a Gentile church at Antioch means one thing:

THE TRANSITION IS OVER!

We have been looking for a church with a membership predominantly Gentile, and headquartered elsewhere than in Jerusalem. That's exactly what we find at Antioch! Not only is the church there non-Jewish and non-centralized, it also has no political arm! This last factor is documented in Acts 12, where we see the church in Jerusalem, not the Temple hierarchy, responding to persecution. When James is killed, and Peter thrown in prison, the church engages in fervent prayer; it does not take up arms!

We will not argue whether the above incident involved only the body at Jerusalem or whether the church-at-large took the matter to God, but we do insist that the actions of this particular church served as a pattern for all succeeding bodies!
Paul's imprisonments, especially the ones in Rome, serve to illustrate that church members sought protection and enforcement of civic rights from the state; they did not take matters into their own hands.

Unger calls the church at Antioch "the birthplace of foreign missions," but we see, too, that Antioch is really the true birthplace of the Church! We have acknowledged that the Church was conceived (not full-born) in a Jewish womb, but once it was put out of the Temple, it "began to spread into the whole world, shedding the old Jewish forms."

Finally, we must remember that it is the Antioch church through which the message of Christ will go to the nations! One author appropriately calls this church "the mother of all others."

STEP SEVEN: CHRIST GOES TO THE NATIONS
(Acts 13-28ff)

Whew! It almost seems as if we have reached a climax in God's program—having witnessed the Transition and the consequent emergence of a new channel of redemption via the Church at Antioch. In truth, though, we are not at the end of something—we are at the beginning! Jesus needed a Gentile Church to reach the nations, and that vehicle does
not reach full maturity until Acts 13! It is at this point, then, that Christ is first able to go to the nations! In one respect, Acts 13-28 constitutes "ACT II proper" since it involves the actual proclamation of the Gospel throughout the world! Up until this section of Scripture, Gentile favor has only been token.

Norman B. Harrison notes, however, that "Scripture makes a matter of record the decisive turning of the Gospel from a Jewish to a Gentile program." The dramatic pivot comes in Acts 13:46 where Paul addresses Jewish rejection of the Gospel for the final time:

"It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you (Jews): but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles."

You see, even Paul had confined his early ministry to the Jews only, visiting synagogue after synagogue (see Acts 9:20; 13:5,14, 14:1), preaching Christ and Him crucified. Indeed, if you are wondering how the Gospel went so smoothly throughout the then-known world, it was because the synagogues, established during the Babylonian captivity, served as beach-heads for the Gospel presentation in the First Century, A.D.!

That is, in their initial outreach efforts, the apostles went to the synagogues in every city to preach the message of salvation. Those who embraced the message moved out of the synagogues and formed local churches! The synagogues, therefore, served as a preparation station for the activities of ACT II, and the church became their off-
The local church was an off-shoot of the synagogues that had been established in Esther's time.

Isn't it amazing how God works things out! When we read about the return in Ezra, it was disturbing to see only a remnant trickle back into the Holy City, wasn't it? Yet look at what God was doing through the others! He was setting up bases in every area of the then-known world...for the future proclamation of the Gospel! You will remember that the synagogue was a well-established institution in the Roman world, according to Unger. This factor certainly aided the rapid advance of the Gospel in Paul's day!

COUNCIL DEALS DEATH-BLOW TO GOSPEL HINDRANCE

Before we look at the exploits of that great apostle—that "man who shook the world"—we need to consider another factor which gave incredible momentum to the Gospel's spread in ACT II. As we traced the growth of the Nation in ACT I, we saw how opposition arose whenever God's purposes started to move forward, remember? The Church was also to encounter hurdles.

The outside attacks suffered by the Church are a matter of history; there was persecution by savage emperors and violent provocations from Jewish leaders bent on de-
stroying the widening influence of the Christian mission. But the Church also had internal problems, an "in-house" disparity that threatened the future well-being and growth of its membership.

We already looked at Peter's predicament in Acts 11:1-17 in which he had to explain to his brethren that God had showed him Gentiles were no longer to be excluded from the kingdom. You will recall the conclusion of Peter's Jewish "jury" at that time. It was decided that God had obviously opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of the matter! As the Church continued to increase, it became more and more Gentile in composition, greatly outnumbering the Jewish Christians. If Peter's jury had realized what a great influx of Gentiles were to enter the Church, they probably would have sat down immediately to write some new rules! As it was, they apparently were not concerned by the initial induction of the non-circumcised into the Church of God.

As the number of Gentile converts mushroomed, however, there arose some among the Jewish Christians who insisted that the door to the Gentiles be opened only half-way, "admitting only those who in addition to faith in the Messiah submitted to Jewish rites, notably circumcision." In short, these Judaizers, as they were called, wanted their Gentile brethren to become full-fledged Jews! If we are marching toward a purely Gentile channel, you can see what a devastating impact such a notion would have on God's desire!

That is why the verdict of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35) is so historic. This body concluded that a
Gentile did not need to become a Jew in order to be genuinely saved. In fact, no Jewish rites whatsoever were to be imposed on him! He was simply asked to abstain from idolatry, from fornication, and from things strangled and from blood (Acts 15:20).

Unger heralds the importance of the first church council in praise-laden language:

"The immense significance of the first church council consists in saving the gospel from Judaistic mixture, thereby setting Christianity on its own course as a universal spiritual movement transcending all social, racial and religious barriers, offering spiritual regeneration to everyone who believes." 88

In short, the "gospel of free grace (which) Paul had seen so signally authenticated" 89 on his first missionary journey was now loosed to spill salvation's tidings throughout the entire world!

THE MISSIONARY THRUST

If you have any question that Christianity was set on its own course of universal destiny and impact in the First Century, A.D., you only need to read Basil Matthews' account of Paul's incredible pioneering work:
"All across the high plateau of Asia Minor, in Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium, down the river valleys to lovely ports round the Aegean Sea—Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens—and in Corinth on a gulf of the Adriatic Sea, this dauntless master-strategist created what he characteristically called 'colonies of heaven', which, in turn, became missionaries to still unreached peoples."90

Bruce also hails this dynamic operation, noting that the book of Acts traces "the progress of Christianity from Judaea to Rome, and ends with the chief herald of the gospel proclaiming it at the heart of the empire with the full acquiescence of the imperial authorities".91

As we have noted before, however, Acts 28 does not mark the close of Act II. The evangelistic outreach of the early church did not end at Rome. As Matthews so rightly observes:

"The most amazing true mystery story of all times is the expansion of the tiny group of followers of a crucified village carpenter into a world-wide fellowship vaster in numbers than any other one group of any kind in all history."92

Indeed, the "enduring activity of Christ"93 is attested to by the fact that "in our day, His discipleship is rooted in the soil of every people on earth."94 The Twentieth Century Church—today's disciple—has certainly abetted the cause of the Gospel. J. Herbert Kane,
in his book, *Understanding Christian Missions*, is not em-
bellishing the facts when he says:

