

“My People Are Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge”: Spiritual Ignorance and the Voice of the Prophets

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In Matthew 28:20, Jesus commanded his disciples to teach future disciples to obey everything he commanded them. This aspect of the Great Commission has profound implications for the Lord’s people: every Christian is obligated to know and obey everything that Christ has commanded.² Spiritual growth is a process, however; new believers do not immediately know every command. In this life, believers are always in a state of partial ignorance. Even in their glorified state, humans will never be omniscient. Inevitably, unglorified believers will transgress God’s desired will—at times simply because they are unaware of his expectations. How, then, does God respond to the spiritual ignorance of his people, especially when transgressions may have been averted by a more thorough investigation of his revelation?³

Sin, Ignorance, and Culpability

This article assumes that culpability for divine judgment can be assigned only to what Scripture defines as “sin.” In other words, God is not a capricious deity and does not punish people for things that are morally right. Therefore, it is essential to define “sin” carefully.⁴ Scripture should govern both the framework of the discussion and the nuances of any terms employed. No single definition can encompass every aspect of impurity, transgression, rebellion, straying, failing, iniquity, and unbelief in

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² John 14:25–26 makes it clear that the Holy Spirit continued the teaching ministry of Christ in and through the lives of the apostles (cf. Acts 1:1, “all that Jesus *began* to do and teach”). Jesus’ ministry of relating truth from the Father continued through the Holy Spirit after his ascension (John 16:12–15). The entire NT, therefore, as the product of the Spirit’s ministry through the apostles, can be said to encompass the “commands” of Christ. Moreover, since the same Father, Son, and Spirit were involved in the giving of the OT, the whole of Scripture is rightly considered the revelation that believers are accountable to know and obey.

³ Ethicists, philosophers, and legal theorists have often debated the extent of one’s blameworthiness for moral wrongs committed in a state of ignorance. Students (and critics) of theological systems have explored the significance of culpable ignorance in Wesleyan or Oberlin Perfectionism or in Roman Catholicism’s distinction between mortal and venial sins. Focused interaction with these theories or systems is beyond the scope of this article.

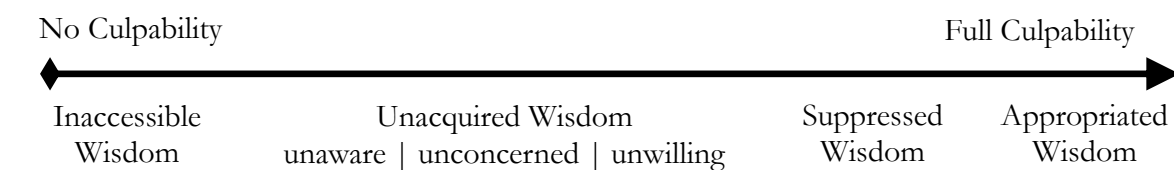
⁴ J. C. Ryle warns, “It may be laid down as a rule, with tolerable confidence, that the absence of accurate definitions is the very life of religious controversy. If men would only define with precision the theological terms which they use, many disputes would die. Scores of excited disputants would discover that they do not really differ, and that their disputes have arisen from their own neglect of the great duty of explaining the meaning of words.” *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from the Standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman* (London: National Protestant Church Union, 1898), 1.

Scripture. In general, however, “sin” in this article will describe any deviation from God’s revealed will in action, word, thought, or disposition.⁵

Further, it is important to distinguish between wrongness and blameworthiness. This article contends that a violation of God’s revealed will is always *wrong*, but the question at stake is whether the believer is *culpable* if the violation was unintentional due to ignorance.⁶ Although theological systems provide helpful constructs for discussion and identify key lynchpins in biblical thinking, they rarely address the question of how God *feels* (in a relational way) and *reacts* to transgressions of ignorance among his people.

The kind of ignorance that lies behind errors of judgment can be due to a variety of factors. The wisdom necessary to make the best decision may be inaccessible (one cannot know), may be unacquired (one could know, but does not), or may be suppressed (one does know, but does not want to admit it). The degree of culpability increases as one moves along this continuum from what he *cannot* know to what he *does not* know to what he *will not* know.⁷ Someone who sins in spite of full, applied knowledge would incur the greatest culpability (see Figure 1). Yet unacquired wisdom must also be subdivided; there are various reasons why an individual might not appropriate the wisdom that he theoretically could gain. Some are unaware that they need to seek wisdom because they deem their current answer to be acceptable (the issue of misinformation). Others do not pursue wisdom because they deem it to be unimportant at that time or in that arena; therefore, they are unconcerned with their current ignorance (the issue of prioritization). In fact, the very nature of ignorance, “either consciously or unconsciously, judges what is or is not worth knowing and acts accordingly.”⁸ Others are aware that they are deficient in some area of wisdom but are unwilling to put forth the effort to acquire it due to the inconvenience of the learning process or due to the perceived implications of the truth (the issue of motivation). This article focuses on the category of unacquired wisdom.

Figure 1. Degrees of Culpability for Various Causes of Ignorance⁹



⁵ In other words, a right act done for the wrong reason is “sin,” as is a wrong act done for the right reason. “Transgression” in this article denotes a departure from a stated law, regardless of one’s intent. Other terms such as “iniquity” or “wickedness” describe one’s disposition more than one’s act.

⁶ The level of culpability hangs, in part, upon the extent to which the “ignorance” itself was intentional.

⁷ “Will not” here describes volition, not a temporal future. This is the stance of the child who looks groggily at her father at 10:00 p.m. and asserts, “I will not go to sleep.”

⁸ Paul Rauschenbusch, “The Sin of Ignorance,” Day1, aired February 20, 2011; transcription accessed December 26, 2019, https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002c94/the_sin_of_ignorance.

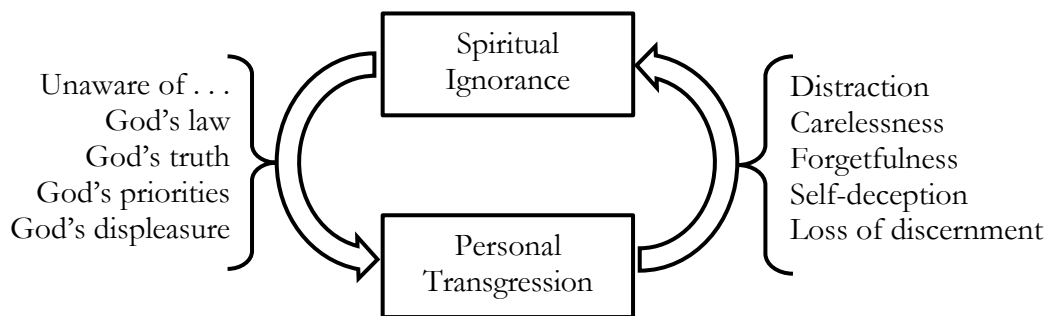
⁹ To define precisely whether “inaccessible wisdom” belongs at the punctiliar beginning of this line (absolutely no culpability) or somewhere along the continuum is outside the purview of this article. This requires an answer to the question “Does culpability require ability?,” which has been addressed at length in Augustinian-Pelagian debates about depravity and the correlation between human ability and human responsibility for sin.

Throughout the history of the world, God has chosen to relay his word through mediators, especially the *prophets*. Inasmuch as prophets withhold, twist, or counterfeit divine revelation, spiritual ignorance will persist and escalate. Inasmuch as prophets declare God’s word by announcing, warning, and exhorting their fellow men, spiritual understanding will grow. True prophets, therefore, serve as one of God’s great antidotes to spiritual ignorance. Individuals may still reject the light of the truth, but not in ignorance of God’s will and ways.

