

THE SLOW STAIN

LESSONS FROM THE PAST,
WARNINGS FOR TODAY

CONNOR BOYACK

SOCIAL **HARMONY**

To Gordon B. Hinckley

For sounding the alarm.

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Other religious titles by the author:

Christ versus Caesar: Two Masters, One Choice

*Latter-day Responsibility: Choosing Liberty
through Personal Accountability*

*Latter-day Liberty: A Gospel Approach
to Government and Politics*

INTRODUCTION

There's a tense scene in *The Matrix* where Morpheus has been captured by the Agents and is being forcibly drugged and interrogated. The year is close to 2197, and Agent Smith is hoping to procure the codes needed to invade Zion so the machines could crush humanity once and for all. As the drugs take their course, Smith explains that keeping the lab-grown humans comfortably plugged into the virtual reality required designing a system that reflected “the peak of your civilization.”¹

Thus, the machines chose the late 1990s—the era of AOL chat rooms and dial-up modems, pop bands like NSYNC and Britney Spears, and the Beanie Babies craze. Perhaps the last few decades of lived experience offer reasons to agree with Agent Smith and his artificially intelligent associates. Maybe it's nostalgia distorting things, but, in many respects, it does seem like the late 1990s was an idyllic time in contrast to the social degeneracy that has followed. Public optimism ran high, driven by economic growth and burgeoning tech ventures. Television provided communal water cooler moments, with shows like *Friends* and *Seinfeld* reflecting an upbeat cultural milieu. The grow-

1 Lilly and Lana Wachowski, dir. *The Matrix*, Warner Bros., 1999.

ing World Wide Web connected humanity like never before. Mental health was generally strong. In fact, Gallup's data bears out this theory. Since 1979, they've been polling multiple times a year to ask Americans if they are satisfied with the way things are going in their country. In the nearly half a century since, the highest score achieved, 71 percent, came in 1999.² (The scores in recent years have been in the low 20s.)

But not everything was sunshine and rainbows—certainly not from the perspective of President Gordon B. Hinckley. Barely two months after he became president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in early 1995, he spoke to a group of local leaders at a regional conference in Springville, Utah. Contrasting the nostalgic perception of positivity, Hinckley warned against the tendency God's followers had to take on the negative ways of the world. "We don't adopt them immediately," he said, "but we slowly take them on, unfortunately."³

Perhaps he was testing the reaction to this idea with a smaller audience before sharing it more widely, which he did later that same year in the October 1995 General Conference. Speaking to the women in the Relief Society session, Hinckley shared for the first time what most Mormons are now very familiar with—"The Family: A Proclamation to the

2 "Satisfaction With the United States," Gallup, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx>.

3 Quoted in Earl C. Tingey, "The Sabbath Day and Sunday Shopping," *Ensign*, May 1996, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1996/04/the-sabbath-day-and-sunday-shopping>.

World." Far less known is what he said just prior to reciting this proclamation's text:

With so much of sophistry that is passed off as truth, with so much of deception concerning standards and values, with so much of allurements and enticement to take on the slow stain of the world, we have felt to warn and forewarn.⁴

The decades since have borne out what was warned against: deceitful and fallacious arguments being proclaimed as true by academics, celebrities, politicians, and professional propagandists; the accelerated degradation of societal standards and values; and the seductive pull of peer pressure and social conformity enabling the "slow stain of the world" to persistently spread among Latter-day Saints.

The scriptures are filled with examples of God's people embracing—slowly, then suddenly—the idolatrous ideas and corrupt behaviors of those who lived near and among them. Things were so bad in Noah's day that "God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth."⁵ The rescued Israelites embraced Egyptian paganism to the point of creating and worshiping a golden calf.⁶ After settling in Canaan, they "followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them,

4 Gordon B. Hinckley, "Stand Strong against the Wiles of the World," *Ensign*, November 1995, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/stand-strong-against-the-wiles-of-the-world>.

5 Genesis 6:12.

6 Exodus 32:1–6.

and bowed themselves unto them.”⁷ Rejecting the prophetic judgment of Samuel, a later generation of Israelites demanded a monarchy “to judge us like all the nations.”⁸ King Solomon, influenced by his foreign wives, built high places for false gods, gradually integrating their religious rites into Israel’s worship.⁹ The northern kingdom of Israel incorporated idol worship and pagan rituals introduced by neighboring peoples.¹⁰ The people of Judah adopted foreign idols and forsook their covenant. God had planted them “a noble vine, wholly a right seed,” yet by adopting the beliefs of surrounding pagan cultures, they had “turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine.”¹¹ Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes for clinging to the traditions of men and rejecting the commandments of God.¹² Paul warned of those who had “changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man.”¹³ The list goes on.

Of course, the slow spread of society’s degenerate practices is not reserved for scripture stories of yesteryear; we, too, can be, and are, guilty of the same. President Hinckley’s observation was not in the abstract. It’s already happening, and we were warned of that outcome in revealed scripture. Nephi foresaw that in the latter days many would be pacified into carnal security, their souls being led away “carefully

7 Judges 2:12.

8 1 Samuel 8:5.

9 1 Kings 11:1–10.

10 2 Kings 17:7–17.

11 Jeremiah 2:11–13, 20–23.

12 Mark 7:8–9.

13 Romans 1:23.

down to hell.”¹⁴ Others would fall to flattery, being deceived into ignoring the devil’s influence in their own lives, “until he grasps them with his awful chains.”¹⁵ Secret combinations seduced the once-righteous Nephites “until they had come down to believe in their works and partake of their spoils, and to join with them in their secret murders and combinations.”¹⁶ We are directly commanded by the Lord to “repent of [our] sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above [us].” Moroni’s warning makes clear this outcome is not a matter of if, but “*when* ye shall see these things come among you.”¹⁷ And in a revelation given to Joseph Smith, God lamented the many covenant breakers who “seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol...”¹⁸

The purpose of this book is to help you better understand historical examples of idolatry and spiritual decay as well as what these challenges look like in our day. Because the intent of education is to lead to improved action, the book’s goal is to empower you to recognize, avoid, and even fight against the slow stain corrupting Christ’s followers. A solution is not relevant until a problem is adequately understood. To immunize ourselves from the stain, we must be fully aware of what it is and how it spreads.

14 2 Nephi 28:21.

15 2 Nephi 28:22.

16 Helaman 6:38.

17 Ether 8:23–26.

18 D&C 1:15–16.

Before we begin, a word of caution: Hinckley's choice of words may be a bit deceptive. Yes, the stain begins to spread slowly—but like a snowball going down the hill, increasing in size and momentum, wickedness can compound over time. After the Proclamation was shared in that 1995 Relief Society meeting, it was met with what can best be described as a collective shrug. It was not a radical restatement of doctrine or a provocative declaration dividing society into opposing camps. Nearly nobody disputed that human beings were “male and female” and that “gender is an essential characteristic” of one's identity that is not fluid or simply “assigned” at birth. Sure, there were intellectual radicals pushing the envelope, such as feminist philosopher Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler's academic attack on traditional gender roles offers us this word salad:

The univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression.¹⁹

But Butler and her peers were in the strong minority—a social anomaly compared to the masses who recognized binary gender (male and female) not as a “regulatory fiction” but as plain reality. Literature, social commentary, most of academia, and more from the 1990s simply assume this fact

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

and discuss gender issues in the context of men and women. When researchers analyzed “gender role attitudes” from 1977 to 2008 for the *American Journal of Sociology*, using data from the General Social Survey, a nationally represented interview-based survey to monitor social changes in America, the authors discuss men's issues and women's issues, without nary a mention of anything else even being within the realm of sociological possibility.²⁰ Transgender activism would soon change that and spread throughout academia in subsequent years, but certainly, in 1995, Hinckley's views on gender were noncontroversial and widely shared.

