



*"You keep using that word.  
I do not think it means what you think it means."  
Inigo Montoya from the Princess Bride*

## PROSPERITY AND THE JUST SOCIETY

### Part Two: The Nature of Prosperity in the Hebrew Bible

#### **Introduction**

Before examining the concept of "prosperity" as found in the Hebrew Bible, we should take just a moment to review what we learned in part one of this study. We began with definitions. We discovered that unlike modern usage of "prosperity" and its accompanying word group, 19<sup>th</sup> century usage was not focused on "wealth" or material accumulation. Rather, it emphasized "success" in any good endeavor.

We next examined the Book's original "Prosperity Promise" as given to Nephi and found in 1 Nephi 2.<sup>19-24</sup>. Here we observed that the promise was predominately societal and public rather than individualistic and private. In addition, we found that the promised prosperity was political and militaristic rather than material or economic. It was a promise of success in military encounters against foreign enemies, and "freedom" from foreign domination. It was a promise of "national security" in ones' "inheritance."

We then turned our attention to those Book of Mormon passages that referenced Nephi's original "Prosperity Promise." Here we found that the same societal and political/military emphasis dominated. We found that the "prosperity" promised in the Book of Mormon never possessed a private economic aspect. There is no justification for utilizing the Book's "prosperity promise" as promise to any individual that their "obedience" will yield material well-being. None. If one is looking for justification for such doctrine, they will need to look

outside the “prosperity” passages.

In this, Part 2, of our study on prosperity, we will examine the concept as it is found in the Hebrew Bible. We will do this, as before, by examining definitions. The same English definitions that we found for our English word group in Part One of our study (based on Webster’s 1820 Dictionary) will hold here.<sup>1</sup> With our study of the Hebrew Bible, we will have the added advantage of being able to examine the Hebrew words that were translated into our English “prosperity” word group.

In much the same fashion that we examined individual Book of Mormon passages that referenced the “Prosperity Promise,” we will examine individual passages from the Hebrew Bible that speak of “prosperity.” We will not examine all of them (some 85), but we hope to review enough so as to understand how the word group is understood and used in the Bible. In reviewing these passages, we hope to discover the similarities and/or differences in how the two texts—Book of Mormon and Hebrew Bible—think of “prosperity.”

Many of the Old Testament passages we review will say, essentially, the same thing. We will be observing and making the same points over and over again. As we mentioned in the justification of Part One, though it may lack a certain “excitement,” and run the risk of seeming pedantic, such repetition seems necessary due to the pervasiveness and tenacity of the false traditions and attitudes concerning prosperity that have developed in modern Christianity. It seems that overwhelming “evidence” is necessary to overturn them.

### ***definitions***

In the following passages, we will find that several Hebrew words were translated into our English “prosperity” word group. These include the following in the order of their frequency, from greatest to least. The Hebrew word most often translated into this English word group is *šlh*. It represents close to two-thirds of all occurrences. Four other words are used nearly equally with each other, and are most common in poetic passages. They are *škl*, *šlm*, *šlh*, and

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Noah Webster conducted a thorough examination of King James Bible usage and made sure that this was reflected in his 1820 dictionary.

*tôb*.<sup>2</sup>

We look, first, at *šlh*. This word means to “succeed” at or “attain” some objective. The word itself contains no inherent “economic” meaning. In looking at each individual passage, we will hope to determine by context what is being “attained.”

*Škl* means to “be insightful,” or to “understand.” The insight or understanding seems less a matter of “intellect” and more a matter of “common sense.” It also seems to denote “success” that flows from the use of common sense. Like *šlh*, it has no inherent economic nuance, so we will have to determine the nature of success from individual passages.

*Šlm* means to “be at peace,” “be intact,” “be whole.”<sup>3</sup>

In its positive iterations, *šlh* means to “rest,” “be at ease,” “be carefree.” In its negative, it means to “be negligent.” Of course, we will only examine those that are positive. Again, the source or reason for being at ease is not to be found in the word itself, but in the context. It therefore has not inherent economic nuance.

Hebrew *tôb* has an extraordinarily wide range of meaning, depending upon the context and the subject matter. It’s basic meaning is to “be good,” “be pleasing.” It can mean to “be happy,” “be well.” It does not carry with it any specifically economic meaning.

### **Hebrew bible ‘prosperity promise’?**

The first thing that we note as we begin to look at the concept of prosperity in the Hebrew Bible is that Nephi’s “prosperity promise” did not spring forth out of a vacuum or from the blank canvas of Nephi’s mind. It was, rather, grounded in the theology of the Hebrew Bible. Following are passages from the Hebrew Bible that seem to reflect a promise of prosperity that is based upon obedience, just as was that given to Nephi.

*Joshua* 1.<sup>7-8</sup>

“Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to

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<sup>2</sup> *Hlk* is used once, but is a bit of an outlier.

<sup>3</sup> According to *TDOT*, Steck understands the word to indicate “the ordered stability of the world, which benefits and promotes life.” Vol. XV, p. 19.

all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest *prosper* whithersoever thou goest.

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way *prosperous*, and then thou shalt have good success.”

Here, Yahweh is admonishing Joshua upon the death of Moses. We hear in this admonition and echo of Nephi’s prosperity promise (actually, Nephi’s promise would be an echo of this one): “...observe to do according to all the law... that thou mayest prosper.” Based upon just these two verses, we can say very little about the specific nature of the prosperity promised to Joshua. It could be economic, political, or even spiritual. However, as we look at the context, the nature of the promised prosperity becomes clear. Before the encouragement of verses 7 and 8, Yahweh commanded,

“Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life...”<sup>4</sup>

Immediately after the encouragement found in verses 7-8, Joshua begins to make preparations to enter the Promised Land and take possession of it. The prosperity promised is “success” in obtaining an inheritance and dividing the inheritance in the Promised Land. No enemy will be able to stand against Joshua and his armies as long as he, and, presumably, his people “observe to do according to all the law.”

The prosperity promised to Joshua as a condition of his obedience is military and/or governmental success and freedom. Joshua’s “personal success” is really corporate or societal as it will result in the Israelites being successful against enemies and taking

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua 1.2-5

possession of the land promised to them.

*I*kings 2.<sup>3</sup>

This passage—containing counsel King David gave to his son, Solomon, not long before his death—also seems to contain a “prosperity promise” that, like Nephi’s, is based upon obedience to God.

“And keep the charge of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper<sup>5</sup> in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself...”

While this single verse provides no clue as to nature of the “prosperity” that David had in mind, the verse that follows does.

“That the LORD may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, ‘If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel.’”<sup>6</sup>

David seems to have been given a “prosperity promise” himself. This promise, too, was conditioned upon obedience—obedience of his descendants. The promise was that the Davidic dynasty would continue as long as those who sat on the throne were faithful to Yahweh. We see again that “prosperity” was focused on political success, and that it was societal rather than strictly private.