Compounding of Ignorance and Sin

Ignorance and sin are often difficult to distinguish starkly in practice since they can be closely related and mutually reinforcing. Transgression and ignorance each function as both cause and effect. On the one hand, people at times transgress because they do not know the law. On the other hand, people who disregard known laws may lose the opportunity for further clarification or understanding, forget what they previously knew, or otherwise miss out on instruction.¹⁰ Multiple internal and external factors, ranging from self-distraction to self-deception or from diversion to deceit, can contribute to the compounding of ignorance and sin.¹¹ Figure 2 visualizes the cyclical nature of personal transgression and spiritual ignorance, as acts of sin contribute to a personal environment that exacerbates spiritual ignorance leading to further sin.

Figure 2. Compounding of Ignorance and Transgression



God, through his prophets, confronts both sin and ignorance to interrupt this cycle and to establish or restore his people in knowledge and obedience. In particular, he confronts ignorance due to a culture of distraction, personal rebellion, divine judgment, or appointing only affirming advisors.¹²

¹⁰ For example, if a student fails to listen during a foundational lecture, the professor may need to take an extra class period to review this material instead of progressing on to profitable applications that would better equip the student to excel in his professional field.

¹¹ Brian Hand observes, “Knowledge tells us ahead of time where we’re likely to find traps of sin, what they look like, and how to avoid them. God’s Word shines a light into the recesses of our hearts to reveal what’s already going on inside of us. Our natural tendency toward self-justification resists such exposure; so unless we’re committed to a sustained campaign against sin, we will treat our sin far too lightly and will fail to expose its hold on our hearts.” *Web of Iniquity: The Entangling of Sins* (Greenville, SC: JourneyForth Academic, 2016), 52.

¹² The tone of this article will not be disimpassioned, because the biblical texts under consideration exude emotion. It would be a mistake to attribute the reactions in the text to the passions of human prophets alone, because in almost

Ignorance Due to Distraction

One significant enemy of spiritual understanding is a culture of distraction. Isaiah indicts those who (from “early in the morning” until “late in the evening”) intentionally impair their understanding with alcohol, who fill their discretionary time with music and parties, and who have no time to consider the things of the Lord (5:11–12). Such failure to turn one’s attention toward (נִבְט, hiphil) the acts of God is called absence of knowledge (מִבְּלִי־דַעַת,¹³ v. 13), and God attributes Israel’s deportation to this spiritual ignorance.¹⁴ If the people had stopped to consider their true condition before God, the outcome may have been different. They exchanged spiritual understanding for a lifestyle of amusement and—both subsequently and consequently (“therefore,” לָכֵן)—the pain of exile. Distraction led to destruction.¹⁵

Hosea extends this indictment, explicitly citing alcohol usage and sexual sins as undermining understanding: “they have forsaken the LORD to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine,¹⁶ which take away the understanding” (4:10–11).¹⁷ Israel’s rampant wickedness (v. 2) evidenced that there was “no knowledge of God in the land” (v. 1). Errant spiritual leadership was largely to blame (vv. 4–6),¹⁸ but clergy and laity alike were to face God’s judgment (v. 9). God says, in reference to men and women engaging in fornication, adultery, and prostitution, “A people without understanding shall come to ruin” (v. 14). The horror of the extent of the sin described in Hosea is that the perpetrators were

every passage cited, the words were dictated from the mouth of Yahweh. This is not just the voice of the prophets; this is the heart of God!

¹³ Delitzsch argues that the prefix מִן is not a causal particle but a component of the compound preposition מִבְּלִי, meaning “without” (essentially a double-negative: מִן plus בְּלִי). Thus, Israel’s deportation comes upon her “unawares.” God’s people were ignorant, specifically, of God’s wrath. They became secure in their revelry and blind to their peril because they did not recognize the impending judgment of God upon them for their wickedness. *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. James Martin, in Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (1866–91; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 7:111. The causal connection between spiritual misperception and physical exile inheres primarily in the conjunction לָכֵן.

¹⁴ The problem was not merely that they did not consider the facts of God’s works; they were unable to recognize God’s hand in history or to ascertain the significance of what God was already doing (cf. v. 19). “They lacked spiritual perception.” Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 174. Ascertaining the significance of information requires more time, effort, and attention than acquiring facts alone.

¹⁵ Isaiah “does not oppose them [these pleasures] because they are wrong in themselves, but because they have become all-absorbing to the point where spiritual sensitivity has become dimmed. . . . When the passion for pleasure has become uppermost in a person’s life, passion for God and his truth and his ways is squeezed out.” John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1–39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 160.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Much of the prophetic literature, including this verse, is written in poetic form. Within this article, poetic lines and line breaks are not utilized when verses are quoted in general text, but passages in block quotations are formatted with line breaks as they appear in the ESV.

¹⁷ God mocks the extent of their consequent foolishness by observing that they ask sticks for instructions instead of the living God (v. 12).

¹⁸ David A. Hubbard calls this “a fierce failure.” Indeed, “the collapse of the priest and prophet, key ministers of law and word, leads inevitably to the disastrous destruction.” *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 110. The passage highlights “the pitiable folly of the ill-instructed laity” due to the failures of their leaders. Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 118.

God's own chosen people, to whom belonged the patriarchs and the Law and the prophets (2 Kgs 17:13; Neh 9:26; Rom 9:4)!¹⁹

The prophets have many words from God expressing his reaction to his people when they failed to remember his word in the way he commanded. The root זָכַר (“remember”) occurs ninety-two times in Isaiah through Malachi, and שָׁכַח (“forget”) appears thirty-four times. Toward the beginning of the prophetic corpus, Isaiah warns that because Israel had “forgotten [שָׁכַח] the God of [her] salvation and [had] not remembered [זָכַר] the Rock of [her] refuge, . . . the harvest [would] flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain” (Isa 17:10–11).

Immediately before plunging his people into 400 years of revelatory silence, God gives a command (Mal 4:4) and a promissory warning (vv. 5–6). In light of the coming vindication of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked on the Day of the Lord, God exhorts, “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (v. 4). For Israel, to forget God's commands (either volitionally or intellectually) was to invite utter destruction. Spiritual sloth is spiritual suicide.

Ignorance in Rebellion

The Israelites' trajectory of rebellion impeded the possibility of repentance (“their deeds do not permit them to return to their God,” Hos 5:4), because their hearts and minds were oriented away from Yahweh (“the spirit of whoredom is within them, and they know not the LORD”). God himself determined to withdraw from them even when they sought for him (v. 6). God reserves the right to make spiritual knowledge harder to acquire for those who have rejected him.

Knowledge of God's omniscience should have acted as a deterrent against iniquity (7:2),²⁰ but the Israelites paid attention only to the affirmation of men (v. 3). The people became oblivious to the progression of their own demise (v. 9), and their pride blinded them to the need to return to God, despite God's judgment (v. 10). Shockingly, these people claimed before God himself, “My God, we—Israel—know you” (8:2)! But lip service did not make it so. Moreover, worship was no substitute for true knowledge of God (6:6). God refused to accept their sacrifices (8:13) because “Israel [had] forgotten his Maker”; the Israelites invested in urban development and military defense rather than in pure devotion (v. 14).