"THE CHRISTIAN WORLD MISSION IS WITHOUT DOUBT
THE MOST MAGNIFICENT ENTERPRISE THE WORLD HAS
EVER SEEN."95

Donald McGavran echoes Kane's thought when he suggests
the Twentieth Century Church is in the "sunrise, not the
sunset of mission."96 The dazzling beauty of that sunrise
is reflected in Ralph D. Winter's report on evangelistic
outreach during the third quarter of the Twentieth Century.
Says Winter:

"The church in Korea grew more in the years
1953-60 than it had in the previous sixty years.
The church in Sub-Sahara Africa more than trip-
led from thirty to ninety-seven million. In
Indonesia at least fifty thousand Moslems be-
came Christians—the first time in history that
such a turning from Islam had taken place. The
South India Conference of the Methodist Church
in the face of persecution grew from 95,000 to
190,000 members. The Presbyterian Church in
Taiwan between 1955 and 1965 engaged in a 'Dou-
ble the Church Campaign' and concluded it suc-
cessfully. In Latin America, largely due to
ceaseless and effective personal evangelism on
the part of the Pentecostal family of churches,
Protestants grew from about 1,900,000 in 1945
to at least 19,000,000 in 1970. In Brazil a-
one, by 1970, new congregations of the evan-
gelical variety were being founded at the rate
of three thousand per year."97
Those are amazing statistics, aren't they? We could quote many others—and more recent ones—but the point we want to make is this: the Church, given the care of the vineyard in ACT II, is producing the fruit thereof! Moreover, unlike the Nation's husbandmen, the Church, out of reverence for the Householder's Son, promises increasing harvests in the years to come!

In view of the above, one would hardly expect the curtain to fall on ACT II any time too soon, even though we Gentile players (a substitute cast!) have been a long time on the stage. ACT II has marked our debut in an exciting drama and none of us want to hear that Gentile auditions have been closed. Nevertheless, according to Scripture, the day is coming when our heavenly audience (see Ephesians 3:10) will no longer shout "Encore!", and the end will come.

THE CLOSE OF ACT II.

Those who have cherished participating in Jehovah's glorious drama in these "times of the Gentiles" may stagger at the thought of a final performance by a Gentile cast, yet such an end is mentioned several places throughout the script.

In Matthew 24:3, Jesus' disciples, who are also concerned over the duration of ACT II, ask Him when the end shall be. Jesus, who is the Director of ACT II, tells them very plainly:
"THIS GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM SHALL BE PREACHED IN ALL THE WORLD FOR A WITNESS UNTO ALL NATIONS: AND THEN SHALL THE END COME."

—Matthew 24:14

Hopefully, you can see in Jesus' words a definition of the scope of Act II; the curtain will not fall on Act II, He says, until the Gospel has been proclaimed throughout the world. We underscored the word "witness" because of differences which exist over the role of the Church in this prophecy.

Some hold to the conviction that the Church will effect world conversion before the return of Christ to establish an eternal kingdom. Robert Evans counters such a view, holding that the mission of the Church (according to Acts 1:8; 15:14-17) "is not to convert the nations but to bear witness to all the nations." Kac likewise sees Act II as "a partial ingathering of the Gentiles", not the consummation of God's redemptive enterprise.

Revelation 17 makes a pretty clear case that the Church will not remain faithful to her task anymore than the Nation did to its assignment. Norman B. Harrison comments:
The Apostle Paul also addresses the duration of Gentile participation in God's redemptive drama, but maybe you were too excited at the prospect of replacing God's original cast (the Jews) to really hear his warning. Paul said that we amateur understudies would maintain the lead role only "if thou continue in His goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off." (Romans 11:22)

Saphir tells the tragic aspect of Gentile unbelief, and suggests that Israel's defection is not so permanent nor terrible:

"It is true that Israel has forsaken the old paths, and rejected the Messiah, yet are they still in covenant relation with God, and wish to be so. The apostasy in Christendom, as it is described in Scripture, and as we see it already at work, is a radical and final one; it cuts off all connection with the Living God and His revelation in Scripture, and there is no promise of its ever ending in a return to faith."102

Do you see now why we do not interpret "the end" in Matthew 24:14 as the end of God's redemptive acti-
vities on Earth? This would be a pitiful climax, an unfinished work! What do you have if ACT II is THE end? You have a pocket of believers tucked here and there throughout the earth, that's all! Is that characteristic of the goal toward which God is moving? The Amillennialists say, "This is it! After the Gospel is preached, the Church is raptured and the eternal kingdom begins... in heaven."

Remember our quote from Watchman Nee in the initial pages of this study? It bears repeating:

"If we know God's plan, every time we read the word 'man' or the word 'earth', our hearts should leap within us." 103

Why does Nee say that? It is because Genesis 12:3 speaks of God blessing the Earth (i.e., the inhabitants of Earth)! Max I. Reich reminds us that God's ultimate
goal (Numbers 14:21) likewise involves man and Earth!

"The history of redemption properly begins with the appearing of the Lord of glory to Abraham (Acts 7:2). The goal is the reappearing of the glory and the earth being filled with it as the waters cover the sea." 104

Finally, this thought-provoking word from William Kelly:

"It is a great failure in the faith of any man, and a sad gap in the creed of those who do not believe that the Lord Jesus is going to reign over the earth. What has God made the earth for? For the devil? It would look like it if the Lord is not going to reign!" 105

According to the Word of God, then, the Consummation will take place on Earth! And, as Isaac Watts so accurately penned, "Jesus shall reign wher-e'er the sun Does his successive journeys run; His kingdom spread from shore to shore, Till moons shall wax and wane no more." 106 The work of the Church in ACT II, as glorious as it is, leaves too many things undone, too many prophecies unfulfilled! There must be another act!

Before we turn to ACT III, that great consummation of all God's earthward purposes, let us encourage the reader that the Church does not come to an ignoble end
when the curtain falls on Act II. Just as there was a "true Israel" within the ethnic Israel that continued on in the blessings of God, so there is a faithful Bride within the Harlot Church—and this Bride shall be translated into the heavens to be with her Lord! Theologians have entitled this glorious event "Rapture", a most fitting term for the long-awaited union between Lover and Beloved!

"We shall be caught up...to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

—1 Thes. 4:17,18

Do you see the implications of the Rapture of the Church in relationship to ACT III? The removal (not the destruction!) of God's redemptive channel at the end of ACT II necessitates a different channel for the execution of God's will in ACT III, doesn't it?