*I*chronicles 22.<sup>11-13</sup>

“Now, my son, the Lord be with thee; and prosper<sup>7</sup> thou, and build the house of the Lord thy God, as he hath said of thee. Only the Lord give thee wisdom and understanding, and give thee charge concerning Israel, that thou mayest keep the law of the Lord thy God.

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrew, *śkl*.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 2.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hebrew, *ślh*.

Then shalt thou *prosper*,<sup>8</sup> if thou takest heed to fulfil the statutes and judgments which the Lord charged Moses with concerning Israel: be strong, and of good courage; dread not, nor be dismayed.”

This passage is interesting from a couple of perspectives. First, its language is strongly reminiscent of that found in Joshua 1.<sup>7-8</sup> Like Joshua, Solomon is informed that if he is “strong” and has “courage,” he will be prospered.

Secondly, this passage is Chronicles’ version of David’s final counsel to his son, Solomon. The contexts seems to demonstrate that the “prosperity” David had in mind was two-fold. First, Solomon would be successful in accomplishing David’s long-time dream of building a temple for Yahweh. While we think of this temple building in strictly “spiritual” terms, in the ancient world, monarchs that succeeded in building impressive temples for their gods were deemed to be legitimate in ways that might be missing otherwise. Temple building is a political act and statement. Therefore, there is a “political” element to Solomon’s temple building. Second, Solomon would establish peace with Israel’s enemies.

“Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever.”<sup>9</sup>

Once more, we see that “prosperity” is political/military, and that it extends well beyond the personal to include many generations to come.

2chronicles 24.<sup>20</sup>

“And the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, ‘Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot *prosper*?<sup>10</sup> Because ye have forsaken the

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrew, *slh*.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Chronicles 22.<sup>9-10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hebrew, *slh*.

Lord, he hath also forsaken you.”

Here we are reminded of the negative predictions concerning Laman and Lemuel due to their rebellion. They would not prosper, which, in their case meant that they would not hold political dominance. We might also think of Jarom’s statement concerning the hostile Lamanite armies that did not prosper against the Nephites.

Although this verse does not inform us concerning the nature of the missed prosperity that Zechariah bemoans, the following verses do.

“And it came to pass at the end of the year, that the host of Syria came up against him [King Joash]: and they came to Judah and Jerusalem, and destroyed all the princes of the people from among the people, and sent all the spoil of them unto the king of Damascus. For the army of the Syrians came with a small company of men, and the LORD delivered a very great host into their hand, because they had forsaken the LORD God of their fathers. So they executed judgment against Joash.

And when they were departed from him, (for they left him in great diseases,) his own servants conspired against him for the blood of the sons of Jehoiada the priest, and slew him on his bed, and he died: and they buried him in the city of David, but they buried him not in the sepulchres of the kings.”<sup>11</sup>

Joash’s people did not prosper in that they were defeated by their enemies. In addition the smooth flow of the monarchy was destabilized. Once more, we see that the concept of “prosperity” involves political and military success, control, and freedom. In addition, we see that it has a predominately public and societal emphasis.

2chronicles 26.<sup>4-7</sup>

Speaking of the Judean king, Uzziah, we read,

“And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father Amaziah did. And he sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the

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<sup>11</sup> 2 Chronicles 24.<sup>23-25</sup>

visions of God: and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to *prosper*.<sup>12</sup> And he went forth and warred against the Philistines, and brake down the wall of Gath, and the wall of Jabneh, and the wall of Ashdod, and built cities about Ashdod, and among the Philistines. And God helped him against the Philistines, and against the Arabians that dwelt in Gur-baal, and the Mehunims.

It does not seem like a stretch to hear in this “as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper,” and echo of a “prosperity promise.” The notice that comes immediately after concerning Uzziah’s successes against Philistine, Arabian, and Mehunim military forces evidences the military/national security emphasis of the prosperity that the nation enjoyed during his reign.

*Numbers 14.*<sup>40-42</sup>

After their miraculous rescue from Egyptian oppression, the children of Israel managed a difficult and trying passage through the deserts of Sinai. In this passage, Israel is now encamped on the borders of their promised land. In preparation to enter and take possession of the Promised Land, Israel, unsure of their next move, send twelve spies to reconnoiter the land and report on the nature of the land and the strength of the inhabitants. Upon returning from their survey, the spies report that the land is everything they could hope for. However, the inhabitants are strong. All but two of the spies report that it seems unlikely that the Israelites have sufficient strength to dispossess the present inhabitants and take possession of the land for themselves. Moses encourages Israel to have faith and proceed marshalling themselves to battle against the inhabitants of the land. However, the Israelites refuse, and, discouraged, they murmur against Moses, even threatening to kill him. They begin preparations to return to Egypt.

At this point, Yahweh’s presence is seen to enter the tabernacle. He threatens the people with utter destruction. Moses pleads for the people so that God retracts his threat. However, a deadly plague afflicts the ten scouts that expressed doubts as to Israel’s ability to take possession of the land. In addition, God pronounces a curse on Israel, declaring that they will wonder in the wilderness for forty years before being allowed to enter the land. Stung by this

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<sup>12</sup> Hebrew, *slh*.



declaration, the Israelites decide to marshal for war after all.

“And they rose up early in the morning, and gat them up into the top of the mountain, saying, ‘Lo, we be here, and will go up unto the place which the Lord hath promised: for we have sinned.’

And Moses said, ‘Wherefore now do ye transgress the commandment of the Lord? But it shall not *prosper*. Go not up, for the Lord is not among you; that ye be not smitten before your enemies.’”<sup>13</sup>

Disregarding Moses’ warning, Israel goes forward with their intentions to enter the Promised Land by force. However, true to Moses’ warning, Israel experiences a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Amalekites. Their plans do not “prosper.”

We can detect in this passage an oblique understanding of a “prosperity promise.” The failure to “prosper” is a consequence of “transgressing the commandment of the Lord.”

Additionally, we see in this passage and its historical/narrative context a classic view of what prosperity means. The focus on prosperity is on the political or military sphere of public life. There is no thought or concern given to economic matters.

#### *d*euteronomy 28.<sup>29</sup>

Deuteronomy 28 contains a long cursing and blessing formula. Israel is to be either cursed or blessed according to their observance of Yahweh’s law. The chapter begins with a general statement.

“And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: and all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Numbers 14.<sup>40-42</sup>. The word used here is *šlh*, one of the two Hebrew words we have encountered so far that were translated as “prosper.”

<sup>14</sup> Deuteronomy 28.<sup>1-2</sup>

This statement seems to place the chapter squarely in line with the “prosperity promise.”

This general statement is followed by a long list of blessings in verses 3-13. Verse 14 concludes the blessing formula with a warning against idolatry. The blessings are material, political, and spiritual. However, our vocabulary word group, “prosperity,” “prosper,” etc., is not utilized in this section.