¹⁹ Paul observes that not all ethnic Israelites are truly, spiritually God's people (Rom 9:6). God does, however, repeatedly describe the wayward nation as “my people.” (עַמִּי appears 125 times in Isaiah through Zechariah.) It is also apparent that true believers can succumb to gross sins, though in such cases, God's chastisement and the ultimate repentance of the backslidden individual are indicative of a true relationship with God (Heb 12:6–7). Therefore, in principle, God's responses to the sins of the Israelite nation as a whole can be illustrative of his potential responses to wayward churches and believers—not because the church and Israel are coextensive, but because they are the people of God in distinct but significantly overlapping ways.

²⁰ Literally, “They do not say to their heart [that] all their evil I remember.” David A. Hubbard writes, “They behaved as though God no longer held them accountable for their conduct. Being masters of deceit (6:7; 7:1), they had no difficulty deceiving themselves.” *Hosea*, 141.

More revelation—even more clarification of God’s expectations—was not the solution, however, since the people would have dismissed God’s regulations, no matter how detailed he made them (8:12).²¹ Hosea’s appeal was for genuine repentance after divine chastisement (Hos 6:1–3):

Come, let us return to the LORD;
 for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
 he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.
 After two days he will revive us;
 on the third day he will raise us up,
 that we may live before him.
 Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD.

God’s chastisement included both verbal and physical means. God cut them down (חצב) by the prophets and killed them (הרג) with his words (6:5).²² The prophets “continually assail[ed] the people with their guilt” (v. 5),²³ but when they continued to disregard God (v. 7), God condemned the nation to exile (cf. v. 11).

Ignorance by Judgment

Ignorance may also be God’s means of judgment for earlier rejection. God, through Amos, warned Israel of coming judgment that would include “a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11; cf. Deut 8:3).²⁴ Shalom M. Paul writes,

²¹ Charles Simeon observes that estrangement from truth can manifest itself when God’s laws are “neglected as unimportant” or “ridiculed as absurd.” Regarding the former, he writes, “One would imagine that the book which reveals these great truths should be universally sought after with insatiable avidity; and be studied day and night, in order to the obtaining of a perfect knowledge of its contents. But how is this book treated? . . . There is no other book so generally slighted as the inspired volume; not a novel or a newspaper but is preferred before it; so little is the excellence of its mysteries contemplated, and so little the importance of its truths considered.” *Horae Homileticae: Hosea to Malachi* (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1832), 106. Garrett warns, “Beware of how easy it is to substitute culture and prevalent opinions for true Christianity. It is possible to regard true examples of Christian spirituality as alien.” *Hosea, Joel*, 187.

²² If “judgment” in v. 5 refers to God’s physical chastisement of his people, then the full realization of the prophets’ message was still future. On this basis, the NET Bible identifies these past-tense verbs as “examples of the so-called ‘prophetic perfect’”; thus, “the prophets are pictured as the executioners of Israel and Judah because they announced their imminent destruction. The prophetic word was endowed with the power of fulfillment” (Hos 6:5n11, 12). If, however, “judgment” refers to God’s declaration of their guilt, then the “slaying” ministry of the prophets was a full and present reality through the message of men like Hosea. Garrett, 161.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Lack of direction from leaders in general can also be indicative of God’s judgment among those who are not among the people of God, as seen in Nahum 3:17–18: “Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts settling on the fences in a day of cold—when the sun rises, they fly away; no one knows where they are. Your shepherds are asleep, O king of Assyria; your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them.” How much more dire, however, “is no word from the Lord, an ominous and foreboding silence!” Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 151.

The inaccessibility of God, that is, the absence of prophecy depriving man of the divine word, is regarded throughout the Bible as a dire portent of God's wrath (compare 1 Sam 14:37; 28:6, 15–16). It is often threatened by the prophets, for example, Jer 18:18; Ezek 7:26; Mic 3:6–7; and actually materialized in Lam 2:9 (see Ps 74:9).²⁵

Isaiah bemoaned the witlessness of the people when he chided (29:9–10),

Astonish yourselves and be astonished;
 blind yourselves and be blind!
 Be drunk, but not with wine;
 stagger, but not with strong drink!
 For the LORD has poured out upon you
 a spirit of deep sleep,
 and has closed your eyes (the prophets),
 and covered your heads (the seers).

Isaiah warned that God's word would be beyond the reach of the illiterate, for they cannot read (v. 12), yet it would be inaccessible even to the literate (v. 11) due to their spiritual obtuseness.²⁶ The underlying problem was not what these people claimed about their relationship with God; the issue was their heart stance toward God (v. 13). "Determined spiritual insensitivity becomes judicial spiritual deprivation."²⁷

God declared that he would withhold special revelation, not only in general, but even from those frantically trying to obtain a word from God (Amos 8:12; Hos 5:6; cf. 1 Sam 14:37). An idolater who seeks to obtain a word from Yahweh through a prophet has no right to expect that the answer that he receives will be correct. God says, "If the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet" (Ezek 14:9).²⁸ This scenario is illustrated in 1 Kings 22. When idolatrous Ahab sought a word from Yahweh for an upcoming military campaign, Ahab's prophets unanimous prophesied victory. Micaiah alone dissented, and Micaiah explains, "The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets" (v. 22). Such deception is indicative of God's severe displeasure. In Ahab's case, "the LORD [had] declared disaster" against him (v. 22). Lying prophets confirm sinners in their impending judgment, as Jeremiah observed when he complained, "Ah, Lord

²⁵ *Amos*, Hermeneia, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 265.

²⁶ Oswalt notes that these people "have the technical skills to understand God's word, but they lack the spiritual insight which would enable them to see the plain meaning." *Isaiah 1–39*, 532.

²⁷ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 215. Motyer writes of verse 9, "If we are indecisive spiritually we condemn ourselves to bewilderment." *Ibid.*

²⁸ John B. Taylor summarizes the interaction of culpable prophets as a secondary cause and God as the ultimate cause: "On the face of it, the lying prophets were . . . prophesying 'out of their own minds'. But in the deepest sense, it was the Lord who was responsible. . . . They had succumbed to spiritual blindness and so the lies they uttered were all part of God's judgment upon them." *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1969), 128. See also Lamar Eugene Cooper, *Ezekiel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 160–61.

GOD, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, ‘It shall be well with you,’ whereas the sword has reached their very life” (Jer 4:10).²⁹

A lying prophet will still bear culpability in the situation, for God, through Ezekiel, explains that “the punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike” (Ezek 14:10, cf. v. 9b). God’s ultimate motive, even when he confirms his people in ignorance for a time, is restorative. He told Ezekiel, “They shall bear their punishment . . . [so] that (אֲמַלְ) the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord GOD” (vv. 10–11).

Ignorance by Invitation

More often than not, when God’s people choose a sinful path, they surround themselves with counselors who will affirm them in their deviation. Spiritual blindness is self-perpetuating. Isaiah explains that Israel, in her unwillingness to accept the truth, pressured prophets to change their message to fit with the spirit of the times (30:9–11):

For they are a rebellious people,
 lying children,
 children unwilling to hear
 the instruction of the LORD;
 who say to the seers, “Do not see,”
 and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right;
 speak to us smooth things,
 prophesy illusions,
 leave the way, turn aside from the path,
 let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

Micah mocks those who preach against preaching the truth (Mi 2:6) when he writes, “If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, ‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,’ he would be the preacher for this people!” (v. 11). Willful self-deception is ultimately futile (Jer 7:8). God

²⁹ God expressly exonerates himself from the preponderance of prophetic deception, however, when he says through Jeremiah, “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, “It shall be well with you”; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, “No disaster shall come upon you.” For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened?’” (23:16–18). God’s hiding his word by permitting or promoting deception from the mouth of professional prophets says far more about the persistent promiscuity of the people than it does about God’s truthfulness. These passages do not present God’s role as merely tolerative; he plays an active role in promoting the deception. It is not unjust for him to do so, however, since the people have persisted in rebellion and since he will not hide himself from those who genuinely seek him in humility and repentance. Even when Jeremiah “protests the propriety of God allowing his people to persist in their delusions during such a crisis,” he “notes that God had not left himself without a witness.” R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 74.

declares, “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so” (5:30–31a). Then he asks, “but what will you do when the end comes?” (5:31b).