Floyd V. Filson points out that the Church was "temporary" in relationship to the Kingdom, called into being—to teach and evangelize in order to bring men to faith and train them in obedience to God's will. The Nation Israel, on the other hand, was never considered temporary in relationship to the Kingdom of God and its appearance on Earth! As Saphir so forcefully declares:
"This nation was not merely for a time. There is no new covenant nation of God. ...There is no nation that is God's nation in the New Testament. God has only one nation—Israel; because when He means to revive His direct dealings with the world and to renew His direct governmental manifestation and acts in the world, He has no other medium, by which to benefit the other nations, than the Nation Israel."[108]

It is our thesis, based on the testimony of Scripture and God's covenant faithfulness to Israel, that this "everlasting Nation" will be brought back onto the stage for the final, climatic, exceedingly glorious scene in God's redemptive drama on Earth. As Robert Evans attests:

"ISRAEL IS YET TO OCCUPY THE CHIEF PLACE AMONG THE NATIONS AS THEIR RULER AND BENEFACTOR, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THEIR MESSIAH, KING JESUS. This is the future program of God as revealed in His Word."[109]

Israel today obviously isn't at a place where God can work through her. Evans captures the pathetic condition of the castaways when he says, "The Jews today are a people with the favor of God in eclipse."[110] But something will happen in ACT III that will change all that! Israel will be prepared for her universal mission through the (shhhhh!) ______.
We will deal in greater depth with the transition that must take place before the Nation can serve as God's redemptive arm when we study ACT III itself. For now, and as a matter of review, the reader might be intrigued to know that God has repeated the same miracle in commencing each segment of His drama!

Abraham, you will recall, considered his wife's body dead in terms of what God wanted to do in ACT I, yet Sarah gave birth to the Nation of Israel!

The glorious events in ACT II sprang from a grave site, too! It wasn't until the crucified Messiah ascended into heaven that He began building His Church on Earth through the agency of the Holy Spirit!

And ACT III? Well, when the curtain rises, don't be surprised to find Ezekiel contemplating the power of God... in a graveyard!


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


17. William MacDonald, *Behold Your King*, (Kansas City, Kansas: Walterick Publishers, 1974), holds to the view that Peter's confession is the rock: "The Church is founded on the truth that Christ is none other than the Son of God," p. 91. R. C. H. Lenski disagrees, arguing that "the church is not built on the confession her members make, which would change the effect into the cause." (The Interpretation of Matthew's Gospel), (Columbus Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1943), p. 626. Concurring with the Roman Catholic view is Wolfgang Trilling, who says, "The security and permanence of a rock foundation is to be represented by this man Simon, and Jesus will build his church on him," The Gospel According to St. Matthew, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 61. H. A. Ironside, in his work, Notes on Matthew,
(Neptune, N.G.: Lolzeaux Brothers, 1948), takes the view that Peter, which means stone or piece of rock, indicates Peter was to be built into the Church—the Church was not to be built on him, p. 205.


19Saphir, The Divine Unity of Scripture, p. 58.


21Foslon, p. 305.


25Crouch, p. 29.


27Henry, p. 1312.

28Bryant, p. 431.


30Unger, p. 484.

31Saphir, Christ and Israel, p. 70.

32Unger, p. 484.


35Hodge, p. 329.

36Henry, p. 1753.

37Hodge, p. 305.

38Ibid., p. 326.
40 Ockenga, p. 168.
41 Hodge, p. 322.
42 Harrison, p. 94.
43 Sephiri, Christ and Israel, p. 63.
44 Henry, p. 1781.
45 Hodge, p. 362.
47 Hodge, p. 364.
48 Ockenga, p. 171.
51 Crouch, p. 49.
58 Hodge, p. 351.
59 Crouch, p. 49.
60 Harrison, p. 101.
61 Crouch, preface.


64 Everett F. Harrison, from THE FOREWORD.


66 Crouch, preface.


68 Allen, p. 262.


71 Davies, p. 469.

72 Crouch, p. 29.

73 Snyder, p. 14.

74 Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 34.

75 Calvin, p. 230.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., p. 350.

78 Ibid.

79 Henry, p. 1679.

80 Bryant, p. 47.

81 Unger, p. 578.

82 Snyder, p. 14.

83 Bryant, p. 46.

84 Norman B. Harrison, p. 100.

85 Unger, p. 461.

87 Unger, p. 583.

88 Ibid., p. 585.

89 Ibid.


91 Bruce, p. 20.

92 Matthews, p. vii.

93 Bruce, p. 72.

94 Matthews, p. 5.


98 Ockenga, p. 171.


101 Norman B. Harrison, p. 107.

102 Saphir, *Christ and Israel*, p. 75.


107 Filson, p. 44.

109Evan, p. 33.

110ibid., p. 60.
ACT III - God fills the earth with His glory through restored Israel

1. Transition to new channel
   - promise of restoration of Israel as a Theocracy (Ezekiel 36:22-39; 37:11-28; Amos 9:11-15; Romans 11:25-26)
   - Israel prepared through Tribulation (Isaiah 60:1-3; Jeremiah 30:1-9; and Matthew 24:15-30)
   - the coming of their King (Jeremiah 23:5,6; Daniel 7:13,14; Revelation 11:15)
   - the old channel (Church) removed (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4)

2. What God will do through Israel
   (Genesis 12:3; Numbers 21:21; Isaiah 2:2-4, 60:3; and Romans 11:15.)
Throughout the long years of the Church Age, the Nation of Israel has been "a people with the favor of God in eclipse"\(^1\), a fate foretold in Scene 2 by the sorrow-worn husband and prophet, Hosea.

According to Hosea, who carried God's brokenness over an estranged Israel in his own bosom, the nation would "abide many days without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image, and without an ephod, and without teraphim" (Hosea 3:4).

In other words, Hosea tells us that "during many days Israel will remain without true religion and without false religion--a state of religious neutrality."\(^2\)

Harold J. Ockenga writes more blatantly regarding Israel's present situation. He says, "At the present time Israel is not God's people"\(^3\) Now these particular observations would certainly sound all the more ominous if it weren't for the sure-fire certainty of this one: "The history of the Jew is the finger of God."\(^4\)

Edward Moseley, in his book, The Jew and His Destiny, tells the marvelous ramifications of this one unique aspect of Israel's history:
"It would be hazardous to predict the future of Britain, Germany, France, or any other nation, but there is no hazard whatsoever in predicting the future of Israel. The reason for this is their history is already written. The future of Israel is not a matter of prediction but a matter of record. The Jews are the only people who have their history fully written from beginning to end."5

Adolph Saphir gives us an incredible glimpse of that history in the paragraph below. Assured that God will yet grace Israel with eternal glory, Saphir rushes past her innumerable failures, leaps over the barricades she has set in God's way, and, like all bearers of good news, ascends the heights to give his resounding, antiphonal song:

"And now, supposing for a moment the history of the Jew as a nation had arrived at its termination, I ask, whereunto have they been chosen, and wherein consists their glory and their pre-eminence? Four hundred years in Egypt; forty in the wilderness; a long, dark, and terrible period of warfare, backsliding, and idolatry; a brief gleam of sunshine in the reigns of David and Solomon, a rapid, downward career of apostasy, discord, and sin, to the time of the Babylonish captivity; seventy years' exile; a long interval of darkness and oppression; the great rejection of the Lord of Glory, the frightful sufferings and downfall of Jerusalem, and nineteen centuries of shame, oppression, dispersion, and above all, above all, unbelief, blindness, hatred to God's dear Son, the only Savior!—behold this, as yet, is the history of the great favoured nation! And this is all? Impossible, and a thousand times impossible! God's gifts and calling are without repentance; He will yet be glorified in a converted and restored Israel."6

As we stated in the previous section, the efforts of the Church, though earnest, noble and wide, nevertheless
end on a rather anti-climatic note when viewed in terms of God's ultimate program. ACT II ends with a partial in-gathering of believers, the removal of the Church as God's channel of redemption, an entombed Israel (see Ezekiel 37), and an Earth hardly enveloped with the glory of God. There must be more if God's desire for Earth is to be realized, and Scripture clearly teaches that God will re-introduce Israel for the grand finale of His glorious drama.