A much longer section, verses 15-68, contains the cursing formula. As part of that formula, we read,

“And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness, and thou shalt not prosper<sup>15</sup> in thy ways: and thou shalt be only oppressed and spoiled evermore, and no man shall save thee.”

Rather than being prospered, Israel will “be only oppressed and spoiled” without anyone to deliver it. Only six verses (17, 18, 24, 38-40) direct our minds to material/economic considerations—that’s three verses out of fifty-four. Some fifty verses focus on political and military curses. The absence of “prosperity” includes such things as plague upon body and mind (verse 21-22, 27-28, 34-35, 60-61), military defeat by enemies (25-26), political turmoil (36, 43-44, 48-50), plunder, pillage, and rape (30-33, 51-57), and, ultimately, exile (63-68).

It seems to me that any fair-minded analysis of this formula would find that the focus and emphasis of “prosperity” is on the political and military. In addition, it is focused at the national or public level, rather than the private. It would seem a stretch to apply it individually and economically, as if it declared, “If you obey God, you will be materially well-off.”

*d*euteronomy 29.9

“Keep therefore the words of this covenant, and do them, that ye may prosper in all that ye do.”

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<sup>15</sup> Hebrew *šlḥ*.

These words, uttered by Moses as the children of Israel were preparing to enter the promised land, follow the cursing and blessing formula we discussed immediately above. It sounds very much like the prosperity promise made to Nephi in the Book of Mormon.

So far, in examining Biblical passages that seem to possess a hint of “prosperity promise,” we have observed the same societal and political emphasis that we found in the Book of Mormon. We will now turn our attention to Biblical passages in which prosperity is discussed. We will begin with narrative passages and then move to poetic passages.

### ***P*rosperity in the Hebrew bible—narrative passages**

#### *g*enesis 24

Toward the end of his life, Abraham became anxious about obtaining an appropriate wife for his son, Isaac. He decided to look for a wife among his kin in his native land of “Mesopotamia.” To that end, Abraham commanded his servant to return to Abraham’s native land and acquire a wife for Isaac. According to the un-named servant, Abraham promised,

“The Lord, before whom I walk, will send his angel with thee, and *prosper* thy way; and thou shalt take a wife for my son of my kindred, and of my father’s house.”<sup>16</sup>

Miraculously encountering the maiden Rebekah, kin to Abraham, the servant “wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey *prosperous* or not.”<sup>17</sup> Later, in reporting his experiences to Rebekah’s family, the servant began, “I came this day unto the well, and said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, if now thou do *prosper* my way which I go...”<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, “prosperity” here has nothing to do with material acquisition. Rather it is about the servant’s success in the endeavor to obtain a wife for Isaac. There is a private aspect to the success, or prosperity, but there is also a corporate aspect as well inasmuch as the success in obtaining a wife for Isaac will impact Abraham, Isaac, and generations to follow.

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<sup>16</sup> Genesis 24.<sup>40</sup>. The word used here is, again, *šlh*.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 24.<sup>21</sup>. Again, it is Hebrew *šlh* that is used here.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 24.<sup>42</sup>. Again, it is Hebrew *šlh* that is used here.

Genesis 39.<sup>2-3</sup>

“And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a *prosperous* man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to *prosper* in his hand.”<sup>19</sup>

It seems unlikely that as a newly purchased slave Joseph is growing rich materially. It is possible, of course, that he is acquiring material wealth for his master. But it seems best to read this as a statement that Joseph was generally successful in his undertakings as a slave. He seemed to his master to be a “favored” person.

Hebrew, *šlh*, is translated “prospered” in relation to Joseph again in Genesis 39.23. Here, Joseph is serving in an Egyptian prison. Again, it seems highly questionable to think of it in terms of material well-being.

Deuteronomy 23.<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, Moses is offering Israel advice regarding their future relationship with any individual of Ammonite or Moabite descent. Because their nations would not offer even the most meager of assistance, but actively resisted Israel’s efforts to enter the Promised Land,

“Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their *prosperity*<sup>20</sup> all thy days for ever.”

Israel’s unwillingness to assist these two nations might express itself in any number of ways. In this case, Israel is to exclude individual Ammonites and Moabites from “the congregation” for ten generations. The focus seems religious and cultic, perhaps even nationalistic. It would seem odd to suggest that Israel should not assist any individual from the two rogue nations economically.

Judges 4.<sup>23-24</sup>

Judges 4 tells how Jabin, King of the large and powerful city of Hazor located in northern Israel, subjugated Israel for some twenty years. Finally, Deborah, a prophetess, and Barak

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<sup>19</sup> Genesis 39.<sup>2-3</sup>. Again, it is Hebrew *šlh* that is used here.

<sup>20</sup> Hebrew *tôb*. Israel is not to do anything that might in any way be “good” to or for the two nations.

teamed up to rebel against and defeat Jabin. With Yahweh's assistance, they were able to free Israel from Jabin's oppression.

“So God subdued on that day Jabin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel *prospered*, and prevailed against Jabin the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan.

By our understanding of the word, “prospered” is not the best translation here.<sup>21</sup> However, the use of English “prospered” is classic King James English. Obviously, Israel's prosperity is found in the fact that their militia “prevailed” against Jabin, and was able to free the nation of Jabin's tyranny and oppression.

*J*udges 18.<sup>5</sup>

In approaching the end of the Book of Judges, Israelite society is fragmenting. Civic institutions, such as they are—religious institutions, military institutions, legal institutions, family units, and tribal unity—all are collapsing. Judges 18 tells a strange tale about an Ephramite by the name of Micah and his paid Levite, who serves as Micah's personal priest. The tribe of Dan, having been thus far unable to take possession of land that they could call their own, send five men out to scout out some land that they might be able to possess. During their investigations, the five men come upon Micah's house, and, discovering a Levitical priest,

“They said unto him, ‘Ask counsel, we pray thee, of God, that we may know whether our way which we go shall be *prosperous*.’<sup>22</sup>

Micah's priest assures them that Yahweh would give them success, and, indeed, they end up taking possession of the city of Laish. Here, prosperity is success in their search for an inheritance. To be sure, it has nothing to do with economy, either private or corporate.

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<sup>21</sup> The Hebrew is *hlk*.

<sup>22</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

Here, David, hunted by Saul as an enemy of state, is hiding and living in the wilderness with his small band of mercenaries. At some point in his exile, David sends emissaries from his gang to approach one, Nabal, and request some small amount of financial compensation for security that David and his men have provided Nabal. David instructs them concerning how they are to approach him.

“And thus shall ye say to him that liveth in *prosperity*, ‘Peace be both to thee, and peace be to thine house, and peace be unto all that thou hast.’”

Nabal ends up refusing to grant such compensation. This refusal nearly costs him his life. But we need not worry about that. For now, we are interested in David’s view of Nabal. By David’s estimation, Nabal is living “in prosperity.” What does this mean? What is the nature of the prosperity in which David sees him living?