The same goes for marriage, which the Proclamation states is only “between man and woman.” In a world that has largely legally codified same-sex marriage, it may be difficult to remember the political landscape that preceded it. For example, the most ardent supporters of legalizing same-sex marriage have been Democrats, yet the most prominent Democrats in the 1990s all affirmed their support of marriage between a man and a woman. President Bill Clinton, for example, signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which defined marriage for federal purposes as the union of a man and a woman; he also ran ads on Christian radio stations promoting his signing of the bill.²¹ While running for president in 2008, Barack

²⁰ David Cotter, Joan Hermesen, and Reeve Vanneman, “The End of the Gender Revolution? Gender Role Attitudes from 1977 to 2008,” *American Journal of Sociology* 117, no. 1 (2011): 259–289.

²¹ “Listen to Bill Clinton's 1996 radio ad touting his passage of DOMA,” CNN, October 10, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/10/politics/bill-clinton-1996-radio-ad/index.html>.

Obama explicitly stated, “I believe marriage is between a man and a woman. I am not in favor of gay marriage.”²² Joe Biden, as senator, voted in favor of the bill that Clinton signed. While there was a growing movement to campaign for same-sex marriage in the 1990s, the idea was still outside the Overton Window²³ and thus not publicly shared by most Americans. Here, too, Hinckley and his apostolic associates were saying something reflective of what was at the time the status quo.

A final example may suffice—and this one differs from the rest. The Proclamation also states, “Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony.” While widely accepted as an ideal, by the 1990s there had already been a surge in births to unwed couples and a corresponding rise in single mothers rearing children. In decades past, nonmarital births were pretty rare. In the 1960s, for example, 43 percent of unwed pregnancies resulted in a shotgun marriage, in contrast to only 9 percent today.²⁴ By 1980, some 18 percent of all women in the United States who gave birth were unmarried. By 1995, the number had already risen to 27 percent.²⁵ Here, the Proc-

22 “Evolve: Obama gay marriage quotes,” Politico, May 9, 2012, <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/05/evolve-obama-gay-marriage-quotes-076109>.

23 The Overton Window is the range of ideas and policies that are considered acceptable and mainstream in public discourse at a given time.

24 “How We Ended Up With 40 Percent of Children Born Out of Wedlock,” Institute for Family Studies, December 18, 2017, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/how-we-ended-up-with-40-percent-of-children-born-out-of-wedlock>.

25 “Percentage of births to unmarried women in the United States from 1980 to 2022,” Statista, accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/276025/us-percentage-of-births-to-unmarried-women/>.

lamation was sounding an alarm for a trend already spreading throughout society. Today, roughly 40 percent of all children are born out of wedlock.²⁶ Obviously, this is not merely an American problem: across developed nations, the average rate of births occurring outside of marriage is 42 percent.²⁷ Some countries rank very high, such as Mexico (70 percent), Costa Rica (73 percent), and Chile (75 percent).²⁸ Those at the bottom of the list include Japan and Korea with only two to three percent of births outside of marriage,²⁹ though this statistic is influenced by the fact that people in these countries are having almost no children at all.

The collective shrug given in reaction to the Proclamation was no doubt because the spread was indeed slow. Many of the issues it warned against were still only supported by those at the margins of society. But the compounding effect is real: ten people converted to an idea can, in turn, each influence dozens more, each of whom then goes on to reach countless more, and so on. The spread accelerates, as it certainly has with the issues Hinckley warned against. Conservatives and others opposed to same-sex marriage warned that its legalization would be a veritable slippery slope toward society’s embrace of other unorthodox behaviors. For example, the Family Research Council warned:

26 Ibid.

27 “SF2.4: Share of births outside of marriage,” OECD Family Database, accessed December 14, 2024, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/family-database/sf_2_4_share_births_outside_marriage.pdf.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

Once marriage is no longer confined to a man and a woman, and the sole criterion becomes the presence of “love” and “mutual commitment,” it is impossible to exclude virtually any “relationship” between two or more partners of either sex. To those who scoff at concerns that gay marriage could lead to the acceptance of other harmful and widely-rejected sexual behaviors, it should be pointed out that until very recent times the very suggestion that two women or two men could “marry” would have been greeted with scorn. The movement to redefine marriage has already found full expression in what is variously called “polyfidelity” or “polyamory,” which seeks to replace traditional marriage with a bewildering array of sexual combinations among various groups of individuals.³⁰

In response to these and related concerns, advocates ardently reassured everyone that the slippery slope was nothing more than a fallacy and that, on its face, the giving of legal marriage status to two men or two women would not have the broader implications opponents predicted. Except, time has borne out many of these concerns and shown how quickly the stain can spread. What began as a quest for same-sex marriage soon turned into: using the legal system to compel business owners to offer their services in support of gay marriage celebrations; elevating transgender issues as the next frontier of activism, shaming those who don’t use one’s preferred pronouns; allowing minors to dance in front of sexually oriented

30 “Ten Facts About Counterfeit Marriage,” Family Research Council, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF11B07.pdf>

drag performers; puberty blockers and permanent sterilization of minors who think they were born the wrong gender; pedophiles rebranding as “minor-attracted persons”; biological men competing against women in sports; and all kinds of other social degeneracy. What was a “love is love—we just want acceptance!” campaign quickly became a Trojan horse for a radical redefinition of societal norms. The slow stain accelerated into a swift contamination, saturating classrooms, media outlets, academic institutions, civic movements, social circles, and beyond. And that stain can affect everything it touches, including the Church—which, despite its long-held strenuous objections to same-sex marriage, ended up affirmatively supporting a federal same-sex marriage law in 2022.³¹

Though we’ll certainly discuss many relevant examples of marriage, children, and gender, this book is not limited only to these issues. The slow stain of the world encompasses far more than social threats to the family. We’ll review, among other things: secret combinations and the continuing war on agency; government-run education and the dumbing down of society; rising support for socialism and institutionalized covetousness; feminism and the de-prioritization of motherhood; monetary debasement and the financial enslavement of families; and government surveillance and the trading away of liberty for “security” theater.

31 “Mormon church comes out in support of same-sex marriage law,” NBC News, November 15, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/mormon-church-comes-support-sex-marriage-law-rcna57393>.

To understand these threats we face in the present, it would be instructive for us to gain insight by reflecting on the past. That is, after all, the whole point of scripture—and the reason God has given us additional insights to guide our actions today. We ought to liken the circumstances in these stories to our own lives and search for wisdom that can help us avoid the societal stains threatening to spread to our homes. What we'll find, and what any serious student of scripture already knows, is that a slow and subtle erosion of long-held values is first tolerated, then normalized, and eventually celebrated. What once was considered scandalous or morally unacceptable becomes fashionable. Once the foundation of shared virtues cracks, the entire structure of a community's moral order can collapse, often far more rapidly than one might expect.

In the pages that follow, we will examine ancient warnings and modern analogs. We will consider how various societies—Nephite, Israelite, early Christian, and others—gradually allowed contamination to creep into their midst. We will see how moral principles were quietly sidelined and ultimately replaced. This analysis will help us pinpoint where we stand in our own moment in history and, more importantly, what we can do to resist today's creeping cultural corruption. If we understand how the pattern unfolds, we will be better equipped to disrupt it.