Deceived by a Prophet of God

Not all defective instruction is invited by the people, however. Sometimes, deviant doctrine is foisted upon people by spiritual leaders who, by their falsehood, propagate spiritual ignorance and promote attendant transgressions. Within any environment pervaded by spiritual ignorance, identifying truth amidst a cacophony of error is essential. The fundamental benchmark by which all assertions are to be judged is the previous revelation of God. Anything that does not accord with what God has already revealed cannot be from the Lord.

God demanded through Moses that any prophet be put to death who spoke on the authority of any god but Yahweh or who feigned a message from Yahweh (Deut 18:20). The challenge, of course, was to identify whether a message was truly from Yahweh or not. Anyone who “taught rebellion against the LORD” (13:5) by suggesting that they “go after other gods” (v. 2) was to be killed (v. 5). God predicted, however, that some prophets and dreamers would succeed in giving apparently miraculous signs to validate their doctrine (vv. 1–2); yet even in such an instance, the true test was whether the teaching conformed to the commands of God (v. 4). God expressly allows counterfeit prophets to do counterfeit miracles to test the devotion of his people (vv. 3).³⁰ The validation of future revelation against prior revelation requires, of course, an understanding of prior revelation. Someone who does not already know God’s commands and who is unwilling to cross-check new teaching against former revelation may be unable to identify deviations from the truth.³¹

The fallibility of human leaders throughout Israel’s history highlights the importance of specific revelation from God through his prophets. One of the most striking vignettes in the book of Kings involves a prophet (“a man of God,” 1 Kgs 13:1) from Judah. He traveled to Bethel in the Northern Kingdom for the sole purpose of decrying Jeroboam’s idolatry and predicting the desecration of the illicit altar by a descendant of David named Josiah. No less than four times in these first five verses this prophecy is attributed directly to the speech of Yahweh (vv. 2 [2x], 3, 5), with an additional reference to “the word of the LORD” describing the commissioning of the prophet himself. After a brief altercation, Jeroboam offered the prophet lodging and a reward, but the prophet refused the overtures of this wicked king, specifically citing “the word of the LORD” to him: “You shall neither eat bread nor drink water nor return by the way that you came” (vv. 8–9). The prophet stood firm against lucrative allure and departed in obedience to God’s command (v. 10).

³⁰ Eugene H. Merrill qualifies, “The fact that the false prophet fulfilled a God-ordained function did not deliver him from personal responsibility, however.” *Deuteronomy*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 231.

³¹ In reference to Micah 2:11, Bruce K. Waltke writes, “The profiteers do not bother to verify the authenticity of so-called prophets, for they are not the least surprised or offended by preachers who share their cupidity and venality.” Donald J. Wiseman, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 175.

An aged prophet from that district hurried after him (vv. 11–14). Again, the man of God refused to return, citing for the second time “the word of the LORD” (v. 17). The aged prophet, however, pulled rank and introduced a contradictory “word of the LORD,” which he falsely attributed to an angelic messenger (v. 18).³²

The young man of God was persuaded by the aged prophet and violated the divine terms of his commission (v. 19). During their subsequent meal together, God did indeed give “a word” to the aged prophet, who decried the young man of God because he had “disobeyed the word of the LORD and [had] not kept the command that the LORD [his] God commanded [him]” (v. 21). God declared that the man of God would die on the way home, and a lion killed him on the way (vv. 22–25). God conspicuously fulfilled “the word that the LORD spoke” against “the man of God who disobeyed the word of the LORD” (v. 26). This entire scenario underscored the inviolable nature of “the word of the LORD,” including the absolute certainty of the uprooting of Jeroboam’s idolatrous system (v. 32).

God’s concern for the integrity of his words is striking.³³ To disregard his word as unimportant, no longer relevant, or negotiable is foolish. The prophet initially obeyed God’s word, but he turned aside when another prophet falsely claimed to provide new, contradictory revelation.³⁴ The younger prophet was held accountable for what he already knew and killed for his disobedience. To be dissuaded from the truth is perilous indeed. As Walter Gross writes,

When the man of God allows himself to be deceived, it is no longer important if he acts in good faith or not. It is of no importance whether he believed YHWH had rescinded his original prohibition. Decisive alone is that the man of God overstepped YHWH’s command. For that he must be punished. YHWH’s word may not be ignored, least of all by a man of God.³⁵

The aged prophet was, in part, culpable for the young man’s demise. He misused his office. This passage is explicitly clear, however, that the young prophet ought to have known better. Even God’s

³² God was not at fault. It was “the exegete who went astray.” Walter Gross, “Lying Prophet and Disobedient Man of God in 1 Kings 13: Role Analysis as an Instrument of Theological Interpretation of an OT Narrative Text,” ed. Robert C. Culley, *Semeia* 15 (1979): 109.

³³ Regarding God’s jealousy for the integrity of his words, see Layton Talbert, *The Trustworthiness of God’s Words: Why the Reliability of Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022).

³⁴ Paul explicitly warns against accepting even apostolic or angelic testimony in contradiction to the prior revelation of God (Gal 1:8; cf. 1 Cor 14:32).

³⁵ “Lying Prophet,” 123–124. Gross further warns against seeking to assign motives to characters in this text: “The text remains impenetrable when it comes to the motivation of characters. It can, therefore, only lead to error if exegetes try to gain sense from the text by positing hypothetical intentions for the actors. If intentions of this sort were of decisive importance in 1 Kings 13, the text would provide them or give explicit references. If one argues from hypothetical motivations without mastering the structure of the text, the interpretation dissolves into speculation. At the most decisive point, actions diverge from the characters’ intentions. At this point the continuation of the action does not take the slightest account of intentions.” *Ibid.*, 122. In other words, the focus of the text is on each character’s response to the word of the LORD, regardless of any underlying motivation. “YHWH does punish him but not in spite of his innocence. The text does not present a primitive image of God nor the image of an enigmatic God (see §3.3). Rather, the text simply pays no attention to the subjective level at which the innocence of the man of God would come into play.” *Ibid.*, 124.

prophets are not immune from transgressions of culpable ignorance if they neglect the word of the LORD with which they are entrusted. God has strong indictments for such leaders.

Indictment of Israel's Leadership

Spiritual ignorance became rampant among God's people due largely to the disobedience of the prophets and priests. It was as if the prophets had conspired against the people (Ezek 22:25). The prophets oppressed the people (v. 25), the priests deluded the people (v. 26), the princes abused the people (v. 27), and the people persisted in their sin (v. 29); yet all the while the prophets purported that everything was okay between them and God (v. 28). God was not pleased; in fact, he was indignant and wrathful (v. 31). He sought someone to mediate on behalf of the wayward people, but he found no one (v. 30). Therefore, God gave all of them what their ways deserved (v. 31).