Before answering this, we should note that we have included this passage in our survey even though it is what I call a phantom passage. In the KJV, the word “prosperity” is italicized. This means that the word is not actually in the Hebrew and has been supplied by the KJV translators. So, if we were to rely solely on the Hebrew, we would not be considering this passage in our present survey. However, since the KJV translators supplied the word, we can ask, “What did the KJV translators understand David to think about Nabal, that they have him speaking of Nabal as living in “prosperity”?”

Perhaps David viewed Nabal as living in the lap of material luxury. He is said to have possessed huge flocks of sheep and goats. We cannot rule this out. However, the text also informs us that Nabal is very obstinate. David could have been aware that Nabal was a man who jealously guarded his independence. It was the man’s independence that caused David to think of him as “prosperous.” This would be very much in keeping with the dominant usage of the word in the KJV’s translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Whatever one decides, the usage to which this passage puts the English “prosperity” is not so clear to allow dogmatism or life-directing counsel in regard to material prosperity.

2<sup>samuel</sup> 11.<sup>7</sup>

David, king of a united Kingdom of Israel, is engaged in a military campaign against Ammon. These hostilities are made famous for the fact that David, sending his general Joab into battle, remains home to commit adultery with Bathsheba. Upon discovery of her pregnancy, David, as part of an elaborate ruse, sends for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, an infantryman in the army. Upon Uriah's appearance in the royal court,

“David demanded of him how Joab did, and how the people did, and how the war prospered.”<sup>23</sup>

We all know the rest of the story. Our point in referencing the story and the question posed by David, is to highlight the use of the English word, “prospered,” and to point out, once again, that the word has to do with success in a military endeavor executed for some form of societal benefit. It has nothing to do with material considerations.

1<sup>kings</sup> 10.<sup>7</sup>

“Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity<sup>24</sup> exceedeth the fame which I heard.”

Thus spoke the queen of Sheba after hearing for herself Solomon's wisdom, and seeing for herself the glory and pomp of his royal court. Now, the surrounding texts speaks a good bit concerning the impressive material wealth that was to be found in Solomon's royal court. So we cannot declare it impossible that the queen of Sheba had material prosperity in mind when she spoke these complimentary words.

At the same time, we cannot deny other possible meanings. The queen of Sheba came to Solomon in the first place, we are informed, because she had “heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD.” Therefore, “she came to prove him with hard questions.”<sup>25</sup> Was he as favored of a god as she was hearing him to be? He answered her

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<sup>23</sup> 2 Samuel 11.<sup>7</sup>. Hebrew *šlm*.

<sup>24</sup> Hebrew *tôb*.

<sup>25</sup> See 1 Kings 10.<sup>1</sup>. Emphasis added.

questions beyond her wildest imaginings. She also observed the organization of a well-oiled and orderly court. She found him to be, therefore, full of “wisdom” and “skill,” or “talent,” or “genius.” Thus, she found Solomon to be a man completely in charge—master of his domain. Perhaps this is the “prosperity” she found him to possess.

While the possibility exists here that “prosperity” has an element of materialism about it, it is not so strong as we might wish if we were looking to “prove” that “prosperity” equates with material well-being first and foremost.

*1* kings 22.<sup>12, 15</sup>

There is much that fascinates in this 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of 1 Kings.<sup>26</sup> Jehoshaphat, king of Judah is contemplating joining his military forces with those of Ahab, king of Israel, in a military campaign against Syrian aggression. Before doing so, however, he wishes to obtain the inspired insight of a prophet of God. In an attempt to satisfy Jehoshaphat’s scruples, Ahab employs all the prophets associated with this royal court. Their united message is:

“Go up; for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king.”<sup>27</sup>

Jehoshaphat is not entirely satisfied with this answer. He wants to hear from a more authoritative voice representing Yahweh’s rather than the king’s interests. To that end, emissaries are sent to one, Micaiah, a prophet viewed by Ahab as unfriendly to his interests. The emissaries report the supportive oracle of Ahab’s royal prophets to Micaiah as follows:

“Go up to Ramoth-gilead, and *prosper*: for the Lord shall deliver it into the king’s hand.”<sup>28</sup>

Encouraged to mimic the royal prophets’ oracle, Micaiah accompanies the emissaries to where the two kings await his word. Upon being asked the same question as were the royal prophets, Micaiah sarcastically repeats what he now views as a false prophetic oracle.

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<sup>26</sup> 2 Chronicles 18 contains the same story with the same emphasis on “prosperity.”

<sup>27</sup> 1 Kings 22.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Hebrew *slh*



“Go, and *prosper*: for the Lord shall deliver it into the hand of the king.”<sup>29</sup>

Though Micaiah goes on to predict a disastrous outcome to the proposed military campaign, the two kings’ joint forces attack the Syrians at Ramoth-gilead. In the course of the battle, the Syrians fatally wound Ahab, and rout the joint forces of Israel and Judah.

Now, it is clear from the context that the false prediction that the two united forces will “prosper” in their battle against Syria, is a promise of military victory and success. Once more, there is no thought to economics.

2kings 18.<sup>5-8</sup>

“He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. For he clave to the Lord, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him; and he *prospered*<sup>30</sup> whithersoever he went forth: and he rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not.

He smote the Philistines, even unto Gaza, and the borders thereof, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city.

These words were written in acclaim of the great Judean King, Hezekiah. Here, Hezekiah’s “prosperity” consisted of his ability to rebel against and remain free from the tyrannical rule of Assyria. In addition, he enjoyed military success against one of Judah’s most persistent and pestilent foreign enemies, Philistia.

1chronicles 29.<sup>23</sup>

“Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father, and *prospered*; and all Israel obeyed him.”<sup>31</sup>

This verse follows immediately upon Solomon’s coronation as king, and immediately proceeds notice of David’s death. It seems best to understand Solomon’s “prosperity” in

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<sup>29</sup> 1 Kings 22.<sup>15</sup>. Hebrew *šlh*

<sup>30</sup> Hebrew, *śkl*.

<sup>31</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

terms of his acceptance as the legitimate successor to his father, David. Both nobles and common people embrace Solomon as legitimate king of Israel.

“And all the princes, and the mighty men, and all the sons likewise of king David, submitted themselves unto Solomon the king. And the Lord magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel.”<sup>32</sup>

Yet again, we see the focus on rule, sovereignty, and government. There is nothing said of economy.

2chronicles 7.<sup>11</sup>

“Thus Solomon finished the house of the Lord, and the king’s house: and all that came into Solomon’s heart to make in the house of the Lord, and in his own house, he *prosperously*<sup>33</sup> effected.”