As Robert Evans notes:

"The glowing pictures of Israel's future glory found in the Old Testament would be hard to believe if we regarded these prophetic statements as the words of sincere but uninspired men who sought only to encourage the people of their day by fanciful pictures of Israel's future. But we believe that these prophetic utterances embody the infallible and sure Word of God."7

What do these prophecies say that so convince us that Israel is to be returned to the stage as God's redemptive channel in ACT III? Saphir gives this testimony:

"From Genesis to the Apocalypse, there is an unbroken chain of evidence, declaring that, according to the divine plan, in Abraham's seed all nations of the earth shall be blessed, and that the Jewish people are chosen to occupy a peculiar and central position in the future kingdom of the Messiah."8

Before we begin tracing this marvelous chain of
evidence, perhaps we better answer a question that may have arisen in the mind of our readers. Up to this point, we have been tracing out the activities of God in the historical sections of Scripture. This has been in support of our thesis that the acts of God constitute the foundational unity of Scripture.

When we finished ACT II (the building of the Church), however, we also finished the last historical book in the New Testament--the book of Acts. So then, the question may arise as to how we can have another scene in this historical drama if there is not another historical book from which to glean our facts.

We would like to suggest that Israel's restoration as God's redemptive channel in ACT III--although it has not yet happened--is nevertheless "history." Granted, we must construct this final and climactic Act in God's redemptive program from prophecy, but it is prophecy which foretells the future action of God in history!

If you are familiar with the many Bible prophecies regarding the Nation of Israel, and if you believe with us that these prophecies are sure, you will understand why we feel free to construct ACT III from these prophetic passages. In short, we believe, particularly in relationship to Israel's future, that Biblical prophecy is nothing less than history on its way to happening! Adolph Saphir illustrates this point--at least in part--in his comments below:
"To one who believes Scripture, it makes no difference whether a thing has been actually accomplished in history or is merely written in the Bible. One is as sure as the other. We have not the slightest doubt that Jerusalem was destroyed, not only because the Roman historians tell us, but because Christ said that it would be destroyed. Neither have we the slightest doubt that Israel shall be restored, converted, and reinstated in their own land, because God has said so. The Word of God standeth sure forever."9

Alfred Edersheim likewise maintains that "history and prophecy are one, because God is one." According to this noted writer, prophecies should not be studied as isolated utterances, "but as prophecy in its grand harmonious historical unity."10

As we look at various prophecies regarding the Nation Israel in Act III, we ask the reader to bear in mind the following truth in that it shows forth the end of God's redemptive purposes upon Planet Earth:

"As we know the beginning of Israel's history, so with perfect certainty do we known the end of Israel's history. There is scarcely a prophet in the Old Testament Scripture who does not conclude his book by picturing to us Jerusalem filled with the knowledge and the glory of the Lord—the centre from which light and peace permeate to all the ends of the earth."11
When one ponders the certainty with which many modern-day writers tell of Israel's future glory (not to mention the Biblical writers themselves!), one is all the more anxious to see the curtain rise and to "get on with the show!"

It should be noted, however, that conservative theologians—although they agree in essential doctrines—hold dissimilar views regarding the Bible's eschatology (the study of "last things"). These different interpretations, of course, preclude a dogmatic construction of events in ACT III, although we shall propose a climaxing of God's redemptive drama based on one of these interpretations and the testimony of Scripture itself.

Before the curtain rises on this final act, however, we believe the reader should have a basic definition of the term "eschatology", and should also be familiar with the three most popular interpretations of the Bible's "end events". It is not our intent to give a comprehensive account of the three most current positions; the reader who desires more knowledge in this area should consult various reference works and/or texts on systematic theology.

The New Compact Bible Dictionary (Zondervan Books) gives the following definition of eschatology:
Eschatology (es-ka-tol' o-ge), a division of systematic theology dealing with the doctrine of last things such as death, resurrection, the second coming of Christ, the end of the age, divine judgment, and the future state. It properly includes all that was prophetic of future events when recorded in Scripture. Biblical eschatology assumes that the Scriptures predict future events with infallible accuracy and constitute a divine disclosure of the future.12

Many of the differences that arise over eschatology are in the area of sequential fulfillment (what takes place first, second, etc.), as well as other areas of consideration. We shall focus here on the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of His millenial kingdom. The word "millenial" means "one-thousand", thus Christ's millenial kingdom would be 1,000 years in duration (if interpreted literally).

In the field of eschatology, there are different views as to when Christ will return and at what point His 1,000-year reign will commence. There is also some dispute over whether the 1,000 years are to be interpreted as a literal 1,000 years, or if the number just represents a long period of time. Also involved in the controversy is the question as to whether this reign will be on earth, or whether it is to be understood in a spiritual sense only. The three major views regarding the Second Coming of Christ include premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism. We shall examine each of these views briefly so that the reader may have some idea as to where differences in interpretation lie. The definitions below have been gleaned from T. Alton Bryant's The New Compact Bible Dictionary and from R. Ludwigson's A Survey of Bible Prophecy. Both works are Zondervan publications.
**PREMILLENNIALISM**

(Pre = "Before")

This view anticipates a literal return of Christ to the earth, prior to the establishment of His kingdom on earth for one thousand years, and the beginning of the eternal state thereafter.

**AMILLENNIALISM**

( A = "No" )

This view holds there will be no earthly millennial kingdom. Instead, it sees the millennium as spiritual in nature—having already begun with the first coming of Christ, to be consummated in His second coming, and to be followed immediately by the eternal state. In other words, when Christ returns, heaven, not earth, will be His domain.

**POSTMILLENNIALISM**

(Post = "After")

Teaches that Christ will return to earth after the Gospel has ushered in a thousand-year reign of peace and righteousness on earth. In other words, the Church is seen as paving the way for Christ's return through a dynamic spread of the Gospel. According to this view, there will be a general resurrection at Christ's return (= the quickening of the whole Church of God). Christ will then deliver the kingdom to the Father, and the present earth and heaven will be dissolved by fire. A new heaven and earth will appear, ushering in the eternal state. 

The reader desiring more information on these three current views should consult pages 92-126 of R. Ludwigson’s *A Survey of Bible Prophecy* (Zondervan).
One need not be an expert in systematic theology to see right away that our construction of ACT III will be based upon the *premillennial view*. That is, we are going to propose that God will consummate His earthward desires through a restored Israel in ACT III, and that Christ *will* rule on earth!

As we have stated before, something seems unfinished or incomplete if God's drama of redemption does not climax on earth, or if Israel's theocratic mission to the world remains aborted. We feel these two facts in particular beg for another scene in the old redemption story.