PART ONE

HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

As a newly ordained Elder studying in the Missionary Training Center in 2001, preparing to head to Honduras for nearly two years, I quickly became aware of my scriptural illiteracy. Despite years of seminary and regular church attendance, with irregular family and personal scripture study along the way, I had work to do. There was a lot I didn't know. Perhaps this situation is best demonstrated by the fact that, at one point, I asked my teacher why the fifth chapter of Jacob in the Book of Mormon had a lengthy story about gardening. "I don't get it," I admitted. "Why all the fuss about fertilizing and pruning in a book of scripture?"

Shake your head all you want. I was clearly scripturally illiterate. Fortunately, that soon changed, but in that moment the teacher kindly smiled and explained that the entire chapter is an allegory—a story with hidden meaning. As one scholar wrote about Zenos's olive tree allegory, it is "at once simple and complex, obscure and obvious."¹ Perhaps not obvious to me but worth spending some time to understand.

Zenos uses olive trees as a metaphor for God's covenant people, showing a careful and continual effort by the "master" (representing the Lord) to nourish and preserve them over long spans of history. Each step in planting, pruning, grafting, and harvesting parallels God's active guidance of Israel and other nations—teaching truth, calling prophets, and warning against idolatry. When the chosen branches begin to decay,

1 Paul Y. Hoskisson, "The Allegory of the Olive Tree in Jacob," Book of Mormon Central, accessed December 28, 2024, https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/hoskisson/2016-02-03/ch._5-the_allegory_of_the_olive_tree.pdf.

it signifies spiritual decline and an embrace of foreign philosophies or wicked traditions. As the master grafts in wild branches—other peoples—and carefully prunes away infected or lifeless parts, he is extending mercy, offering new covenants, and removing corrupt influences. This careful husbandry shows that God is willing to save and restore His people as long as they respond to His efforts, while also warning that neglect and the acceptance of cultural contamination can eventually lead to spiritual death if left unchecked.

Throughout the allegory, you can almost hear the anguish in the master's voice, asking his servant several times, "What could I have done more for my vineyard?"² His repeated attempts to save the varied trees and cultivate good fruit were frustrated by constant corruption among the vineyard, leading to "much fruit, and there is none of it which is good."³ Indeed, the master observed "all kinds of bad fruit; and it profiteth me nothing, notwithstanding all our labor; and now it grieveth me that I should lose this tree."⁴ The master and his servant looked around the vineyard and "beheld that the fruit of the natural branches had become corrupt also; yea, the first and the second and also the last; and they had all become corrupt."⁵ Things got so bad that the master threatened to burn it all to the ground: "all the trees of my vineyard are good for nothing save it be to be hewn down and cast into the fire."⁶

2 Jacob 5:41, 47, 49.

3 Jacob 5:32.

4 Ibid.

5 Jacob 5:39.

6 Jacob 5:42.

Why were these trees so prone to corruption? The allegory is mostly silent on this question, though it suggests that “the wild fruit... had overcome that part of the tree which brought forth good fruit,”⁷ suggesting that the healthy parts of the tree were often overtaken by the invasive forces introduced into the vineyard. Let’s infer a few things beyond what’s in the text that might be relevant observations.

First, the trees can be viewed as inherently vulnerable because they are planted in a fallen world. Just as a pristine orchard can still be subject to pests, drought, or disease, so too can a covenant people remain susceptible to alluring philosophies, idolatrous rituals, and moral relativism prevalent in their environment. God does not seclude or segregate His children in greenhouse-like isolation. They are expected to grow amid adversity and opposition.

Second, the allegory illustrates that without constant nurturing and intentional effort, corruption flourishes. Even healthy branches need constant pruning, meaning that even strong believers require regular spiritual maintenance. Left untended, virtue and truth can grow stale, and worldly ideas can seem more appealing. The very absence of vigilance creates space for unrighteous influences to take root and spread, eventually deforming what was once solid and pure.

Third, the trees’ proneness to corruption may reflect the gradual and subtle nature of spiritual decay. “Wild fruit” is not introduced as a bold, sudden intrusion easily recognizable to all. Instead, harmful influences blend quietly into the orchard,

grafted in and growing alongside the original stock. Over time, such influences gain ground because the difference between right and wrong, truth and error, can become blurred. As a result, sound doctrine and moral standards recede against a surging tide of shifting norms and comfortable compromises. In this sense, the allegory underscores that moral corruption rarely announces itself dramatically at the outset. Rather, it infiltrates gradually—spreading slowly at first.

Ultimately, the olive trees are prone to corruption because they exist in a dynamic environment of competing values, subject to the stewardship—or neglect—of the master’s servants and the attentiveness—or apathy—of those tending their growth. Obviously, we humans have agency as well, unlike trees. Our own spiritual decay is not something that can be blamed on others. The lesson for us is that spiritual strength is not self-sustaining. It must be cultivated, protected, and periodically renewed to prevent the wild fruit of cultural contamination from overtaking the orchard. And the allegory packs a punch because it precisely describes what we see in scriptural history over and over again. Despite the best efforts of God and His prophets to call people to repentance and help them bear good fruit, they choose—typically as a result of the cultural contaminations to which they’ve been exposed—to abandon the gospel by trying to serve multiple masters at once. The scriptural narratives that follow provide case after case revealing how once-flourishing vineyards of believers succumbed, step by subtle step, to the pervasive influence of the world.

⁷ Jacob 5:40.

THE ISRAELITES

Long before the gardeners in Zenos's allegory were anxious over an orchard of corrupted trees, the Lord had chosen Israel as His "peculiar treasure," establishing a covenant to make them "a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation."¹ Delivered from Egyptian bondage by miraculous power and bound to God by sacred commandment, these people were to remain distinct in belief, behavior, and worship—even when surrounded by hostile and idolatrous nations. The Lord urged them to "learn not the way of the heathen"² and commanded, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."³ He desired them to flourish like a well-tended vine,⁴ devoted solely to Him and nourished by divine truth. In theory, Israel's covenant relationship should have yielded a people filled with spiritual vitality and true devotion, but, as we will see, this chosen nation repeatedly succumbed to the slow stain of foreign influences and fell far below the standard God had set.

1 Exodus 19:5–6.

2 Jeremiah 10:2.

3 Exodus 20:3.

4 Isaiah 5:1–4.

The Golden Calf at Sinai

Following their miraculous escape from Egyptian bondage and triumphant crossing of the Red Sea,⁵ the Israelites stood poised to become a people wholly devoted to the Lord.⁶ It was a defining moment—a fresh start after centuries under the shadow of a pagan empire that worshiped a vast pantheon of gods.⁷ Yet only a short time later, while Moses communed with God on Mount Sinai,⁸ the people reverted to what they knew from their former oppressors. Rather than patiently awaiting divine direction, they fashioned a golden calf reminiscent of the bull-gods worshiped in Egypt, bowing before it in revelry and sin.⁹ This shameful scene was not merely a misstep—it was a sign that Egypt’s religious traditions had left a deep imprint on their minds and hearts.