These words were spoken upon the completion and dedication of Solomon’s temple. It seems best to read them as saying that Solomon “succeeded” in all these building projects—both national and personal. However, as we mentioned in relation to 1 Chronicles 22.<sup>11-13</sup>, temple building in the ancient world (and perhaps in our own as well) is a political act. It legitimizes and grants a “monopoly of force.” Hence, it is no surprise that after this notice, God visits Solomon. Among other things, God delivers, without utilizing our vocabulary item, “prosper,” a kind of “prosperity promise.”

“And as for thee, if thou wilt walk before me, as David thy father walked, and do according to all that I have commanded thee, and shalt observe my statutes and my judgments; then will I stablish the throne of thy kingdom, according as I have covenanted with David thy father, saying, ‘There shall not fail thee a man to be ruler in Israel.’

“But if ye turn away, and forsake my statutes and my commandments, which I have set before you, and shall go and serve other gods, and worship them; then will I pluck them

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<sup>32</sup> 1 Chronicles 29.<sup>24-25</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

up by the roots out of my land which I have given them; and this house, which I have sanctified for my name, will I cast out of my sight, and will make it to be a proverb and a byword among all nations.”<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to read these words without thinking of the promise made to Nephi in 1 Nephi 2 or the words uttered by Lehi as he blessed his sons in 2 Nephi 1. Here, as there, the focus seems to be on political independence rather than material well-being.

## 2chronicles 13.<sup>12</sup>

The thirteenth chapter of 2 Chronicles reports the military aggression perpetrated by Israel’s king, Jeroboam I, against Abijah, king of Judah. In response to this aggression, Abijah is recorded as having stood upon a mountain and launched into a long “tirade” against Jeroboam and his northern kingdom. In this tirade, Abijah asserts Judah’s faithful worship of Yahweh. As his principle evidence of this faithfulness, Abijah points to the legitimacy of the Judean temple—its ordinances and personnel. Because of this faithfulness, Abijah warns Jeroboam to reconsider his decision to attack Judah.

“And, behold, God himself is with us for our captain, and his priests with sounding trumpets to cry alarm against you. O children of Israel, fight ye not against the Lord God of your fathers; for ye shall not *prosper*.”<sup>35</sup>

Jeroboam ignores the warning, attacks Judah, and, as predicted, does “not prosper.” Rather, he is defeated by the Judean military. We see again the militaristic and corporate nature of prosperity.

## 2chronicles 14.<sup>7</sup>

Asa succeeded Abijah as King of Judah. Asa, we are informed, “did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God.”<sup>36</sup> As is so often the case in Chronicles, the nature of his obedience was in reference to the temple and its cult. Because of his goodness,

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<sup>34</sup> 2 Chronicles 7.<sup>17-20</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Chronicles 14.<sup>2</sup>

“He built fenced cities in Judah: for the land had rest, and he had no war in those years; because the Lord had given him rest. Therefore he said unto Judah, ‘Let us build these cities, and make about them walls, and towers, gates, and bars, while the land is yet before us; because we have sought the Lord our God, we have sought him, and he hath given us rest on every side.’ So they built and *prospered*.”<sup>37</sup>

Here, prosperity is clearly referring to national security through military means. What follows makes this even clearer.

“And Asa had an army of men that bare targets and spears, out of Judah three hundred thousand; and out of Benjamin, that bare shields and drew bows, two hundred and fourscore thousand: all these were mighty men of valour.

And there came out against them Zerah the Ethiopian with an host of a thousand thousand, and three hundred chariots; and came unto Mareshah. Then Asa went out against him, and they set the battle in array in the valley of Zephathah at Mareshah.

And Asa cried unto the Lord his God, and said, ‘Lord, it is nothing with thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O Lord our God; for we rest on thee, and in thy name we go against this multitude. O Lord, thou art our God; let not man prevail against thee.’

So the Lord smote the Ethiopians before Asa, and before Judah; and the Ethiopians fled. And Asa and the people that were with him pursued them unto Gerar: and the Ethiopians were overthrown, that they could not recover themselves; for they were destroyed before the Lord, and before his host; and they carried away very much spoil.”<sup>38</sup>

I suppose one could latch onto the final notice that Israel “carried away very much spoil” and claim that the passage was, in the final analysis, about economic well-being. But this seems a stretch to me. This does not seem a very dependable means by which to maintain the economic stability of either individual or nation. No, the thrust of the entire passage is best seen in military terms.

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<sup>37</sup> Verses 6-7. Hebrew *slh*

<sup>38</sup> 2 Chronicles 14.<sup>8-13</sup>.

2chronicles 20.<sup>20</sup>

An allied army consisting of Moab and Ammon, with other unnamed confederates, is on the march against Judah. King Jehoshaphat, intimidated by the size of the gathered force fears and calls for a national day of fasting. After a communal prayer, king and people are assured through a Levitical prophet, Jahaziel, that the Lord will defeat Judah's imposing enemy.

With such assurance, Jehoshaphat takes his armies into the field of battle against the coalition. What happens next is miraculous.

“And they rose early in the morning, and went forth into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went forth, Jehoshaphat stood and said, ‘Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye *prosper*.’<sup>39</sup>

And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the Lord, and that should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army, and to say,

‘Praise the Lord;  
for his mercy endureth for ever.’

And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the children of Ammon, Moab, and mount Seir, which were come against Judah; and they were smitten. For the children of Ammon and Moab stood up against the inhabitants of mount Seir, utterly to slay and destroy them: and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, every one helped to destroy another. And when Judah came toward the watch tower in the wilderness, they looked unto the multitude, and, behold, they were dead bodies fallen to the earth, and none escaped. And when Jehoshaphat and his people came to take away the spoil of them, they found among them in abundance both riches with the dead bodies, and precious jewels, which they stripped off for themselves, more than they could carry away: and they were three days in gathering of the spoil, it was so

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<sup>39</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

much.”<sup>40</sup>

Israel, then, wins without a fight as the enemy turns on itself. Now, I suppose that if one is intent on “prosperity” being about material wealth, one could focus on the incredible amount of spoil taken by the Judean army, and suggest that this was the real meaning of the king’s promise of “prosperity” in verse 20. Reading the king’s words in this way seems highly questionable. The taking of spoil in war seems an undependable—to say nothing of its questionable morality—means of obtaining and maintaining economic prosperity.

No, it seems that we must understand the prosperity that the king promises to be the military victory against Judah’s enemies. Whatever material benefit that might have accrued from the victory is secondary.

2chronicles 31.<sup>20-21</sup>

“And thus did Hezekiah throughout all Judah, and wrought that which was good and right and truth before the Lord his God. And in every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he did it with all his heart, and *prospered*.”<sup>41</sup>

These words represent the two-verse summary of Hezekiah’s extensive, and, really, unparalleled religious reforms. It seems clear that the prosperity spoken of here is the “success” which he experienced in reforming Judean religion. To be sure, there is nothing in the immediate narrative context of these verses that would lead us to think in terms of economics.