**THE SCOPE OF ACT III**

ACT III involves Jehovah filling the earth with His glory through a restored Israel. That is the great event we hope to trace in the prophetic record. Needless to say, there are numerous passages that unfold this event for us; we cannot possibly consider all of them!

Instead, we will concentrate on the transition of channels which must be effected in ACT III before Israel can be used of God to fulfill her original mission. The brief word we gave regarding the removal of the Church at the end of ACT II will have to be enlarged. First of all, however, we will consider those passages in which God promises the restoration of Israel as His theocratic channel. (Ezekiel 36:22-39; 37:11-28; Amos 9:11-15 and
Other facets of the transition which we will consider include the preparation of Israel through tribulation (Isaiah 60:1-3; Jeremiah 30:1-9; and Matthew 24:15-30), and the coming of her King (Jeremiah 23:5,6; Daniel 7:13,14; and Revelation 11:15). Those passages which deal with the removal of the old channel, the Church, will also be reviewed (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

Finally, we will examine those passages which tell what God will do through Israel upon her restoration, conversion and fulfillment of mission (Genesis 12:3; Numbers 21:21; Isaiah 2:2-4; 60:3; and Romans 11:15). The reader should note that the Scripture references provided above are in no way comprehensive! They are listed in order that the reader may pursue further study on his own, since we may not be able to cover even these few in great detail.

**ISRAEL: A BLESSING TO ALL NATIONS**

We have tried to depict, in historical sequence, the unfolding of God's redemptive drama through the use of charts and illustrations. **Act III**, then, is pictured below, and should be studied in its larger context on the next page.
## God at Work

**As the Father sent me, so send I you.**

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Well, we are now ready to pick up Act III in the Bible record. Surely as the curtain begins to rise, you can sense with us that no production in all the world will ever surpass the exceeding greatness of the one we are about to witness! Some of you in the audience may even feel compelled to jump to your feet and let your applause ascend into eternal realms before the Director summons His superb cast for that final, achieving bowl!

Ladies and gentleman, you are about to see the glory of the Lord!

**ACT 3 - SCENE 1**

**GOD'S GOAL REALIZED THRU ISRAEL**

As we study each new phase of God's redemptive plan, we constantly marvel at how God so openly shares His agenda with mankind!

Jesus, you will remember, told His disciples that a master does not communicate his heart and mind to his servants, but to his friends only (John 15:15). And yet, at the beginning of each scene we have studied thus far, God has gra-
ciously taken man into His confidence and has whispered into his ear, "I want you to know what I am going to do next"! Blessed is the man who cherishes such undeserved communing with the Living God!

This amazing phenomenon—that God discloses His plans to men before taking action—occurs again at the beginning of ACT III. We have already proposed that Jehovah is going to use Israel to consummate His earthward desires, but, first, Israel must be brought back onto the stage of God's redemptive drama. And truly, no chapter in all of Scripture portrays this momentous event with such captivating imagery as does Ezekiel 37:11-28!

ISRAEL'S GLORIOUS RESTORATION

If you were about to engage a people in the most dynamic operation on earth, would you do your recruiting in a cemetery?! Dear friends, that's the opening scene of ACT III! When the curtain rises on this final episode in God's redemptive drama, we find the prophet Ezekiel overlooking a valley filled with dry, brittle bones. (Ezekiel 37).

According to verse 11 of this chapter (which is known as "The Vision of the Dry Bones"), these skeletal remains, which are scattered throughout the world, picture Israel's national and spiritual life since her dispersion among the Gentile nations. Surely, the picture is not a hopeful one in terms of Israel being used of God to complete redemption's story on earth!
Nevertheless, as Ezekiel surveys the scene, contemplating the extreme dryness of the bones and their great number, the Spirit of the Lord addresses him and asks him the following critical question:

"Son of man, can these bones live again?"

--Ezekiel 37:3

Dear friends, you will not appreciate the rest of this chapter unless you see the real question here! The issue is not whether God can bring the dead back to life; Ezekiel is NOT being introduced to resurrection theology! No, the real question posed by the Spirit is this:

"CAN THE NATION BECOME GOD'S REDEMPTIVE CHANNEL ONCE AGAIN, DESPITE HER CENTURIES OF SPIRITUAL DEGENERATION?"

You see, Jehovah cannot use an unregenerate nation to fulfill His utmost desire for earth! If Israel is to be His arm of salvation in ACT III, then something radical must take place to ready the nation for such a divine mission! Ezekiel's vision testifies that God will do an incredible work among His people! As Merrill Unger notes:
Ezekiel's vision, of course, shows that Israel's restoration will be by divine power. God is going to bring the bones (the exiles) together, having gathered them from the places of their dispersion (the valley), and will impart His Spirit upon them for what Paul R. Alderman calls "the greatest and most universal evangelistic campaign ever undertaken on earth."15

As Ezekiel himself testifies, those who were raised up by the power of God "stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army." (Ezekiel 37:10) Matthew Henry gives a more picturesque rendering of this event:

"And then they stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army; not only living men, but effective men, fit for service and formidable."16

How would you like to see a missionary force with such qualifications in operation today? Dear friends, this is why the Apostle Paul described Israel's restoration as nothing short of a "resurrection from the dead"! (Romans 11:15)
THE PURPOSE OF THE INGATHERING

Now why do you suppose Jehovah will gather His people from their "graves" in France, England, Germany, Poland, Russia, the United States, etc.? To re-establish them as a nation in the land of Israel? Hardly! The prophets celebrate—get this!—not Israel's restoration as a nation, but Israel's restoration as the ONLY THEOCRACY ever to exist on the face of the earth!

The former (i.e., Israel's statehood) means nothing without the latter qualitative blessing—as Israel's reclaimed statehood in 1948 so adequately proves! Wherein has she been a blessing to the world since that event? The truth is this: Israel could enjoy the status of nationhood for another 1,000 years and never have the impact God intends for her to have upon the world!

But, ah, when God reinstates her as the only theocracy this side of heaven, this same nation will become God's agency for what one author hails as "the greatest and most universal evangelistic campaign ever undertaken on earth!"

Israel will not only function once again as a theocracy, but she will be unified. According to Ezekiel 37:22, the discord that led to kingdom rivalry between Israel and Judah following Solomon's death will be healed:

"And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all."
Unity, of course, has always been the success mark of God's activities on earth. That is, Israel has best fulfilled Jehovah's purposes when she has been unified (remember Samuel's judgship and David's glorious reign?) So, too, the Church, when unified, has made the greatest strides for the kingdom of God. Unity is a must if God's ultimate desire for earth is to be fully realized!