Though the Lord patiently gave them His law and prescribed strict worship practices,¹⁰ this contamination from Egyptian culture resurfaced repeatedly. In the wilderness, many Israelites still clung to the idea that deities could be molded and manipulated to their liking,¹¹ rather than worshipping the one, invisible God who delivered them.¹² Their yearning for the food, comfort, and familiar religious customs of Egypt competed with the monotheism Moses tirelessly

5 Exodus 14:21–31.

6 Exodus 19:5–6.

7 Exodus 12:12.

8 Exodus 24:12–18.

9 Exodus 32:1–6.

10 Exodus 20; Leviticus 1–27.

11 Exodus 32:4.

12 Deuteronomy 4:15–19.

taught. The multitude “fell a lusting” and whined, saying, “Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes.”¹³ Even as God led them by a pillar of cloud and fire,¹⁴ and fed them with manna,¹⁵ lingering vestiges of Egyptian thought and idolatry undermined their faith and fidelity. The Lord said:

In the day that I lifted up mine hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land that I had espied for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands:

Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.¹⁶

13 Numbers 11:4–6.

14 Exodus 13:21–22.

15 Exodus 16:4–5, 14–15.

16 Ezekiel 20:6–8.

This dual allegiance continued to surface throughout the lengthy sojourn in the desert.¹⁷ By the time the Israelites finally stood ready to enter the Promised Land, the Lord had to repeatedly emphasize the importance of worshiping Him alone and shunning the idols of other nations.¹⁸ Much of the purpose behind the Law of Moses was no doubt to isolate Israel from the influences of surrounding cultures—an isolation necessary because of how thoroughly Egyptian beliefs had penetrated the hearts of previous generations. Ceremonial purity, dietary restrictions, distinctive religious festivals, and centralizing worship at the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) all served to keep the people focused on their covenant with the one true God.¹⁹ Without these preventative measures, the lingering memory of Egyptian idolatry would continue to corrode their spiritual integrity.²⁰

Israel's experiences in Egypt left scars that would take generations to heal.²¹ The golden calf episode was perhaps the most dramatic manifestation, but subtler forms of cultural contamination lingered long after.²² By looking back to Israel's time under Egyptian rule, we see that even miraculous deliverance and divine instruction did not slow the spread of pagan ideas and influences resulting from their Egyptian exposure.

17 Numbers 14:2–4.

18 Deuteronomy 6:4–14; Joshua 24:14–23.

19 Leviticus 11–23; Exodus 25–27; Deuteronomy 12:1–14.

20 Psalm 106:19–21.

21 Ezekiel 23:3, 8.

22 Amos 5:25–27; Acts 7:39–43.

Moabite Idolatry at Baal–Peor

As the Israelites pressed closer to the Promised Land, word began to spread of their victories over formidable enemies—most notably Sihon, king of the Amorites,²³ and Og, king of Bashan.²⁴ These defeats rattled Moab and its king, Balak, who recognized that Israel's success was not due to sheer military prowess alone, but some sort of divine protection. So Balak sought a supernatural countermeasure to fight back and attempted to hire the soothsayer Balaam to curse Israel in order to make them vulnerable.²⁵

The plan failed spectacularly. Instead of cursing God's people, Balaam was compelled by divine intervention to pronounce blessings upon Israel.²⁶ Balak's hopes were dashed, so he resorted to a more insidious strategy. There would be no open battle against Israel's armies, no bold challenge to their God. Instead, the Moabites would exploit Israel's vulnerabilities—its human desires and capacity for compromise.

And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods.²⁷

By inviting Israelite men to participate in ritual feasts to their god Baal-Peor and enticing them to indulge in immoral

23 Numbers 21:21–24.

24 Numbers 21:33–35.

25 Numbers 22:1–6.

26 Numbers 23–24.

27 Numbers 25:1–2.

acts tied to pagan worship, Moab aimed to accomplish what curses and swords could not. Having failed to defeat Israel in direct conflict or through spiritual cursing, they turned to seduction as their final, and tragically successful, weapon. The people who had only recently escaped Egypt's grip and witnessed God's mighty works now stumbled into idolatry and immorality, seduced by Moabite customs that were as enticing as they were destructive.

The Moabites did not need to directly challenge Israel's worship of the true God. They simply introduced a contrary model—one where divine favor could be obtained through celebratory feasting and immorality. Israel's participation in these rites implied that they viewed the Lord as just one more deity among an array of gods to be appeased rather than the only true God. This willingness to mingle their sacred identity with foreign religion exposed how susceptible the people were to cultural contamination. By partaking of the Moabites' sacrificial meals and bowing to their gods,²⁸ Israel proved that previous lessons and warnings had not fully taken root.

After Joshua's Death

Many years later, once settled and prospering under Joshua's leadership, Israel was entering the next phase of its history in a position of apparent strength and stability. The tribes were settling into their allotted territories, and some had already seen God's power demonstrated through resounding

²⁸ Numbers 25:2.

military victories.²⁹ But after Joshua died, a new generation arose “which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel.”³⁰ Without Joshua's leadership to guide them, and not having experienced God's deliverances themselves, the people became susceptible to the slow stain of surrounding cultures and their idolatrous influences.

All around Israel, the Canaanites had built altars and shrines to worship a wide range of fertility gods like Baal, Asherah, Astarte, Mot, and others. Their religious rites often involved immoral practices—ritual prostitution, child sacrifice, and superstitious customs to curry favor with these deities who, in their minds, controlled rainfall and agricultural success. Rather than firmly resisting these influences, Israel began to mingle more freely with Canaanite society, forging alliances and intermarriages that quickly diluted their distinct way of life.³¹ Little by little, what had seemed foreign became familiar, and Israel's own worship practices were compromised. The stain spread.

And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim: And they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, which brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the people that were round about them, and bowed themselves unto them, and provoked the Lord to anger. And they forsook the Lord, and served Baal and Ashtaroth.³²

²⁹ Joshua 24:31.

³⁰ Judges 2:10.

³¹ Judges 1:27–36; 3:5–6.

³² Judges 2:11–13.

Israel was essentially saying that Yahweh was no longer the exclusive object of their devotion. As they adopted Canaanite customs, they brought pagan idols into their homes and communities, combining covenant worship with the agricultural gods and fertility rites that promised worldly prosperity. This syncretism—the blending of true worship with pagan elements—wasn’t a dramatic overnight rebellion or sudden decision on their part. Instead, it spread gradually: the more Israel interacted with the Canaanites, the more they saw immediate benefits in fitting in, and the less they remembered the unique deliverances that had once made them a distinct nation. These choices paved the way for repeated cycles of apostasy, oppression, and eventual rescue by a judge whom the Lord raised up.³³ Each judge would restore monotheism momentarily, only for the people to slide back into the same pattern of cultural contamination once that strong leadership was gone.

Like All the Nations

Though judges arose periodically to rescue Israel from its idolatry and foreign oppression, the people’s appetite for worldly acceptance persisted. Each time a deliverer restored the people to covenant faithfulness, complacency returned soon after. The closing chapters of the judges’ era reveal a nation longing for more than just momentary stability—they wanted a permanent solution that matched the visible pomp and power of surrounding kingdoms. And they soon got it.

³³ Judges 2:14–16.

Samuel was fulfilling his prophetic charge to warn Israel against the moral lapses that had repeatedly drawn them into bondage. “If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts,” Samuel admonished them, “then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve him only.”³⁴ However, Samuel’s leadership was not sufficient to quell the people’s desire to embrace the ideas and practices of surrounding cultures. This became evident when Samuel, in his old age, had appointed his sons as judges in Israel, only for those sons to abuse their positions of authority for financial gain.³⁵ The elders in Israel approached the aged Samuel with a political solution similar to what everyone else was doing:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the Lord. And the Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.³⁶

Instead of relying on God’s direct guidance, Israel demanded the worldly structure they believed would ensure prestige, stability, and a reputation equal to neighboring pow-

³⁴ 1 Samuel 7:3.