Isaiah describes Israel's watchmen as "blind," "all without knowledge," and "shepherds who have no understanding" (Isa 56:10–11). He compares them to mute watchdogs incapable of barking to warn of danger, slothful sleepers who merely dream, and pragmatic egotists who invent whatever promises the most profit.³⁶

Indictment against the Priests

God singled out the priests for special indictment (Hos 4:4–9). Despite God's contention with the spiritual anarchy of his people in general (vv. 1–3), God said through Hosea (4:4–6),

Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for [your people are as priest-accusers].³⁷
You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.³⁸

³⁶ Sadly, one outcome of such leadership is that people do not understand that when righteous, devout men are removed, it is not an indictment upon the upright; instead, it is God's reward to remove the upright before he brings calamity on the wicked (Isa 57:1).

³⁷ For line 3 of verse 4, the ESV reads, "for with you is my contention, O priest" (cf. CSB and NET), following an emendation of *וְעִמָּךְ כְּמַרְיָבִי כֹהֵן*. The emendation is supported by Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell, Hermenia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 70; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 70, 72; and J. Andrew Dearman, *Hosea*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 155, 157. The issue, however, as Garrett observes, "is that although the significance of the verse is debatable, the Hebrew itself is quite clear. The LXX and Vulgate do not support emendation." *Hosea, Joel*, 116. Garrett quips in conclusion, "This [emendation] would be helpful if it had any supporting evidence." *Ibid.*, 116n28. Taking the text as it stands, God is demonstrating that, although he had a "controversy with the inhabitants of the land" (v. 1), their very state bore testimony against the priesthood. No one can argue the point, and indeed no one need try, for the people themselves are evidence enough to incriminate the leadership (v. 4).

³⁸ This line (*וְיָדַמְתִּי אֶמְךָ*), too, has suggested emendations. The net translates this line, "You have destroyed your own people!" (*וְיָדַמְתִּי עַמְךָ*), since the "2nd person masculine singular form *וְיָדַמְתִּי* . . . is preserved in several medieval Hebrew MSS and reflected in Jerome's Vulgate" (Hos 4:5n10). This suggested reading parallels nicely with the final line of verse 4 ("because your [own] people are the priest-accusers" and "you have destroyed your [own] people") and strengthens the

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
 because you have rejected knowledge,
 I reject you from being a priest to me.
 And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
 I also will forget your children.

Instead of decrying the sinful ways of the nation, these leaders reveled in the people's sin (Hos 4:8).³⁹ Because the priests propelled and perpetuated the moral degradation of God's people instead of inhibiting their depravity (v. 7), God declared that the priests would stumble even in the daytime and would fall at night, together with the prophets (v. 5). This picturesque imagery portrays the spiritual stupefaction of such leaders as antecedent to the corporal punishment upon God's people. The priests "rejected knowledge,"⁴⁰ and God's people were "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (v. 6).⁴¹ The priests had "rejected knowledge,"⁴² so God rejected them; the priests had "forgotten the law of

directness of the divine indictment. Douglas Stuart posits that these two words belong instead to the following line, reading, "You will push in terror when [my people are destroyed]." *Hosea-Jonah*, 70, 72. In support of the WLC pointing are the ESV, CSB, KJV, NASB, and NIV) along with Wolff, *Hosea*, 70, and Dearman, *Hosea*, 158n11. The parallelism and progression are significant in the three-fold divine judgment: "I will destroy your mother" (v. 5), "I will reject you" (v. 6a), and "I will forget your children" (v. 6b).

³⁹ If תַּטֹּחַ refers to the sin offering, rather than to sinful acts themselves, then the first line of the couplet identifies a utilitarian motive behind the priests' reveling: more sin means more sacrifices, and more sacrifices mean more economic prosperity for the priests. For those whose livelihood is built on the failings of others, a godless heart can revel in continued failure. Beyond mere economic gain, however, it is tempting to vicariously enjoy the unfolding or rehearsing of sin, even (or especially) sins which one would be unwilling to commit himself in most circumstances. This is certainly the case for audiences of most of what the secular entertainment industry produces, who "give approval to those who practice" all kinds of sin (Rom 1:32). Through a subtle shift of the flesh, however, even spiritual leaders who regularly counsel with others about their sin problems can inordinately meditate on and fantasize about the moral failures of others while hypocritically preserving the moral high ground for themselves because they have never actively engaged in that particular sin. Jesus confronted this attitude in the Sermon on the Mount by focusing on the internal expectations of God's moral law, in addition to the external manifestations of a wicked heart (Matt 5:27ff).

⁴⁰ The second-person masculine singular pronominal suffixes have been interpreted as referring to the nation as a whole in its priestly role between God and the nations. See Keil, *Hosea*, trans. James Martin, in *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10:52. That the priests (or the priesthood: כֹּהֵן, v. 4; כֹּהֵן, v. 6; כֹּהֵן, v. 9) are in view is apparent, however, by the interposition of "priest" and "people" as distinct entities in verse 9.

⁴¹ Keil, unlike Delitzsch (see footnote 13 above), does not seek to divest מִן of causative import in the phrase מִבְּלִי הִדְעַת. *Ibid.*, 52. The practical difference, however, is insignificant between "my people are destroyed because they do not know something" and "my people are destroyed and they do not know it." Both ways of rendering the Hebrew clause indicate that spiritual ignorance enervated by spiritual leadership contributed to the destruction of the people, either by withholding truth or by withholding warning. The people were kept in the dark about either God's requirements or God's perspective. As other passages corroborate, the people were, in reality, ignorant of both.

⁴² "Knowledge" in Hosea, remarks Stuart, "involves a constant awareness of and obedience to the covenant relationship." *Hosea-Jonah*, 78.

[their] God,”⁴³ so God would “forget [their] children” (v. 6).⁴⁴ The synonymous parallelism between “You have rejected the knowledge [of God]” and “You have forgotten the law of your God” demonstrates that the knowledge of God and the instruction (*torah*) of God are directly related.⁴⁵ To forget *torah* is to reject *the* knowledge—the only knowledge that really matters—that is, knowing God himself. Leaders would not be exempt from judgment when God punished his wayward people (v. 9). In fact, they were to bear the brunt of God’s vengeance.

In the Israelite economy, God provided regular memorial days to prompt remembrance. Regarding the Sabbath Day, in particular, God mandated that his people “remember” (i.e., observe and consider) it in order to “keep it holy” (i.e., guard it as a special day; Exod 20:8). The sacredness of the day and the realization of its intended purpose required active attention. That day served as an aid for Israelites to recall God’s creation of all things in six days (v. 11) and their unique relationship with Yahweh, who set them apart to himself (Ezek 20:12). The people of Israel, however, failed to honor this day; instead they “greatly profaned” God’s holy days (v. 13).

God placed a significant weight of responsibility for such neglect on the shoulders of spiritual leadership. Although God commanded the sons of Aaron “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and . . . to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses” (Lev 10:10–11), Ezekiel says (22:26),

Her priests have done violence to my law and have profaned my holy things. They have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

These priests failed to declare (לֹא הוֹדִיעוּ, hiphil of יָדַע; “they have not caused to be known”) and, indeed, hid away (הֶעֱלִימוּ, hiphil of עָלַם; “they have caused to be secret” or “have concealed”) the LORD’s instruction for his people. God’s reputation was debased in this case, not because the priests blatantly denied God’s word but because they “distorted the line”; they turned into gray areas what God had made clear.⁴⁶

Indictment against the Prophets

In many cases, the people were not innocent victims, since they themselves “loved to wander” (Jer 14:10). Nevertheless, they became established in their chosen path because the prophets spoke “a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds,” without a commission from the

⁴³ Dearman clarifies that “to forget” in Hebrew “does not necessarily mean to be unable to recall something. . . . To forget something means to fail to bring something to conscious focus or to ignore its significance, so that it no longer guides a person to the proper response.” *Hosea*, 159.