Jehovah's goal involves a unity or oneness among the peoples of the earth

But unity is not the only vital ingredient of success; God's people must also be characterized by love--love for God and love for one another. While Ezekiel 37:16-22 testifies that Israel and Judah will one day be unified, Ezekiel 36:22-39 contains the glorious promise of a new heart for the people of God:

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."
Whew! a new unity, a new heart; hopefully, you can see that God means business when He says He is going to restore Israel to a place of privilege among the nations of the earth! If you have your doubts, however, we would like to turn to one more passage in which God declares His intent for Israel "in the latter days." Amos 9:11-15, a mere five-verse prophecy, nevertheless portrays Israel a restored nation, and one marked by prosperity and peace and glory! (Verse 12 omitted below):

"In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up its ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old...

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed; and the mountains shall drop sweet wine, and all the hills shall melt.

And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them.

And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the Lord."

The glories pictured above are self-explanatory. We only want to point out that the "tabernacle of David" is nothing less than the restoration of the Davidic throne! As Merrill Unger explains:
Matthew Henry reminds us that the kingdom of David suffered incredible degeneration following Solomon's apostasy. Not only was the royal family from that point on morally impoverished, its power was abridged and its imperial dignity lost, especially in the Babylonian captivity. When Messiah, the Greater David, returns, however, Israel's throne will be occupied by a pure, powerful, Eternal King; by the Ruler of all the earth!

Paul Alderman Jr. reminds us of the importance of this great event. You see, Israel not only gave us Christ in the flesh (Romans 9:5), but, as Alderman explains:

"Literally, Israel is to be the chosen instrument through whom the coming glorification of the returning Son of God will be manifested."
Indeed, according to verse 13, even the land shall benefit from the Divine Presence of Israel's Messianic King. Saphir captures the beautiful essence of this truth when he writes:

"Israel is a land in sympathy with Jehovah: blossoming when Israel obeys Him; desolate when Israel doesn't."20

Finally, in terms of Israel being returned to the land and planted there, we must keep in mind the following observation by Paul R. Alderman, Jr.

"Insofar as the human element is concerned, God's dealings with man in His earthward program are through Israel in her land. The chosen people and the Holy Land are inseparable; and when the people are out of the land, God's...program is temporarily held in abeyance."21

Other authors have noted that Israel's restoration to the land negates the idea that the Church has replaced the Nation in God's redemptive program. That is, these prophecies are directed at the Nation; the Church is not to occupy the land of Palestine--Israel is! Kac points out that although Israel has remained in an inferior position in relation to the Gentile world since the beginning of the Babylonian exile,
Scripture warns the Gentile world—particularly in the book of Daniel and in Romans 11—"not to behave as if they were the true and permanent masters of the earth." As Kac further observes:

"For Israel to accomplish her mission to the world while being exiled from the land of Israel is an utter contradiction. (See Gen. 12:1, 3; 17:7-8; Gen. 26:2-4; Gen. 28:13-15). Israel can never fulfill her Divinely-appointed mission if she is not right with God. And to be exiled from the Land of Israel is for Israel, as a nation, to be exiled from God." Saphir further confirms the national restoration of Israel with this observation:

"Throughout the whole of the Word of God one truth is written more clearly than any other—that Israel is the chosen nation of God forever; that although the circumference of God's dealings may enlarge, the centre always remains the same, and that the purposes of God concerning Israel can never alter."  

Lastly, the Apostle Paul, speaking to the New Testament Church, boldly declares that Israel's national blindness is "not total as regards themselves (11:7-10); not fatal, as regards the faith of the world (11:11,12); not final, as regards the purposes of God (11:13-32)."
According to Kac, it will not be until Christ's second coming that the Jewish people will enter upon their God-given mission "and the effect of this upon the world will, according to Paul, be equivalent to a resurrection from the dead. (Romans 11:15)." 26

**ISRAEL PREPARED THROUGH TRIBULATION**

We have looked at some very important passages in terms of God's promise to restore Israel as the only theocracy upon the face of the earth. Perhaps, however, we need to remind the reader that Israel does not merit such exaltation. As Saphir notes:

"In the Word of God the restoration of Israel is always based upon the power and love and the unchanging character of the promises of the everlasting God." 27

In Ezekiel 36:22-39, where Jehovah promises to remove Israel's stoney heart, fill her with His Spirit and bring her back to the land, He says, "I do this not for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake, which ye have profaned among the heathen, whither ye went...and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord...when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes." (Ezekiel 36:22,23)

While it is clear from this passage that Israel's restoration will be by God's mercy, God's holy requirement forbids Him from bringing Israel back into the drama without first bringing the Nation to a place where it will gladly
obey His revealed will and carry out His program. Israel, you will remember, has digressed from that course for more than 19 centuries! God's righteous character would be mocked if, all of a sudden, He brought Israel back in as His redemptive arm simply because He had promised to do so! No, instead God will prepare Israel for her divine mission through tribulation.

According to Scripture, this tribulation will be seven years' duration, and staggering in intensity toward the second half of the period. The purpose for this bitter travail, known as "The Time of Jacob's Trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7) and identified by Bible scholars as Daniel's seventieth week, is to "break the power of the Holy People," the Jews, by purging them of their unbelief and guilt. Several passages testify that this will be no light discipline for Israel:

"Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it; it is even the time of Jacob's trouble." (Jeremiah 30:7)

"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor never shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened." (Matthew 24:21,22)

"Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness?" (Jeremiah 30:6)
You might be wondering what kind of judgment could cause such fright and agony among the people of Israel. In truth, they will experience a situation similar to those who fled from Pharaoh's army during the exodus from Egypt. We oftentimes forget how terrifying and hopeless that situation appeared to the Israelites! Here were a multitude of shepherds—totally unequipped for battle—being relentlessly pursued by one of the greatest, most invincible armies on the face of the earth! And guess what was ahead of them? The Red Sea! Don't forget that there were no inflatable rubber rafts in that day; Israel would have been sunk—literally—without a direct intervention from the Living God!

The reason why men pale from the inside out in Jeremiah 30:6 is because Israel will once again be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Scripture tells us that the great nations of the earth will band together to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. This final cataclysmic battle, which is to take place at the very end of the tribulation period, is known as the Battle of Armageddon (See R. Ludwigson, A Survey of Bible Prophecy, pp. 27-30 for more information on this invasion.)

Israel, which is a tiny nation geographically, not only will be surrounded by great, powerful armies, but she will be pressed by armies under Satanic leadership! What chance could she possibly have against such nefarious opposition? How would you feel if ten or more nations were gathered around your country's borders, ready to annihilate the total population in brutal, merciless, diabolical fashion?

**ISRAEL'S ONLY HOPE**

Just as the participants in the Exodus had no hope
of deliverance beyond the direct intervention of Jehovah in their behalf, so, too, the Jews in Palestine will have no hope in this devastating hour unless there is divine intervention! And, hallelujah, there will be divine intervention! When Israel thinks her hope is spent, her existence about to be cut off, then shall a great shout echo through all the earth; then shall glory flash from one end of the sky to the other; and then shall Israel look up and know that her salvation draweth nigh. Jesus, in visible splendor, in power and glory, will personally intervene for those who pierced Him through long years ago!  

"And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn."