2chronicles 32.<sup>30</sup>

With the report of his religious reforms and the previous two-verse assessment of them, the text turns to other matters relative to Hezekiah’s reign. Of special note is the report concerning one of the most important and cherished political events in ancient Judah’s

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<sup>40</sup> 2 Chronicles 20.<sup>20-25</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

national history: The Assyrian king, Sennacherib's, failed attack on Jerusalem.

The text goes into great detail concerning Hezekiah's military preparations. He strengthened the fortifications in several ways. In addition, he worked to deny the Assyrian forces of any water source during the anticipated siege of the city. Because of his preparations, the siege failed and the city was delivered.

We then read this.

“And Hezekiah had exceeding much riches and honour: and he made himself treasuries for silver, and for gold, and for precious stones, and for spices, and for shields, and for all manner of pleasant jewels; storehouses also for the increase of corn, and wine, and oil; and stalls for all manner of beasts, and cotes for flocks. Moreover he provided him cities, and possessions of flocks and herds in abundance: for God had given him substance very much.

“This same Hezekiah also stopped the upper watercourse of Gihon, and brought it straight down to the west side of the city of David. And Hezekiah *prospered*<sup>42</sup> in all his works.<sup>43</sup>

We have waited long for it, but, here, in my view, is the first passage in our survey in which “prosperity” could arguably be thought of as meaning “material well-being.” It could be argued, I suppose, that his “success” “in all his works,” refers to his “fortification works,” among them the work performed on the “watercourse of Gihon.” But perhaps it also refers to economic successes, though the text doesn't make mention of them until this conclusion. Is this an outlier in the Bible's use of “prosper”? Let's wait and see if there are others that are less ambiguously economic in focus.

*Ezra* 5.<sup>8</sup>

“Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this

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<sup>42</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>43</sup> 2 Chronicles 32.<sup>27-30</sup>

work goeth fast on, and *prospereth* in their hands.”<sup>44</sup>

This is part of an official communique written by a Persian government official by the name of Tatnai to the Persian King, Darius. In it he reports on Jewish progress toward rebuilding the temple and on material needs for the proper fulfilment of the rites to be performed in the temple. Obviously, we could replace “prospereth” with “progresses” without doing the slightest harm to the meaning of the message.

*Ezra* 6.<sup>14</sup>

Darius responded to Tatnai’s letter by reaffirming his kingdom’s commitment to seeing the Jewish built.

“And the elders of the Jews builded, and they *prospered*<sup>45</sup> through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.”

It is obvious, it seems, that the “prosperity” they enjoyed took the form of success in construction of the temple.

*Nehemiah* 1.<sup>11</sup>

“O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and *prosper*,<sup>46</sup> I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king’s cupbearer.”

This verse is a portion of a prayer Nehemiah offered as he contemplated approaching Artaxerxes, king of Persia, in order to request permission to return to Jerusalem in order to assist in the rebuilding of the city. The “prosperity” he seeks is “success” in convincing the

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<sup>44</sup> Hebrew *slh*. *Ezra* 6.<sup>14</sup> has the same emphasis—success in building the temple. *Nehemiah* 1.<sup>11</sup> and 2.<sup>20</sup> both speak of prosperity or success in fortifying the vulnerable city of Jerusalem upon the Jewish return from exile.

<sup>45</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>46</sup> Hebrew *slh*.



King to grant his request.

*Nehemiah 2.*<sup>20</sup>

Nehemiah, after making his way to Jerusalem and conducting a brief inspection of the dilapidated state of Jerusalem and its fortifications, encouraged his fellow Jews to diligence in the rebuilding projects. When the foreign governor of the province accused Nehemiah of fomenting rebellion against Persia and being delusional in his intents, Nehemiah explained that he was on the king's errand and that the Jewish people would be successful in their reconstruction of the city.

“Then answered I them, and said unto them, The God of heaven, he will *prosper*<sup>47</sup> us; therefore we his servants will arise and build: but ye have no portion, nor right, nor memorial, in Jerusalem.”

Again, we see that “prosperity” is “success” in Nehemiah's planned reconstruction of the city. Material resources will surely be needed to do so, but the focus of the success is not the acquisition of needed funds, but on the general success of the projects.

### **Summary of findings**

Whew. That's it. That is all the narrative passages in which the King James translators used the “prosperity” word group. Feel free to take a break. If you've made it this far, you deserve it. That was a rather long and tedious investigation. Again, I justify such painstaking examination because of the persistent misrepresentations concerning the nature of “prosperity” as depicted in scripture. It will take overwhelming force to debunk such popular views that gratify natural-man desires.

The weight of the evidence above seems incontrovertible. As was true in the Book of Mormon, the Hebrew Bible narrative passages that we have examined do not support the idea that “prosperity” equals “material gain.” Therefore they do not justify the contention that obedience brings material gain—either individual or societal.

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<sup>47</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

In the Hebrew Bible, “prosperity,” suggests simple “success” in various endeavors. Principle among these endeavors are those involving warfare, national security, and independence from foreign powers. Prosperity applies directly to nations, and only indirectly to individuals, as individuals are members of nations. No text has so far given us any justification for interpreting “prosperity” economically or privately.

O.K., break’s over. We now go back to work. We will now examine the poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible to determine what they have to say about the nature of “prosperity.

### ***The nature of ‘prosperity’ in the Hebrew bible—poetic passages***<sup>48</sup>

*psalm 1.*<sup>3</sup>

“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water,  
that bringeth forth his fruit in his season;  
his leaf also shall not wither;  
and whatsoever he doeth shall *prosper*.”<sup>49</sup>

This passage represents a promise made to those who study and live by the word of God. The passage itself isn’t specific about the nature of the prosperity, thus allowing one to interpret prosperity according to one’s biases.

However, the following verse contrasts the life of the observant with that of the “ungodly.” From the nature of the contrast, it seems best to read the observant’s “prosperity” in “spiritual” terms related to their acceptance by and access to God. There is nothing to suggest either a political or an economic focus.

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<sup>48</sup> There are five passages in Job in which the KJV translated Hebrew words into English “prosperity” (8.<sup>6</sup>, 9.<sup>4</sup>, 12.<sup>6</sup>, 15.<sup>21</sup>, 36.<sup>11</sup>). Due to the frequent ambiguity of Job, I have chosen to not deal with them individually. The reader is welcome to have a look at them, but they will find that they do not add to or take from the conclusions that we have drawn to this point.

<sup>49</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

*psalm 30.*<sup>6</sup>

“And in my *prosperity*<sup>50</sup> I said,  
I shall never be moved.”

It is the nature of the Psalms that it is often impossible to know whether a voice is that of an individual or of a group. Expressions that might have been at one time individual could be and were adopted by groups. Then again, expressions that might have been at one time group could be and were adopted by individuals as their own. In addition, expressions that might have at one time been uttered by a royal speaker could be “democratized.” These, and many other complexities will make our job difficult.