⁴⁴ When God says that he will “forget” the children of the priests, this is “the language of the curses of childlessness and/or bereavement (Deut 32:25; 28:18, 32, 41, 53–54).” Stuart, *Hosea–Jonah*, 78.

⁴⁵ Jeremiah 22:16 indicates, for example, that true knowledge of God is expressed through justice and righteousness.

⁴⁶ Cooper, 222.

LORD (v. 14). The people fell under the smarting judgment of God, because “both prophet and priest [plied] their trade through the land and [had] no knowledge” (v. 18). Prophets and priests were professional ignoramuses. The prophets allowed the people to remain comfortable in their sin and thus to persist on the path to judgment. As Jeremiah lamented of Jerusalem, “Your prophets . . . have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes, but have seen for you oracles that are false and misleading” (Lam 2:14).

God responded to such deceit, in part, by warning his people through true prophets. He says through Jeremiah, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them” (Jer 14:14). Again, God says, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. . . . I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied” (23:16, 21). Twice more, God warns, “Do not listen to your prophets” (27:9), and “Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream” (29:8). God identifies malicious intent within these perjured prophets, who thought that they could “make [his] people forget [his] name by their dreams that they [told]” (23:27). These liars stole God’s words from each other (v. 30), and led God’s “people astray by their lies and their recklessness” (v. 32). They did not “speak [God’s] word faithfully” (v. 28), “so they [did] not profit this people at all” (v. 32). Zechariah describes the dearth of spiritual direction that afflicts those who lack spiritual leadership, especially when the people turn to futile sources of revelation. “Household gods utter nonsense,” he writes, “and the diviners see lies; they tell false dreams and give empty consolation” (Zech 10:2). When people cannot obtain true spiritual direction, they “wander like sheep; they are afflicted for lack of a shepherd” (v. 2).

God lamented, “My people know not the rules of the LORD”; indeed, the instinctive, seasonal compass of migrating birds was better than the instilled, moral compass of God’s people (Jer 8:7). The people claimed, “We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us,” but in actuality, they had fallen prey to the lies of the scribes (v. 8). The so-called “wise men” of Israel had “rejected the word of the LORD,” so God asked rhetorically and incredulously, “What wisdom is in them?” (Jer 8:9). What kind of wisdom can someone who has rejected God’s ways offer? Instead of giving true remedies, these prophets prescribed Band-Aids for mortal wounds (v. 11; cf. 6:14). They proclaimed that all was well despite the people’s abominable sin. As a result, the people “[held] fast to deceit” and “refuse[d] to return” (8:5). The people even lost their ability to be ashamed of their sin: “they did not know how to blush” (v. 12; cf. 6:15). They did not give their ways a second thought and continued headlong and headstrong, each in his own chosen path (8:6). The people mis-assessed their own spiritual condition because they failed to examine themselves against the light of Scripture. They were unteachable, unrepentant,⁴⁷ and unreserved in their perpetual pursuit of sin (v. 5) while the leaders aided and abetted their sedition against Yahweh.

⁴⁷ F. B. Huey points out that “several verbal forms of **שוב** are found a total of five times in Jer 8:4–5,” emphasizing that Israel had “turned away” from her covenant obligations and was in dire need of “turning back” to God. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 113n17.

God responded to the prophetic perpetrators themselves by pronouncing woe on such shepherds (Jer 23:1), who “prophesied by Baal and led [his] people Israel astray” (v. 13).⁴⁸ The kings, officials, priests, and prophets would be openly disgraced alongside the people they misled into destruction (8:1–2). They would eventually be utterly overthrown (v. 12). Micah declared that, in the meantime, God would withhold his revelation from prophets who were declaring blessing (שְׁלוֹם) only upon people who remunerated them and were declaring woe upon those who did not (Mic 3:5–6). God himself would refrain from responding to them, resulting in their own humiliation (v. 7).⁴⁹

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God says, “Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing!” (13:3). These prophets were self-deceived to the point that they actually “expect[ed God] to fulfill their word,” even though Yahweh had not commissioned them (v. 6). They misled the people by making them comfortable in their sinful ways, removing the fear of retribution for sin, and “whitewashing” their endeavors (v. 10). These prophets inverted proper discernment and trained people’s consciences to accuse right and excuse wrong. God chides, “You have disheartened the righteous falsely, although I have not grieved him, and you have encouraged the wicked, that he should not turn from his evil way to save his life” (v. 22). As a result, God asserted personal vindication (“I am against you,” v. 8; cf. Jer 23:30–32, three times) with tailored reckoning from his own “hand” (v. 9). God viewed their actions as “hunt[ing] down souls” (v. 18) and bartering God’s reputation for bread (v. 19).⁵⁰ They cared more about good food than God’s fame. Through their lies, they were “putting to death souls who should not die and keeping alive souls who should not live” (v. 19). God’s response to the prophets’ role in creating and perpetuating spiritual ignorance was partly a message of judgment against them and partly a promise to one day “deliver [his] people out of [their] hand” (vv. 20, 21, 23). God’s anger was an expression of his devoted love toward his abused flock (Zech 10:3).

Responsibility of the Watchman

In contrast to arrogant and abusive prophets, God intends for his prophets to serve a role spiritually parallel to that of a city watchman (צֹפֵן), who is commissioned to warn people of impending danger (Ezek 33:2–6). Just as a derelict watchman would be held responsible for the death of any citizens who fall unprepared in an attack (v. 6), so it is incumbent upon a prophet to warn people of sin and its consequences. God’s true prophets must take heed to themselves to ensure that they discharge their duties properly. God himself set Ezekiel up as one such watchman (3:17; cf. 33:7).⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Something disgusting” (Jer 23:13) and “something horrible” (v. 14) may be parallel expressions (see CSB) denoting equally offensive deviations from God’s expectations for his prophets, or they may be contrastive (see ESV), where God moves from the unsavoriness of false religion to the horribleness of wickedness under the auspices of true religion.

⁴⁹ In contrast to a false prophet, a true prophet is one who is willing to confront sin directly. Micah contrasts his own ministry with that of his counterfeit contemporaries when he writes, “But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (3:8).

⁵⁰ In Ezekiel 13:18–23, God addresses women (“woe to the women,” v. 18, followed by third-person feminine plural forms and suffixes throughout) who misled his people. Both men and women can mislead, and God pronounces woe against all who do so.

⁵¹ As with a city watchman, the number of corroborative opinions among watchmen is ultimately of no consequence. It is the authority and responsibility of the one appointed watchman that is under consideration. The vulnerable people

God commissioned Ezekiel to steward his revelation; whenever Ezekiel heard a word of condemnation from God, he was obligated to relay the message.⁵²

God proposes two hypothetical situations: God may pronounce condemnation upon the wicked who are already on a path toward judgment (Ezek 3:18–19), or he may warn the righteous not to deviate from that which is good (vv. 20–21). In both cases, God’s goal is restoration (“in order to save his life,” v. 18; “he shall surely live,” v. 21). In both cases, the individual who sins will die for (אֵל) ⁵³ his sin, regardless of the obedience of the prophet (vv. 18, 21). In both cases, the prophet must discharge his duty to warn, lest God hold him accountable for the spiritual destruction of the sinner (“his blood I will require at your hand,” vv. 18, 20).⁵⁴ In both cases, the prophet will not be implicated in the downfall of the sinner as long as he has sounded the warning (“you will have delivered your soul,” vv. 19, 21).