³⁵ 1 Samuel 8:1–3.

³⁶ 1 Samuel 8:4–7.

ers. Samuel spelled out in stark detail the potential costs of such a path, warning of conscription into royal service, heavy taxation, and the loss of personal freedoms.³⁷ Even so, “the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel” and insisted, “We will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles.”³⁸ In this statement, Israel disclosed its underlying motives—an ambition to conform to the prevailing norms of global power rather than maintain the unique covenantal bond that had distinguished them since the Exodus. Once again, the slow stain of worldly influence had tainted Israel. Their desire to replicate what they observed in surrounding cultures was clearly greater than their fidelity to the Lord and the warnings from His prophet. They were God’s people in name, but in practice, they pursued and participated in the ways of the world.

Solomon’s Foreign Wives

Israel’s choice to enthrone a king led to a golden age under David and later Solomon—an age whose glory would soon be corroded by idolatrous entanglements. Solomon’s reign began with the favor of God, marked by great wisdom and prosperity.³⁹ Yet the success of his kingdom soon clashed with the warnings the Lord had previously given about royal excess and foreign entanglements.⁴⁰ Over time, Solomon’s

³⁷ 1 Samuel 8:10–18.

³⁸ 1 Samuel 8:19–20.

³⁹ 1 Kings 3:5–13.

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 17:14–17.

heart turned from the God of Israel to the deities venerated by the many nations surrounding him, such as Moab, Ammon, Edom, Sidon, and the Hittite kingdoms.

This slide into apostasy came because Solomon “loved many strange women”⁴¹ and built high places and altars to accommodate their varied gods.⁴² In direct defiance of the Lord’s commandment that Israel should not intermarry with idol-worshippers,⁴³ these polygamous unions became a conduit for cultural contamination. Rather than maintaining the purity of Israel’s worship, Solomon justified the integration of foreign deities—an outward display of his willingness to syncretize truth with pagan belief. By yielding to the political allure of diplomatic marriages—a practice embraced by many royal kingdoms throughout time—he introduced spiritual corruption into the highest level of Israel’s governance. The outcome was catastrophic. Solomon’s heart unsurprisingly became “turned away after other gods,” and he “did evil in the sight of the Lord.”⁴⁴ This behavior was especially egregious given that the Lord had twice appeared to Solomon to reaffirm His covenant and warn against apostasy.⁴⁵

Solomon’s personal choices reached far beyond his own household, infecting the very core of Israel’s identity. By building shrines and worship sites for pagan gods, he effectively broadcasted that the throne sanctioned such practices. Once the king himself sanctioned idol worship, local leaders

⁴¹ 1 Kings 11:1.

⁴² 1 Kings 11:4–8.

⁴³ Deuteronomy 7:3–4.

⁴⁴ 1 Kings 11:4–6.

⁴⁵ 1 Kings 11:9–10.

and commoners alike felt freer to participate. A monarchy previously united around the worship of Jehovah splintered into factions of competing religious loyalties. Royal officials, bureaucrats, and those seeking favor at court adapted to the shifting cultural climate, compromising the distinct covenant standards that had long defined Israel. Over time, the taboo of mingling pagan rites with the worship of the one true God dwindled. Foreign influences took root in places of high authority and bled down into everyday life. The influx of pagan shrines, alliances, and the open tolerance of polytheistic rituals contaminated Israel and undermined the purpose for which God had once set them apart. Stains spread slowly to start, but if they can contaminate people in positions of influence, their reach and impact accelerate significantly.

Apart from his pagan, polygamous relationships, Solomon is best known for overseeing the construction of Israel's first permanent temple in Jerusalem—a momentous feat that symbolized the nation's covenant bond with God.⁴⁶ Although David had long yearned to build such a house for the Lord, it was Solomon who brought the ambitious vision to fruition. Upon its completion, the temple became the focal point of Israel's faith. Its dedication was marked by solemn sacrifices and a visible demonstration of divine glory, with the cloud of the Lord's presence filling the sanctuary.⁴⁷ The people now had a centralized location for sacrifices and feasts—an unprecedented opportunity for them to unite in worship. But it wasn't the only game in town: Solomon's embrace of false gods ultimate-

46 1 Kings 5–9; 2 Chronicles 2–7.

47 1 Kings 8:10–11.

ly led to the construction of a competing cult temple only four miles away from the famed Temple of Solomon. Constructed in a similar fashion, this temple at Tel Moza—only recently discovered and still being excavated—includes an altar, an offering table, cult vessels and artifacts, and more.⁴⁸ The pagan worship at this nearby temple long succeeded Solomon's reign and became more pervasive as Israel divided into two kingdoms under Jeroboam and Rehoboam.

Jeroboam's Golden Calves

Following Solomon's death, the kingdom of Israel fractured into two realms: Judah in the south and the newly formed northern kingdom, ruled by Jeroboam. Once an official under Solomon, Jeroboam had fled to Egypt to escape the king's wrath.⁴⁹ While there, he encountered religious customs that would profoundly shape his leadership. Returning home to govern the north, he faced an immediate dilemma: how to ensure his subjects' loyalty when the temple—and thus the heart of Israel's worship—remained in Jerusalem. Fearing that ongoing pilgrimages to the southern kingdom would erode his influence, Jeroboam institutionalized idolatry instead:

If this people go up to do sacrifice in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then shall the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah, and they shall kill me, and go again to Rehoboam king of Judah. Whereupon the king took

48 "Tel Moza Expedition Project," accessed December 22, 2024, <https://www.telmoza.org/>.

49 1 Kings 11:26–40.

counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.⁵⁰

By co-opting Egyptian iconography and reviving an idolatrous practice from Israel's distant past, Jeroboam ensured that religious devotion in the north pivoted away from the covenant-centered temple worship in Jerusalem. Priests were consecrated outside the Levitical order,⁵¹ feasts were scheduled in competition with God's appointed times,⁵² and the entire structure of Israel's relationship with Jehovah was corrupted at its core. What began as an attempt to secure national stability quickly became a slippery slope to deeper apostasy. Jeroboam's golden calves reintroduced idolatry on a grand scale: once the highest authority sanctioned it, the populace not only tolerated but also embraced foreign deities. Jeroboam had cemented his political power at the expense of his people's devotion to God. Once again, Israel's worship had become tainted.

Ahab and Jezebel

For generations after Jeroboam's reign, the northern kingdom lurched from one dynasty to another, each ruler seeming to outdo the last in rebellion against the Lord. Jeroboam's golden calves had sown the seeds of widespread idolatry, which soon choked out true devotion and entrenched for-

⁵⁰ 1 Kings 12:27–28.

⁵¹ 1 Kings 12:31.

⁵² 1 Kings 12:32–33.

eign practices among the people.⁵³ Baasha wrested the throne through conspiracy, yet repeated Jeroboam's errors,⁵⁴ and his successor Zimri ruled only a week before Omri emerged triumphant in a civil war.⁵⁵ Each regime further eroded what little remained of the nation's spiritual integrity, culminating in Omri's son, Ahab, who ascended to power at a time when the kingdom had already largely distanced itself from the worship of Jehovah.