Nevertheless, we can make a couple of observations about the nature of prosperity in this psalm. First, there is positively no hint that we should think of prosperity in this psalm in terms of economics or materialism. What the Psalmist is looking for is either individual or societal protection from an enemy’s lethal threat. Prosperity is safety from oppression and bondage—perhaps physical, perhaps emotional/spiritual; perhaps literal and historical, perhaps cultic.

“I will extol thee, O Lord;  
for thou hast lifted me up,  
and hast not made my foes to rejoice over me.  
O Lord my God, I cried unto thee,  
and thou hast healed me.  
O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave:  
thou hast kept me alive,  
that I should not go down to the pit.”

*psalm 37.*<sup>7</sup>

“Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him:  
fret not thyself because of him who *prospereth*<sup>51</sup> in his way,

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<sup>50</sup> Hebrew *šlh*. In this instance, it means something like “be carefree,” “at ease,” “unconcerned.”

<sup>51</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.”

There is little in the psalm that justifies a strong position on the nature of “prosperity” in this passage. The psalm does promise those who trust in the LORD that they “shalt be fed,”<sup>52</sup> while the “righteous” need not fear about their children “begging bread.”<sup>53</sup> This could lead one, especially if one’s mind is already made up, to understand the “prosperity” in economic terms. At the same time, the psalm provides the following comfort,

“The little that a righteous man hath  
is better than the riches of many wicked.”<sup>54</sup>

Not exactly a ringing endorsement for a doctrine claiming materialistic bounty in reward for “righteousness.” The most consistent theme of this psalm is one of “inheritance.”<sup>55</sup> This could be understood in terms of “inheriting the earth” in a post mortal existence. On the other hand, we might think of Lehi’s blessing from 2 Nephi 1 in which he promised his descendants a secure inheritance in their promised land as long as they were faithful.

All in all, this passage does not advance our understanding of prosperity. It certainly contains nothing that would lead us toward a conclusion other than that to which we have already come.

*Psalm 45.*<sup>4</sup>

“And in thy majesty ride *prosperously*<sup>56</sup> because of truth and meekness and righteousness;  
and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.

Psalm 45 is generally thought to be a royal wedding song praising a Jewish king and his bride at the time of their marriage. Royal marriages are national events, often with implications for domestic politics and international relations. A single royal marriage can

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<sup>52</sup> Verse 3

<sup>53</sup> Verse 25

<sup>54</sup> Verse 16

<sup>55</sup> Verse 9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34

<sup>56</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

have an impact on an entire nation. With this psalm therefore, we are in the political realm. While not strong, perhaps, there does seem to be a suggestion of military prowess and political stability. The next two verse read,

“Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king’s enemies;  
whereby the people fall under thee.  
Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever:  
the sceptre of thy kingdom is a right scepter.

Based upon our conclusions after examining the narrative passages, perhaps we can be excused for reading “prosperity” here in terms of political stability and security. It is certain that there is nothing in the context that would lead us to think in economic or materialistic terms.

*Psalm 73.*<sup>3, 12</sup>

Psalm 73 is a kind of confession of ignorance and wrong-headedness. The Psalmist begins by confessing to God:

“I was envious at the foolish,  
when I saw the *prosperity*<sup>57</sup> of the wicked.”

The Psalmist then describes the nature of the “prosperity” that he thinks he detects in the life of the “wicked.”

“For there are no bands in their death:  
but their strength is firm.  
They are not in trouble as other men;  
neither are they plagued like other men.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hebrew *šlm*.

<sup>58</sup> Verses 4-5

“Their eyes stand out with fatness:  
they have more than heart could wish.”<sup>59</sup>

“Behold, these are the ungodly, who *prosper*<sup>60</sup> in the world;  
they increase in riches.”<sup>61</sup>

In these passages, and for the first time in our entire investigation into the nature of prosperity, a strong case can be made for equating “prosperity” with “material acquisition.” However, the passages cannot be used to support the contention that material well-being is given in reward for obedience; for the individual who is spoken of as prosperous in psalm 73 is “foolish,” “wicked,” and “ungodly.” His prosperity, in fact, as is not infrequently the case in the Hebrew Bible, can be seen as flowing, not from his “righteousness,” but from his wickedness and his knowledge and manipulation of others and an immoral “business climate.” Nevertheless, prosperity is equated with materialistic success here, for what it’s worth.

*Psalm 118.*<sup>25</sup>

“Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD:  
O LORD, I beseech thee, send now *prosperity*.<sup>62</sup>

There is nothing in this verse that advances our understanding of the nature of prosperity.

*Psalm 122.*<sup>6-7</sup>

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
they shall *prosper*<sup>63</sup> that love thee.

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<sup>59</sup> Verse 7.

<sup>60</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

<sup>61</sup> Verse 13.

<sup>62</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

<sup>63</sup> Hebrew *šlh*

Peace be within thy walls,  
and *prosperity*<sup>64</sup> within thy palaces.

The narrative context, focused on the Royal City of Jerusalem, inclines me to think in terms of sovereignty and governance, but I will not be rigid about it. There is certainly nothing overtly financial in the passages or their context.

In Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, there are five passages<sup>65</sup> in which the KJV translates four separate Hebrew words<sup>66</sup> into our prosperity word group. None of these passages contributes to our discussion.

*Isaiah* 48.<sup>14-15</sup>

In 586, the overwhelming forces of Babylon defeated Judah's army, captured and sacked Jerusalem, and sent its residents into exile. Isaiah here promises that Yahweh will provide a deliverer (Cyrus), who will "prosper" by defeating the Babylonians, thus initiating the return of the Jews from their Babylonian captivity.

All ye, assemble yourselves, and hear;  
which among them hath declared these things?  
The LORD hath loved him:  
he will do his pleasure on Babylon,  
and his arm shall be on the Chaldeans.  
"I, even I, have spoken;  
yea, I have called him:  
I have brought him,  
and he shall make his way *prosperous*.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly, "prosperity" here signifies military dominance. Cyrus will "succeed" or "prevail" against the Babylonians.

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<sup>64</sup> Hebrew *šlh*

<sup>65</sup> Proverbs 1.<sup>32</sup>; 17.<sup>8</sup>, and 28.<sup>13</sup>. Ecclesiastes 7.<sup>14</sup> and 11.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>66</sup> *škl*, *šlm*, *šlh*, and *tôb*.

<sup>67</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

*isaiah* 53.<sup>10</sup>

“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him;  
he hath put him to grief:  
when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin,  
he shall see his seed,  
he shall prolong his days,  
and the pleasure of the LORD shall *prosper*<sup>68</sup> in his hand.”