This passage emphasizes each party’s individual relationship to God and his word. Divine prerogative and initiative are seen in the commissioning of the watchman (v. 17), communication of the warning (v. 17), condemnation of the sinner (v. 18), downfall of the apostate (v. 20; cf. Jer 6:21), and evaluation of the watchman (vv. 18–21). For the prophet of God, whether or not the offending party heeds the warning is not the primary issue; there is great responsibility on the part of one who knows the word of God to declare truth to others by warning them to turn from their wicked ways.

If God’s spokesman knows the word of the Lord and keeps silent, God will judge the sinner for his own sin (even though the sinner is ignorant of the word of God due to the negligence of the prophet), but God will also hold the prophet accountable for shirking his responsibility. Both the wicked and the righteous may choose not to listen to the warning of the watchmen (צַפִּים, Jer 6:17); but if they never hear the warning, they will not have the opportunity to repent, turn to God, and be delivered. God holds spiritual leaders (e.g., pastors, professors, or parents) particularly culpable for how they lead—or mislead—those within their sphere of influence.

Prophecy of God’s Solution

It is apparent from the prophets’ messages that there is a twofold problem underlying spiritual ignorance. First, leadership has failed in its God-given role to pass along the truth. Second, people are unwilling to receive instruction. The solution is threefold: on God’s part, he commits to orchestrating history (both socio-political and redemptive history) to vindicate his glory. In addition, mankind needs

do well to listen to the one watchman who sounds the alarm rather than the multitude of optimists who claim continued peace.

⁵² Daniel I. Block calls this the “formal call to sentry duty.” *Ezekiel 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 144.

⁵³ The preposition אֵל could mean either “in” (KJV, NKJV, NASB) or “because of” (“for,” ESV, CSB, NET, NIV). In this passage, both senses are apropos. The wicked will die in his sinful state because he remains unwarned and unchanged, and death is the direct consequence of his sin. Like a man in the midst of the sea with a millstone around his neck dies both “by” (proximity) and “by” (means) the boulder, this sinner dies because of his sin on account of its presence with him at the end.

⁵⁴ “Indifference that fails to save a life is comparable to negligent homicide. The prophet would be guilty of murder by his failure to fulfill his calling.” Cooper, 86.

both new leadership and a new heart if he is going to please God. The prophets anticipate a future time when God will provide all of these for his people.

A New Knowledge of God

The prophet Isaiah foretold of a time when the people of Israel would return to their land with such help from the host nations of their exile that the fingerprint of God would be absolutely unmistakable. God said to them, “Then you will know that I am the LORD” (Isa 49:23). God later employed this phrase as a thematic refrain through the prophet Ezekiel. Eighty-eight times in the OT, God acts or responds so that people would “know that I am the LORD.” Seventy-two of these are in Ezekiel. God employs judgment upon Israel so that the nation would recognize him as Yahweh (e.g., Ezek 6:14; 7:4, 9; 24:24; 33:29). God employs judgment upon other nations to emphasize to both Israel and the pagan peoples that he alone is Yahweh, the true God.⁵⁵ God also identifies the purging of unbelievers from Israel’s midst (20:38), restoration of a future Israelite leader (a “horn,” 29:21), restoration and rebuilding of Israel to unprecedented proportions (36:11), and complete repopulation of the land (v. 38) as means to spread his knowledge among his people and all the earth.

True knowledge of God is more than intellectual affirmation, but it is never less. True knowledge includes experiential understanding, which, for God’s people, should result in relational commitment. Pharaoh naïvely said, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD” (Exod 5:2), and God responded, “The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them” (7:5; cf. vv. 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4, 18).

God’s people come to know him through both chastisement and blessing. God’s enemies come to know him through selective judgment and blessing—judgment upon them and blessing upon his people (Isa 49:26).

A New Heart

God promises to break the cycle of multi-generational sin and judgment (Jer 31:29–30) by establishing a New Covenant with his people (v. 31).⁵⁶ In contrast to the Mosaic Covenant of legal code, which Israel so grossly violated (v. 32), God, in his New Covenant, would emboss his instruction upon the very hearts of his people (v. 33).⁵⁷ This internalized law transcends the limitations and

⁵⁵ God cites retribution against Ammon (25:5, 7), Moab (v. 11), Philistia (v. 17), Tyre (26:6), Sidon (28:23), Egypt (29:9, 16; 30:8, 18, 26; 32:15), Edom (35:9, 15), and the nations in general (28:24, 26), culminating with the destruction of Gog (38:23).

⁵⁶ “In addition to maintaining the continuity of his own faithfulness (Lam 3:22–32), it is because God is able to break the continuity between past sins and present or future experience . . . that he could provide Israel with a ‘new’ covenant.” Huey, 278.

⁵⁷ Huey argues that תּוֹרָה here refers “to something more basic or foundational than its specific manifestation in the Mosaic law.” Ibid., 286. Just as Abraham obeyed God’s “voice . . . mandate . . . commands . . . statutes, and . . . instructions” (Gen 26:5, CSB) before the giving of the Mosaic law and just as Paul speaks of “the law of God” and “the law of Christ” in the NT (1 Cor 9:21), God’s תּוֹרָה indicates in this passage his fundamental expectations for his creatures, which underly the various expressions of those expectations in specific commandments. Ibid.

liabilities inherent in a system of revelation that requires mediation by finite beings. By design, the law will be known so personally and intimately that God declares, “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (v. 34).

The nature of this knowledge is important to understand. Both words in verse 33 used to identify the locus of God’s internalized law (לֵב and קֶרֶב) describe the inner man beyond mere intellect; these synonyms together denote the center of one’s mind, will, and emotions.⁵⁸ Commentators disagree as to which aspect of the transformed inner man is primarily in view when God promises, “They shall all know me” (v. 34). Huey writes, “To ‘know the Lord’ . . . is the result of faith rather than instruction. . . . It is exhortation rather than instruction that is to be rendered superfluous by the new covenant” because the emphasis is “primarily a changed nature rather than the acquisition of facts.”⁵⁹ Harrison identifies the fundamental change as taking place in the will, such that obedience will be “by choice rather than by compulsion.”⁶⁰ Lalleman describes this knowledge of God as “living in fellowship with him and obeying his commands,” not because teachers will cease to exist but because “everyone will know in their hearts what to do and what not to do in accordance with God’s will.”⁶¹ Thompson writes, “The verb *know* here probably carries its most profound connotation, the intimate personal knowledge which arises between two persons who are committed wholly to one another in a relationship that touches mind, emotion, and will.”⁶²

Verse 32 identifies that the Israelites’ problem was fundamentally not one of ignorance but of infidelity. Nevertheless, intellectual knowledge is not absent from this passage. To say “no longer” implies that, at the time God made this promise, such knowledge could be “taught” (לָמַד, piel) in a way that involved both rehearsal of facts (as when Moses taught Israel God’s statutes [Deut 4:5] as God commanded him [6:1]) and exhortation toward obedience (as when Moses taught Israel “to observe” those same statutes [4:1, NKJV]).⁶³ God promises that in the New Covenant he will give them not only knowledge of his law but also the will to obey him. He says, “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. . . . And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (32:39–40). To have God’s instruction “on their hearts” is to understand intuitively what God expects, and to “know the LORD” is to fellowship intimately with God himself such that God’s people will obey instinctively what God desires (cf. Jer 24:7).

⁵⁸ The NET Bible, Jer 31:33n78, 79. In Ezekiel, God promises Israel a “new heart and a new spirit” (לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חֲדָשָׁה), 36:26; cf. 11:19), a parallel expression denoting the comprehensive scope of the transformation.