It was into this moral quagmire that Ahab introduced his most ruinous decision: forging an alliance with the Phoenicians by marrying Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon.⁵⁶ Influenced by Sidonian customs, Ahab openly embraced the worship of Baal and built an altar in Samaria, effectively sanctioning idolatry as the state religion:

And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him.⁵⁷

In clear contrast to the commandments, a once-chosen people now hoisted an emblem of foreign devotion in the seat of royal power. Under Ahab and Jezebel's guidance, Baal worship became the cultural norm: shrines proliferated, false prophets abounded, and those loyal to the Lord were per-

⁵³ 1 Kings 14:9–16.

⁵⁴ 1 Kings 15:27–34.

⁵⁵ 1 Kings 16:15–23.

⁵⁶ 1 Kings 16:31.

⁵⁷ 1 Kings 16:32–33.

secuted, fleeing to hide in a cave to escape.⁵⁸ By enthroning Baal in the political and religious life of Israel, Ahab followed in Solomon's footsteps by embracing idolatrous practices at the highest levels and pushing it onto the people. With royal sanction behind Baal worship, the northern kingdom swiftly absorbed these corrupted practices—no public outcry, no outpouring of protest. Time and again, Israel had shown that the slow stain of foreign idolatry was no unwelcome invader. They embraced it with open arms.

After the Assyrian Conquest

Eventually, Israel's persistent apostasy enabled the Assyrian conquest. By 722 BC, Samaria fell,⁵⁹ and the kingdom of Israel was officially dismantled—a defeat they invited by abandoning their only true protector. Following the fall of Samaria, the Assyrians employed a strategy of deportation and resettlement to maintain control over their new territory. They removed many Israelites from their homeland and replaced them with people from other nations.⁶⁰ These newcomers brought with them their own deities and customs, further muddying whatever remained of Israel's religious identity. These new residents adapted their rites to combine with worship for the God of Israel.⁶¹ The end result was a hybrid faith alien to the covenant that had once bound Israel to the Lord. The Bible makes very clear where the fault lies:

⁵⁸ 1 Kings 18:4.

⁵⁹ 2 Kings 17:5–6.

⁶⁰ 2 Kings 17:24.

⁶¹ 2 Kings 17:25–33.

For so it was, that the children of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God, which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods, And walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made.

And the children of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God, and they built them high places in all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city. And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree:

And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as did the heathen whom the Lord carried away before them; and wrought wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger: For they served idols, whereof the Lord had said unto them, Ye shall not do this thing.

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. Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the Lord their God.

And they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and his testimonies which he testified against them; and they followed vanity, and became vain, and went after the heathen that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them, that they should not do like them.

And they left all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger.⁶²

In reality, the installation of new settlers with foreign deities only accelerated a process that was already far advanced. Now, the northern kingdom was hopelessly entangled in a patchwork of superstitions—some faintly reminiscent of the Mosaic law, many overtly pagan. This final phase of assimilation testified that Israel’s flirtation with idolatry had come full circle: they had once yearned for security and prestige by copying other nations’ ways, and now they became a vassal state drowning in a sea of false gods.

In this bleak aftermath, the scriptural record underscores the tragic irony: the people God once called “my people”⁶³ forfeited their identity by chasing after every imaginable deity. Their covenant inheritance, so precious and heavily guarded

62 2 Kings 17:7–17.

63 Hosea 1:9.

by prophets of old, was squandered in their pursuit of worldly allure. The Assyrian conquest exposed how deeply the slow stain of spiritual compromise had permeated the nation’s heart. In a matter of generations, Israel had gone from being set apart to being hopelessly conformed.

Judah’s Adoption of Surrounding Idols

While the northern kingdom collapsed beneath Assyrian power, Judah appeared, for a time, to stand on firmer ground—thanks in part to King Hezekiah’s devotion to the Lord. Yet even Hezekiah’s sweeping reforms,⁶⁴ which targeted pagan altars and images inherited from earlier apostasies, did not permanently shield Judah from the slow stain of surrounding cultures. In the decades following Assyria’s conquest of Israel, Judah continued to face rampant spiritual threats, proving that no nation was immune to the corrosive lure of pagan practices. Enter Manasseh, who ascended to the throne at age twelve and promptly reversed the very reforms that had offered Judah a measure of holiness and divine protection:

And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, after the abominations of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out before the children of Israel.

For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them.

64 2 Kings 18:1–6.

And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord said, In Jerusalem will I put my name. And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord.⁶⁵

Like other apostates of his day, Manasseh embraced the excesses of these pagan rituals, which included child sacrifice, by killing his own son.⁶⁶ He desecrated the temple, installing the image of a pagan god⁶⁷—symbolically signaling that foreign gods and worldly values were welcome at the heart of Judah’s religious life. Manasseh’s endorsement injected the practices of Canaanites, Assyrians, and other pagan nations deep into Judah’s cultural bloodstream. People who had once flirted only occasionally with idol worship now found that compromise endorsed and prescribed by royal decree. What began as a smoldering temptation under lesser kings burst into a full blaze of syncretism, overshadowing the Mosaic Law and smothering any lingering reverence for the Lord’s holiness.

Prior to the Babylonian Exile

Even after Manasseh’s reign began to wane and subsequent kings tried—and often failed—to rein in idolatrous impulses, Judah’s slide toward spiritual ruin continued. The prophet Jeremiah emerged during this turbulent period, crying repentance to a nation that had grown deaf to divine warnings. Despite sporadic efforts at reform, Judah’s leaders persisted in

65 2 Kings 21:2–5.

66 2 Kings 21:6.

67 2 Kings 21:7.

turning to military alliances with Egypt, in adopting remnants of Canaanite fertility rites, in flirting with Assyrian astral worship, and in welcoming Babylonian deities into their religious pantheon. By the late seventh century BC, foreign infiltration had penetrated virtually every part of Judah’s culture.

Echoing the allegorical reference from Zenos, Jeremiah shared the Lord’s lament about the children of Israel pursuing worldly ways: “Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?”⁶⁸ Their moral corruption was evident not only in pagan altars and public rituals but also in the daily sins of injustice, deceit, and oppression that arose when God’s laws were cast aside. The prophet shared that Judah had “played the harlot with many lovers,” referencing how they chased after deities from across the region, from Egyptian cults to Babylonian cosmic beliefs.⁶⁹ “My people,” the Lord said, “have changed their glory for that which doth not profit.”⁷⁰

This wide-scale abandonment of God, as we’ve seen, did not happen overnight. As with earlier generations, it began with small compromises: treating foreign gods with a casual tolerance, allowing idols to remain in private homes, and accommodating alliances and marriages that bound Judah more deeply to pagan nations. Little by little, these influences chipped away at the identity Judah once held as a people uniquely set apart to serve Jehovah. The glitter of Egyptian

68 Jeremiah 2:21.

69 Jeremiah 2:20.

70 Jeremiah 2:11.

wealth, the awe of Assyrian power, and the rising star of Babylon all contributed to a culture that steadily forgot its true heritage.

By Jeremiah's day, the moral rot was nearly complete, setting the stage for the Babylonian exile that would soon follow—a tragic culmination of generations of escalating infidelity and a final consequence of Israel's refusal to forsake false gods. Long before the armies of Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem and dismantled the Temple,⁷¹ prophets had implored Judah to abandon its adulterous alliances with foreign deities and return to the God who had delivered them from Egypt. Their pleas went unheeded. Thus, when Babylon finally swept in to conquer the land, it was more than a political or military defeat—it represented divine judgment for a people who had consistently chosen idolatry over worship of the one true God.