--Zechariah 12:9,10

This, then, is the great event that will result in the total conversion of Israel. God is going to save His people; God is going to purge their rebellion and unbelief. As Kac so rightly states:
"NOTHING SHORT OF A NEW CONFRONTATION OF THE JEW BY GOD WILL WIN THE JEW BACK TO GOD."32

Robert Evans likewise agrees that Israel's conversion is a critical issue in God's redemptive program. He asserts:

"The future restoration of the Jewish nation to the full possession of her land, and to the place where she will again be God's channel of blessing to the nations, is contingent upon her acceptance of Jesus Christ as her Messiah."33

Ah! God's ways are so incredibly sublime, dear friends! We set forth in an earlier chapter that God's judgments are never totally punitive, and this wonderful fact attends even Israel's thorough purging during the Great Tribulation. Do you know what positive element will result from the Tribulation? Scripture says that men will hear the Word of God; that men will heed the Word of God...in exceeding, great numbers! But, look, it won't be the Church's missionary force that carries out this global campaign with such phenomenal success! We quote some stirring facts from Burl Haynie's book, The Time of Jacob's Trouble:

"From whom will men hear the message of righteousness during the Tribulation?

Revelation, chapter 7, reveals that near the beginning of the tribulation 144,000 Jewish servants of God will be sealed--12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel....As mighty teachers, like the Apostle Paul, they will go throughout the world calling men to repent of their sins and have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."34
Do you see God's exceeding wisdom in this, dear friends? The Jews are everywhere! They are in Russia, in the United States, in Italy, France, Germany—everywhere! Unlike the Church's missionary force, they will not have to be "sent" to another culture to preach the Gospel! They are already planted in the various cultures of the world! And get this: they know the customs and the language of the peoples in whose cultures they reside; they won't have to spend years and years and years learning how to communicate and how to adapt the message to any given culture! Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! Burl Haynie has asked, "From whom will men hear the message of righteousness during the Tribulation?" Now he asks:

"What will be the results (of this campaign by the 144,000 Jews)?

REVELATION 7:9-14 -- "AFTER THIS I BEHELD, AND LO, A GREAT MULTITUDE, WHICH NO MAN COULD NUMBER, OF ALL NATIONS, AND KINDREDS, AND PEOPLE, AND TONGUES, STOOD BEFORE THE LAMB, CLOTHED WITH WHITE ROBES.... THESE ARE THEY WHICH CAME OUT OF GREAT TRIBULATION...."

...It is clear that this innumerable host of people will be brought to God during the Great Tribulation, the period of God's wrath, as a result of the teaching of the 144,000 Jewish servants of God."35
As you ponder the ecstasy of the above scene, you may be wondering where the Church is during the Tribulation and why Scripture doesn't credit this glorious institution with this universal ingathering of souls for God. Perhaps the explanation given by Paul R. Alderman Jr. will best serve as an explanation. We will elaborate further on the "rapture" of the Church after studying his comments:

"Revelation 7 describes the world-wise harvesting of souls for Christ through the preaching of 144,000 God-fearing, Christ-believing Jews. This, we believe, is the proclamation of the 'gospel of the kingdom' in all the world for a witness unto all nations, just preceding the age-ending return of Christ in glory. This will take place during the seven year tribulation period, after the Church has been called home, and must therefore be carried on by some agency other than the Church. So God raises up a witnessing body from Israel who proclaim again the message of John the Baptist: Repent, for the kingdom is at hand (the King is about to come back)...

It should be noted that these faithful witnesses from Israel will not have accepted Christ as their personal Savior prior to the rapture of the Church, for, if they had, then they would have also been caught up, because in the Church, His Body and Bride, all distinction as to Jew and Gentile is done away. But they will turn to Christ after the rapture and become God's agency for the greatest and most universal evangelistic campaign ever undertaken on earth."36

THE OLD CHANNEL REMOVED

You will remember our statement at the end of ACT II that God's commitment to Israel necessitated the removal of
the Church as His earthward agency before Israel could be brought back onto the stage of His redemptive drama. As Harold J. Ockenga reminds us:

"When God rejected Israel nationally in part it was to substitute the Church for Israel as His witness on the earth."37

But God never rejected the Nation totally, nor finally, as Saphir observes below:

"If a nation ever might have become altogether degraded, and might have dwindled down into non-existence, it would have been the Jews; but God in the prophets said that they were never to cease as a nation before Him, and He says, Even when I shall punish you and banish you, I will not abhor you. I will never forget the covenant I have made with your fathers. I will regard you with favor, and preserve you for the time when there shall be given unto you repentance."38

According to this word, then, God has always intended for Israel—not the Church—to bring in the Kingdom glory! Again, Saphir notes:

"Through the Church individuals are gathered out from among all nations to believe in Jesus; but it is through the nation of Israel that national Christianity will be established upon the whole face of the earth."39
You will recall that the Church eventually became a totally exclusive Gentile channel. God's ultimate glory, however, was destined to be revealed through the seed of Abraham, and the Nation of Israel!

"According to the Word of God, it is obviously necessary that the Jewish nation should remain in existence as a nation until these latter days. Their enemies must not succeed in destroying them; their friends must not succeed in so favouring them that they amalgamate through indifference and worldliness with the other nationalities. And also it is necessary that they should not be absorbed by the Christian churches, so as to cease to exist as a separate community." 40

In regards to the above phenomenon, Robert Evans asks:

"Why in the providence of God has the Jew been kept a separate people without losing his national traits all these centuries if God is through with him?" 41

No, God is not finished with Israel yet, but, according to A.J. Pollock, "the rapture of the Church...must take place before the sequence of events begins to take shape for the final dénouement." 42 The rapture of the Church, says Pollock, constitutes the termination of the Christian era. 43

The Apostle Paul had warned the Gentiles that God's grace in grafting them in would continue only as long as they continued in His goodness (Romans 11:22). We noted in the last chapter how Revelation 17 pictures the Church en-
trenched in gross sin and infidelity. We also noted that not everyone who is in the Church is of the Church (not all church-goers are true Christians), but that Christ would rapture the True Church out of the world before destroying the Harlot Church.

There are three different views regarding the time of the Church's rapture. The Pre-Tribulation view holds "that the Church or those believers living at the time immediately preceding the tribulation, along with those dead in Christ, are to be raptured BEFORE the tribulation period," and will return with Christ at the end when, Scripture tells us, "every eye will see Him!"

The Mid-Tribulation position holds that the Church will witness events, including the revelation of the anti-christ, during the less tumultuous half (the first 3½ years) of the tribulation period before being raptured.

Finally, the Post-Tribulation view holds that the rapture of the Church and the Second Coming of Christ are parts of the same event, and "while believers will not be subject to the outpouring of the wrath of God, being sealed in protection, they may be exposed to the persecution of Anti-Christ during the tribulation." (We recommend the reader to consult R. Ludwigson's A Survey of Bible Prophecy, pages 134-160 for further insight into these views).
The reader is free to select his own position in regard to the rapture of the Church. The important thing here is to remember that God will not cast off His own! Just as the believing remnant of Jews were absorbed into the Church, so the believing remnant of the Church will be brought back with the Lord Jesus Christ to experience and witness the grand consummation of God's glorious plan of redemption! Scripture says that Christ—Glorified, Victorious, Awesome—will bring His saints with Him on that spectacular day when He delivers Israel and devastates the enemy forces! (Jude 14; Revelation 19:11-14)

Can you imagine being a member of that celestial army? Abraham will be in it, along with Moses, Samuel, David, Paul—and we, also! An army commanded by Christ! An army that will see the establishment of God's righteous kingdom upon earth!