⁵⁹ *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 285–86.

⁶⁰ *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 139.

⁶¹ Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 233–34.

⁶² J. A. Thompson, *Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 581.

⁶³ NT believers currently need to instruct one another to “know the Lord” in the same way that they must read the Bible. The “Word” is not fully written on hearts yet (either intellectually or volitionally). The future state of complete obedience promised in the New Covenant is even now imperfect.

Attending and underpinning this new heart is the divine promise, “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (v. 34). When God completely cleanses from guilt and forgives the sin and rebellion of his chosen people, his goodness will be on grand display (33:8–9). When God regathers his people into the land of Israel, he will renew his relationship with them as his own special possession (31:33; 32:38). This covenant, God says, will be “everlasting” (v. 40). The certainty of these promises is guaranteed by the fixed order of creation. As long as the sun, moon, stars, and ocean waves persist (31:35); as long as there is more astronomy and geology to explore (v. 37); and as long as day and night continue (33:20, 25), God will keep his promises to national, ethnic Israel (31:36; 33:26), to David (33:21, 26), and to the Levites (33:21).⁶⁴

Accompanying (and, indeed, causing) the internal change is a heightened manifestation of God’s Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ As God says through Joel, “It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (2:28).⁶⁶ Spiritual understanding, including (at times) new revelation, is indicative of the work of God’s Spirit (cf. Num 11:25–29; 1 Sam 10:6, 10; 19:20–23).⁶⁷

A Perfect Shepherd

Even when giving his people a new heart, God does not leave them without new leadership. Indeed, the prophets predict the demise of all false shepherds and the coming of a perfect Shepherd to lead God’s people.

Although God’s care for his people as a good shepherd is woven throughout Scripture, this pastoral theme is particularly prominent in Ezekiel 34. After rehearsing how Israel’s shepherds mishandled their occupation by starving (v. 2), exploiting (v. 3), abandoning (v. 4), and scattering (vv. 5–6) God’s sheep,⁶⁸ God cries out for the shepherds to “hear the word of the LORD” (vv. 7, 9). God swears by his very existence (v. 8) and declares through an overwhelming string of promises that he will personally liberate his sheep from the hand of these shepherds.⁶⁹ God says (vv. 10–24),

⁶⁴ The promises of a new heart, a restored nation, a Messianic kingdom, and right worship stand or fall together in this passage. They all have the same bases in God’s written promises and sustaining testimony in Creation. Interpreters cannot deny one or more components without threatening the integrity of all these promises together. God already kept his promises to judge Israel for their sin, and it is no less certain that he will keep his promises to them for blessing (v. 42).

⁶⁵ “The gift of the Spirit connotes direct experience with God, as in Joel, as well as the grace that enables his people to love God from the heart, as in Ezekiel. It also is the distinctive sign and mark of membership in the new people of God, as in Isaiah.” Garrett, 368.

⁶⁶ David A. Hubbard cautions, “It is not the various means of revelation that should be underscored. The variety is probably mentioned for the sake of enriching the poetic parallelism. It is the true knowledge of God (v. 27) and the power to share that knowledge that the prophet intended to stress (cf. Num. 12:6–8).” *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 75.

⁶⁷ In Acts 2:16–22, Peter correlates this passage with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Pentecost was “the beginning of the fulfillment” of God’s promise, starting with 120 Jews in Jerusalem and extending in the consummation to the entire world. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 61.

⁶⁸ Taylor calls this “that most pathetic of all states, at least to the eastern mind” (215).

⁶⁹ God’s intervention is not limited to rescuing the sheep from the selfish shepherds; he also discerns among those in the flock those who are truly his: “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and

Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand. . . . I will rescue my sheep from their mouths. . . . Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. . . . I will seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them . . . and I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them. . . . I will feed them with good pasture. . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. . . . I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. . . . I am the LORD; I have spoken.

God does not intend for his people to remain forever under the deception and exploitation of ungodly leadership.

God's righteous leadership of his people will be centered in his Messiah. Isaiah 11:2 predicted that the Messiah would be the apex of wisdom, since he would be endowed by "the Spirit of wisdom [חִכְמָה], . . . understanding [בִּינָה], . . . counsel [עֲצָה⁷⁰], . . . knowledge [דַּעַת], and the fear of the LORD [יְרֵאת יְהוָה]."⁷¹ With this Spirit, Messiah will make only right decisions (vv. 3–4). His leadership will be characterized by righteousness and faithfulness (v. 5; cf. Eph 6:11–18). God reiterates his promises of a future Messiah within the New Covenant (Jer 33:15–16). Mankind does not have the inherent ability to solve the problem of spiritual ignorance. It requires divine enablement, and God has promised to provide.

Concluding Principles

A variety of internal and external components can contribute to spiritual ignorance. Ignorance and transgression on the one hand, or knowledge and obedience on the other, are mutually reinforcing components of a downward or upward spiral. God's people, therefore, must beware of distracting themselves away from active meditation upon God's character, works, and words.⁷² God's people must be quick to repent of rebellion lest they refuse his instruction or, more fearfully, lose access to God and his truth entirely. God's people, further, must invite critique and warning from spiritually

sheep. . . . Behold, I, I myself will judge. . . . And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them" (vv. 20–24).

⁷⁰ "Counsel" is paired with "might" (גְּבוּרָה) in this verse. In addition to the Spirit-given ability to "devise amazing plans," Messiah would "have the power to carry them out." Gary Smith, 272.

⁷¹ Smith states that three couplets in Isaiah 11:2 describing the Spirit's role refer to (1) "mental" and "moral ability to make right choices," (2) "gifts related to the practical accomplishment of tasks," and (3) "an intimate relationship between this ruler and God." Ibid. The role of the Spirit includes intellectual apprehension of God's wisdom yet extends beyond until the full flower of righteousness blossoms forth from a heart that delights to apply that wisdom to order everything as God intends.

⁷² Immorality and insobriety are particularly acute hazards for spiritual understanding (Hos 4:10–11), but activities that are not necessarily sinful in and of themselves (e.g., music and parties, Isa 5:11–12) can also contribute to a culture of distraction and thus be unhealthy for God's people.

minded counselors instead of surrounding themselves with affirming people who tell them only what they already want to hear.

Not all who claim to convey God's truth do so accurately, honestly, or faithfully. God's previous revelation is always the benchmark by which current teaching is to be evaluated. To be persuaded against what God has already said is perilous. Prophets themselves are not above the message they preach; God holds all people accountable for what they do with his words, regardless of their education or formal office.

God appointed his prophets to convey his mind directly to his wayward people. Yet spiritual leaders may disregard God's ordinances and obscure God's expectations from his people. Spiritual leaders may disregard God's warnings and repudiate God's judgments against his people. God displays a vehement visceral response against spiritual leaders who perpetuate spiritual ignorance, especially those who do so negligently or maliciously. Individuals will still be liable for their own sin, but God will hold such leaders culpable for the destruction of those under their care. God expresses special care toward his people who are victims of deceit. He warns them through his true prophets, but he also promises ultimate deliverance as he overthrows deceivers and restores truth among his people.

God understands the fallenness and finitude of his creatures, so God promises to enable them to know and understand by providing them with a new heart, a perfect Shepherd, and his Holy Spirit to guide them. In the end, God will be glorified as all people recognize his goodness and greatness and as his true people know him intimately and obey him fully. In the meantime, it is appropriate for God's people to acknowledge the problem of spiritual ignorance, to delight in God's mercy while submitting to his instruction and actively pursuing wisdom, and to take personal responsibility to instruct others "as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1).