Intermarriage and Cultural Contamination

After roughly seventy years of Babylonian captivity,⁷² a humbled remnant of Israel returned to their homeland under the edict of King Cyrus.⁷³ Their exile had been a dramatic judgment upon centuries of escalating idolatry, forcibly ripping them from the temple and inheritance they had so often taken for granted. In many respects, the trauma of losing Jerusalem, combined with life in a pagan empire, served to chasten them. Now able to rebuild, Israel's overt idol worship

⁷¹ 2 Kings 24–25.

⁷² Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10.

⁷³ 2 Chronicles 36:22–23.

had largely vanished. They meticulously reconstructed the Temple walls, reestablished its ordinances, and renewed their commitment to the Law of Moses, determined to break from the patterns of apostasy that led to their downfall.

Yet the pull of outside influences still persisted. Many Jews intermarried with Ashdodites, Ammonites, and Moabites. Their children “spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language.”⁷⁴ Nehemiah, a prominent Jewish leader, rebuked his peers over their idolatrous intermarrying:

And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?⁷⁵

Still, even Nehemiah's forceful protests could only do so much to contain the slow stain of surrounding cultures. His chastisement of the offenders and his impassioned plea highlighted a deeper reality: despite all that the Jews had suffered,

⁷⁴ Nehemiah 13:24.

⁷⁵ Nehemiah 13:25–26.

from Egypt all the way up to their Babylonian captivity, they persisted in repeating the practices they had been explicitly told to avoid. Israel had been chosen to be a “peculiar treasure” among the nations,⁷⁶ yet time and again the people drew near to customs that threatened their distinctiveness. Nehemiah is best known for helping Jerusalem rebuild its walls to repel physical assault, yet these obstructions were unable to keep out the spiritual threats that encircled Israel—especially since the people intentionally sought after and embraced them.

Marrying people from other faiths was not an isolated event. It represented a recurring pattern seen throughout Israel’s history: each time the people began to prosper, external influences offered alluring alternatives to their full devotion. Whether in Solomon’s grand palace, Jeroboam’s northern kingdom, or Nehemiah’s Jerusalem, the slow stain of worldly enticements continually undermined the Lord’s call for unwavering fidelity. In Nehemiah’s rebuke, we catch an echo of ancient warnings: no matter how many times God delivers His people, the risk remains that they will once again choose to absorb the beliefs and behaviors of those around them, jeopardizing the very inheritance that sets them apart. A stain you embrace will never be cleansed.

The Romans

Though the Jews had already weathered centuries of cultural contamination under successive empires, Rome’s oc-

⁷⁶ Exodus 19:5.

cupation introduced yet another slow erosion of their divine distinctiveness. By the time of Christ, Judea was firmly under Roman administration: taxes flowed to Caesar, Roman governors like Pontius Pilate wielded civil authority, and even the high priest was effectively installed or approved by political figures rather than by divine ordination. This hierarchical arrangement left the Jewish leadership caught between religious duties to God and pragmatic submission to Roman power. While devout Jews still clung to the rites and sacrifices of the Temple, many leaders learned to navigate Roman expectations and work within the system.

This wasn’t mere politics. Coins stamped with the emperor’s image circulated in Jewish markets, reminders of a foreign ruler revered by many as semi-divine. Meanwhile, factions like the Sadducees—who largely controlled the priesthood—embraced Hellenistic and Roman influences, prioritizing status, commerce, and power over doctrinal fidelity. Dynamics such as these intertwined Temple life with the apparatus of an empire that cared little for Israel’s religious aspirations.

Over time, the weight of Roman taxes, the partial assimilation of Jewish elites, and the cultural infusion of Gentile customs conspired to wear down their spiritual identity and faithfulness to God. Although the Pharisees tried to maintain strict adherence to the Law of Moses, even they, in seeking to preserve certain traditions, became mired in a system that often placed legal technicalities and social standing above the true spirit of God’s commandments. Thus, in the decades before Jerusalem’s eventual destruction, the slow stain of Roman influence revealed itself in a people who, though out-

wardly devout, had largely accepted the daily symbols and demands of Caesar. Despite the Temple standing proudly on Mount Moriah, a powerful tension persisted between the official forms of worship and a practical submission to foreign rule—unsettling evidence that a once-theocratic nation had become ever more entangled in the empire’s worldly sway.

The Israelites’ story is one of compromise, idolatry, and assimilation of surrounding practices. They were chosen to stand apart as God’s covenant people, yet time and again they invited outside influences into their belief system, displacing divine counsel with carnal desires. Rejecting God led to the outcomes His prophets warned of: foreign conquest, scattering, and prolonged chastening to prompt their repentance. It was not God’s unwillingness to protect them—rather, the people themselves forfeited His favor by welcoming a slow infiltration of corrupt ideologies and immoral rites. Each wave of apostasy confirms that a heart divided between God and the world cannot retain heaven’s blessings for long.

THE JAREDITES

In the olive tree allegory, Zenos shares that in order to preserve its natural branches, “the Lord of the vineyard went his way, and hid the natural branches of the tame olive tree in the nethermost parts of the vineyard.”¹ He wanted to see good fruit produced but was grieved that he was losing the tree *and* its potential fruit.² The scattering of some branches into distant areas of the vineyard seemed to be an act borne out of desperation—pruning, digging, and nourishing the main tree had, despite his best efforts, resulted in corruption and evil fruit,³ “good for nothing save it be to be hewn down and cast into the fire.”⁴

The Jaredites were certainly one such branch that the Lord relocated elsewhere, to a promised land “which is choice above all the earth.”⁵ This new “nethermost part” of the Lord’s vineyard—separated by vast waters and preserved for a righteous nation—was intended to be a haven where the “natural branches” could thrive, untainted by the idolatrous practices that had taken hold in the old world. By removing them from the immediate influence of Babylonian society, the Lord pro-

1 Jacob 5:13–14.

2 Ibid.

3 Jacob 5:39–40.

4 Jacob 5:42.

5 Ether 1:38.

vided an environment in which the Jaredites, like other hidden branches,⁶ might take firm root and produce good fruit. Isolated on a fresh continent, they were free to build a society centered on their covenants with Christ. God's intent in isolating them was to spare them from the slow stain of worldly corruption that had spread so widely in their old homeland. That was the goal, anyway. Yet, as Ether's record reveals, even in this promised land, the seeds of apostasy could easily take hold.

Secret Combinations

The Jaredites' initial prosperity and fidelity to God soon succumbed to corruption within just a few generations. The tiny kingdom produced warring familial factions, with children, cousins, and siblings all warring one against another to wrest control of the fledgling monarchy. In one early example, Jared (named after the original Jared) dethroned his father, Omer, after winning over half of the people through flattery.⁷ Omer was incarcerated for years, apparently allowed conjugal visits leading to the birth of many children who, years later, "were exceedingly angry because of the doings of Jared their brother, insomuch that they did raise an army and gave battle unto Jared."⁸ These seditious siblings overpowered Jared's army and nearly killed Jared himself, who "pled with them that they would not slay him, and he would give up the

⁶ Jacob 5:13–14.

⁷ Ether 8:2–3.