THE GLORIOUS CONSUMMATION!

Perhaps as we have traced God's activities in history (the foundational unity of Scripture), we have failed to portray and grasp this wonderful drama as a fierce spiritual battle between God and His Christ and Satan, the Devourer. The outcome of this drama is all the more glorious if we realize how hard Satan tried to bring the curtain down on God's redemptive plan!

As Burl Haynie observes:
One author has said that God may appear to move very slowly at times, and we, His children, may become frustrated at the absence of quick success and "overnight redemption." If we knew the intensity of battle being staged on Planet Earth, we might draw back in wonder, our mouths stopped. Genesis 3:15 hints at the ceaseless conflict that would rage between Christ and Satan, but it is only through keen observation and spiritual sight that we come to grips with this terrible drama.

We picture Jesus' birth, for example, as a gentle, yet glorious occasion. Our nativity scenes at Christmas portray a babe lying in a manger, surrounded by faithful admirers and innocent little lambs. Imagine, if you can, a reconstruction of this same scene based on Revelation 12:4,5:

"And the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God and to his throne."

It is no wonder that the author of Hebrews asks, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (Hebrews 2:3) Perhaps now you can recall specific instances where

"Satan has tried for centuries to get rid of the Jews. He knows that could he do so he would be able to thwart God's program..."
Satan tried to abort the fulfillment of God's ultimate goal. It wasn't just in Eden. It was in Egypt, in Canaan, in Jerusalem, in Gethsemane, on Golgotha, in the Church—and wherever a Jew happened to be! If Satan had been successful at any of these points of conflict, then Genesis 12:3 would be meaningless today. But God, in Christ, has fulfilled all His purposes, and has showered upon mankind the most unsearchable blessings.

Many Scripture passages tell of what God will do through Israel when His glory is established upon earth. (See Genesis 12:3; Numbers 21:21; Isaiah 2:2-4; 60:3; and Romans 11:15). For those who are asking, "Why a Nation?" in the end, the answer is simple. Messiah's great victory at Armageddon will "result in Israel's becoming the head nation of the world." If you are going to be dealing with the governments of the world, you yourself need a governmental administrator. Israel will have a King whose power, majesty, reputation and dominion will far exceed even Solomon's glorious throne. As Robert Evans explains in his book, The Jew in the Plan of God:

"Solomon's glorious kingdom (was) but a faint foregleam of Israel's kingdom of the future, to be established under King Messiah Jesus in the latter days, when people from every nation (would) flock to Jerusalem to see the King and to study His beneficent laws."

Do you see now why God can use a nation to reach the nations? According to Saphir, the influence that Israel will have on the rest of the world during Christ's millenial reign on earth will be "not by aggressiveness, but by attractiveness."
Ah, dear friends! do you see the crowning triumph of God's work in the above passage? Do you remember His goal for earth as stated in Numbers 14:21?:

"AT THAT TIME THEY SHALL CALL JERUSALEM THE THRONE OF THE LORD; AND ALL THE NATIONS SHALL BE GATHERED UNTO IT, TO THE NAME OF THE LORD, TO JERUSALEM: NEITHER SHALL THEY WALK ANY MORE AFTER THE IMAGINATION OF THEIR EVIL HEART."

--Jeremiah 3:17

Remember the 3 vital elements of that goal? We said that the goal involved 1. Planet Earth, 2. the inhabitants of Earth, and 3. the inhabitants of Earth exhibiting God's glory through their love for one another and their love for Him.
According to Numbers 14:21

1. God's redemptive operation would be culminated on the Earth.

2. His redemptive activity would focus upon the inhabitants of Earth.

3. God's goal would be achieved when all the peoples of Earth were united in their love for one another and for God.

Throughout this study, the first two dimensions of God's plan have always been before us. Earth seems to be the only planet chosen as the stage for Jehovah's redemptive activities! That God would choose man as the target of all His intimate affection is still an unfathomable wonder, as Psalm 8:4 so adequately expresses ("What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"). But the third aspect of God's goal has been a long time in coming, and at a cost that even the contrite heart cannot measure! There are many passages that tell of the incredible peace and unity that will exist upon the Earth when Jesus reigns, but the portrait of Israel in that day, found in Jeremiah 31:34, echoes a most sublime "shalom":
"But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

--Jeremiah 31:33-34

And so it is that Jesus' millenial reign on earth will be marked by peace, unity and love among mankind, and by a thorough passion for God. Needless to say, it is difficult to find the right words, the right passage with which to conclude this awesome study of God's heart and His wonderful acts among the sons of men.

The early church concluded a worship service by singing a hymn and going out. Perhaps that is the most appropriate way for us to conclude our own worship experience here. We who have been privileged to view this drama of Redeeming Love may even be too overwhelmed to sing with audible voices, but someday the curtain will open on the eternal age, and as we go in, this praise shall forever resound:
"WORTHY IS THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN TO RECEIVE POWER, AND RICHES, AND WISDOM, AND STRENGTH, AND HONOUR, AND GLORY, AND BLESSING."

(Revelation 5:12)
NOTES
ACT III
(pp. 424-462)


7Evans, p. 103.

8Saphir, pp. 164-165.


10Alfred Edersheim, Bible History, Volume 7, The History of Israel and Judah from the Decline of the Two Kingdoms to the Assyrian and Babylonian Captivity, (Piccadilly: The Religious Tract Society, 1887), p. 2.

11Saphir, Christ and Israel, pp. 39-40.


17Unger, p. 412.

18Henry, p. 1137.

19Alderman Jr., p. 57.

20Saphir, The Divine Unity of Scripture, p. 298.
21 Alderman, Jr., p. 56.
22 Kac, p. 250.
23 ibid., p. 22.
24 Saphir, Christ and Israel, p. 129.
26 Kac, p. 367.
27 Saphir, Christ and Israel, pp. 29-30.
28 Evans, p. 65.
29 Ludwigson, p. 182.
31 Ludwigson, p. 175.
32 Kac, p. 152.
33 Evans, p. 68.
34 Haynie, p. 69.
35 ibid., pp. 69-70.
36 Alderman Jr., p. 62.
38 Saphir, The Divine Unity of Scripture, p. 97.
39 Saphir, Christ and Israel, p. 70.
40 Saphir, The Divine Unity of Scripture, p. 69.
41 Evans, p. 62.
43 ibid., p. 128.
44 Ludwigson, p. 136.
45 ibid., p. 148.
46 Ludwigson, p. 151.
47 Haynie, p. 153.
48 Kac, p. 23.
49 Haynie, p. 167.
50 Evans, p. 31.