⁸ Ether 8:4–5.

kingdom unto his father."⁹ They agreed, Jared lost, and he was deeply upset about it "for he had set his heart upon the kingdom and upon the glory of the world."¹⁰

Observing her father's frustration, Jared's daughter contrived a cunning plan inspired by "the records which our fathers brought across the great deep"¹¹—ancient documents describing secret oaths and conspiracies once used to gain power. She proposed that Jared promise her in marriage to a man named Akish, on the condition that Akish murder her grandfather, Omer, and secure the throne for her father, Jared.¹² Through this arrangement, Jared's daughter believed she could restore her father to power and position herself advantageously. Though the scheme initially succeeded in toppling Omer, it also revived the very corruption the early Jaredites had hoped to escape by leaving the Old World behind.

The slow stain of secret combinations—with their tools of deception, flattery, and legalized murder and plunder—intensified significantly as time went on. These conspirators bound themselves with unholy oaths to protect one another and their thirst for power, forging a hidden network of loyalty and fear that threatened anyone on the throne. Over generations, what might have been dismissed initially as just political maneuvering metastasized into the primary driver of societal decay. Moroni, in editorializing Ether's record, notes that they were the primary cause of the Jaredites' ultimate destruction.¹³

⁹ Ether 8:6.

¹⁰ Ether 8:7.

¹¹ Ether 8:9.

¹² Ether 8:10.

¹³ Ether 8:21.

A Com-plete Breakdown

Akish didn't stay in power forever. In what would eventually become a constant scene of blowback—with the faction out of power revolting against the faction in power, again and again—Omer's family regained control after a yearslong war between the two sides.¹⁴ Omer's son Emer began to restore righteousness, which brought prosperity to the people. He even saw Christ himself.¹⁵ Emer's son Coriantumr continued in his father's footsteps, doing "that which was good unto his people in all his days"¹⁶—as did his son Com. It was Com's son Heth who would give in to temptation and lust for power, breaking the fragile peace the people had been enjoying in recent decades. Com's throne became the object of his son's lust, leading Heth to "embrace the secret plans again of old, to destroy his father."¹⁷ Heth wanted power, and Satan had a tried and true recipe to help him acquire it. Com soon thereafter died at the hands of his own son.¹⁸

Maybe there's something in a name, but the cycle repeated generations later with another Com (whose father was also named Coriantumr). This Com grew up in a family who for generations had been living "in captivity," now under the authority of Amgid.¹⁹ Finally, Com rose up against his oppressors and "drew away the half of the kingdom," ruling over this

¹⁴ Ether 9:12–13.

¹⁵ Ether 9:22.

¹⁶ Ether 9:23.

¹⁷ Ether 9:26.

¹⁸ Ether 9:27.

¹⁹ Ether 10:30–31.

split community for four decades until he finally overthrew Amgid in battle "and obtained power over the remainder of the kingdom."²⁰ Things were looking up for Com and his family, yet just as peace and prosperity approached, so too did the secret combinations once again:

And in the days of Com there began to be robbers in the land; and they adopted the old plans, and administered oaths after the manner of the ancients, and sought again to destroy the kingdom. Now Com did fight against them much; nevertheless, he did not prevail against them.²¹

Though Com tried to contain the robbers and defend his renewed kingdom, the "old plans" easily seduced those who wanted to embrace the Old World's ways. As prophets had long warned, once the seed of secret combinations took root, it would not be easily eradicated. Soon, the populace found itself embroiled yet again in brutal struggles for power, each usurper fueled by a sense of entitlement that viewed murder and intrigue as acceptable paths to the throne. And as each generation inherited the legacy of increasingly entrenched conspiracies, the slow stain of worldly ambition smothered the last flicker of faith in and obedience to God. Eventually, so many voices of righteousness were rejected—or even exterminated—that communal repentance became all but impossible.²² This pattern would continue in waves until, in the final chapters of the Jaredite story, the entire civilization

²⁰ Ether 10:32.

²¹ Ether 10:33–34.

²² Ether 11:5, 12.

would reap the harvest of devastation sown by centuries of corruption and apostasy.

Riplakish's Tyranny

Before the eventual collapse of Jaredite society, successive kings employed the Akish strategy to topple the throne and install themselves or their loved ones instead. Over several generations, each factional struggle for power further distanced the people from their original covenant with the Lord. By the time Riplakish arose as a prominent ruler, the notion that might made right—and that wealth and power took precedence over righteousness—had become deeply entrenched in Jaredite society.

What we read of Riplakish's polygamy, taxes, forced labor, and penal system makes clear how the Jaredites had degraded into the monarchical practices of the Old World from which their ancestors had escaped:

And it came to pass that Riplakish did not do that which was right in the sight of the Lord, for he did have many wives and concubines, and did lay that upon men's shoulders which was grievous to be borne; yea, he did tax them with heavy taxes; and with the taxes he did build many spacious buildings.

And he did erect him an exceedingly beautiful throne; and he did build many prisons, and whoso would not be subject unto taxes he did cast into prison; and whoso was not able to pay taxes he did cast into prison; and he did cause that they should labor continually for

their support; and whoso refused to labor he did cause to be put to death.

Wherefore he did obtain all his fine work, yea, even his fine gold he did cause to be refined in prison; and all manner of fine workmanship he did cause to be wrought in prison. And it came to pass that he did afflict the people with his whoredoms and abominations.²³

A people once committed to a God-centered society had become subjugated under an exploitative system rooted in greed and self-indulgence. Rather than prioritizing justice or moral rectitude, Riplakish's administration reflected the values of a civilization undone by its appetite for worldly gain. The seeds planted by earlier conspirators reached full bloom in his regime, bearing the bitter fruit of spiritual decay and social upheaval. Despite being killed in another uprising years later and his descendants all being driven out of the land,²⁴ Riplakish's reign makes clear how many people—particularly those in power—embrace the slow stain and invite it to spread. Society disintegrates when power replaces principle.

In the final chapters of *Ether*, the slow stain of worldly influence reaches a brutal crescendo, plunging the Jaredites into ceaseless warfare.²⁵ Factions splinter and realign in pursuit of power until social order all but disintegrates. Prophets like *Ether* call for repentance, yet their warnings go unheeded; the

²³ *Ether* 10:5–7.

²⁴ *Ether* 10:8.

²⁵ *Ether* 13–15.

people were long past the point of listening to God’s messengers. And with each new generation inheriting the unresolved conflicts of the last, violence became the only real inheritance left. In the end, the Jaredites destroyed themselves entirely—a once-hopeful nation undone by relentless ambition, forsaken principles, and the unrelenting moral decay they refused to curb.

THE NEPHITES

Most who read King Mosiah’s story come away with a superficial understanding of what was happening—not unlike my ignorance as a recently called missionary to what the olive tree allegory was really about. What we find, if we peel back a layer or two, is a direct connection to the Jaredite nation and an opportunity to stop the spread of pride and power lust that had caused that nation to implode.

Let’s establish some context first. Mosiah was a monarch, one in a line of Nephite kings—a system that was less than ideal from the start. Like the Israelites rejecting God as their ruler and desiring kingly control,¹ Nephi explains that his people “would that I should be their king”—a proposal he rejected since he “was desirous that they should have *no* king.”² But Nephi ultimately gave in to their demands in his old age and “anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people” just before his death.³ This follows a similar turn of events centuries before when Jared and his brother’s people “desired of them that they should anoint one of their sons to be a king over them.” Jared’s brother, considering the request “griev-

1 1 Samuel 8:7.

2 2 Nephi 5:18; emphasis added.

3 Jacob 1:9.