Yahweh finds it “pleasing” (better, here, to translate “needful,” “necessary,” something like that), to “humble” (not in its “domesticated” sense, but in its real sense, “humiliate,” “oppress”) his servant. This “needful humiliation” will “pay off.” It will “succeed” in doing what it is intended to do. There is much of interest here that could occupy us for some time. For now, we must limit our observation to the fact that there is nothing economic or political in this passage. In this instance, prosperity, or the lack thereof, is a simply matter of success or failure regarding an objective.

*isaiah* 54.<sup>17</sup>

We have already seen that Isaiah promises Judah (and Israel) that they will return to their promised land from which they are exiled. In this verse, Isaiah promises returned Israel that though it’s enemies may marshal themselves against it (see verse 15), equipped with skillfully wrought weaponry, their weaponry will not “succeed.” The objectives of the military adventurism will “fail.” Our passage is, then, once more military, focused on Israel’s national security.

No weapon that is formed against thee shall *prosper*;<sup>69</sup>  
and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment  
thou shalt condemn.

This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,  
and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD.

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<sup>68</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>69</sup> Hebrew *slh*.



*i*saiah 55.<sup>11</sup>

Among other things, Yahweh promises in this chapter to have “mercy” and to “abundantly pardon” those who repent. He explains that this willing readiness to forgive flows principally from his own nature—one very different and higher from that of mortal beings. Then, utilizing a climatological metaphor, he explains that this “word,” or his promise of mercy and pardon is dependable and effectual.

“For as the rain cometh down,  
and the snow from heaven,  
and returneth not thither,  
but watereth the earth,  
and maketh it bring forth and bud,  
that it may give seed to the sower,  
and bread to the eater:  
“So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:  
it shall not return unto me void,  
but it shall accomplish that which I please,  
and it shall *prosper*<sup>70</sup> in the thing whereto I sent it.”

Here, the plain reading of the last line indicates that “prosperity” is “success” of his word of mercy. The promise will be fulfilled and will have the desired impact. With the previous parallel line’s assertion of “accomplishment,” we have a second witness that our plain reading of the last line and our understanding of “prosperity” is justified. Prosperity is the realization of an objective.

*j*eremiah 2.<sup>37</sup>

In this chapter, Jeremiah surveys many of Judah’s habitual and generational sins. One of them involves Judah’s decision to form an alliance with Egypt in hopes of resisting the expansionist efforts of Babylon. This decision is likened to marital infidelity. With this verse, Jeremiah declares that their alliance with Egypt will fail in its intended objective. Not only

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<sup>70</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

will Judah fail in checking Babylonian expansion, but Judah will be exiled from its inheritance.

“Yea, thou shalt go forth from him,  
and thine hands upon thine head:  
for the LORD hath rejected thy confidences,  
and thou shalt not *prosper*<sup>71</sup> in them.”

Once more, we see that “prosperity” means “success” and is focused on issues related to national security.

*J*eremiah 5.<sup>26-29</sup>

“For among my people are found wicked men:  
they lay wait, as he that setteth snares;  
they set a trap, they catch men.  
As a cage is full of birds,  
so are their houses full of deceit:  
therefore they are become great,  
and waxen rich.  
They are waxen fat, they shine:  
yea, they overpass the deeds of the wicked:  
they judge not the cause, the cause of the fatherless,  
yet they *prosper*;<sup>72</sup>  
and the right of the needy do they not judge.  
Shall I not visit for these things?  
Saith the LORD:  
shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?”

In this passage, Jeremiah is identifying another of Judah’s many sins. People are getting rich by unethical and immoral means. This accumulation of material gains is, here, identified as

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<sup>71</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>72</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

“prosperity.” Once more, we see that when prosperity is associated with material wealth, the economic prosperity is acquired not through righteous obedience but moral bankruptcy. This passage will not advance any doctrine claiming that obedience to God will be accompanied by a promised economic prosperity.

*J*eremiah 10.<sup>21</sup>

“For the pastors are become brutish,  
and have not sought the LORD:  
therefore they shall not *prosper*,<sup>73</sup>  
and all their flocks shall be scattered.”

This verse is part of a long lament (vs. 17-22). In this lament, Jeremiah bemoans the temple’s desecration and the exile of many Judeans. These disasters are, in part, the consequence of religious and other societal leaders having been immoral in their own lives, and derelict in their obligation to teach and encourage moral conduct on the part of citizens. It is the temple’s desecration and the population’s exile that constitute the absence of “prosperity.” Prosperity is, again, focused on military aspects and national security.

*J*eremiah 12.<sup>1</sup>

Righteous art thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee:  
yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments:  
Wherefore doth the way of the wicked *prosper*?<sup>74</sup>  
Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?

This is the beginning of a complaint that Jeremiah uttered before Yahweh. In this complaint, he reports his observation that the wicked seem to “prosper” and live a carefree life. He wonders openly how this can be just. It is more than reasonable to assume that the carefree life is made possible, in part, by means of material resources and comforts. “Prosperity,” then, can include material well-being. However, as before, the “prosperity” is not a

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<sup>73</sup> Hebrew *śkl*.

<sup>74</sup> Hebrew *ślh*.

consequence of obedience, but wickedness. “Prosperity” is not the result of a promise being fulfilled, but of fruit-yielding sin.

Now, it would be ridiculous to maintain that economic well-being has nothing to do with “happiness,” and is not a universal human “hope.” And yet, we know wealthy people who are not “happy.” We know poor people who *are* “happy.” Ultimate happiness does not derive from material well-being. Happiness is difficult to achieve without economic security, but not impossible. The Old Testament in particular is poignant in its warnings concerning idolatry—idolatry being, among other things, the attempt to find ultimate happiness in anything or anyone, including material possessions, other than God himself.

*J*eremiah 20.<sup>11</sup>

In chapter 20, we hear Jeremiah utter yet another complaint before Yahweh. It comes on the heels of his persecution and prosecution, which resulted in his being placed in public stocks by Judah’s religious/political leaders. The leaders’ intent in prosecuting Jeremiah is to shut him up and put an end to the challenge his message poses to their lifestyle. However, Jeremiah declares that their intent will go unrealized.

“But the LORD is with me as a mighty terrible one:  
therefore my persecutors shall stumble, and they shall not prevail:  
they shall be greatly ashamed;  
for they shall not *prosper*:<sup>75</sup>  
their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten.

The absence of “prosperity” here is the absence of “success” in putting a stop to Yahweh’s challenges. Again, there is simply nothing to lead us to think in economic terms.

*J*eremiah 22.<sup>20-30</sup>

Jeremiah 22 represents the Lord’s denunciation and rejection of Josiah’s sons as legitimate kings of Judah. They will die ignominious deaths, undergo ignominious burial, and/or go into exile. The Lord’s rejection of them, will extend to many generations. Speaking of Koniah, or

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<sup>75</sup> Hebrew *śkl*.

Jehoiakin, Jeremiah declares,

Thus saith the LORD,

Write ye this man childless,

a man that shall not *prosper*<sup>76</sup> in his days:

for no man of his seed shall *prosper*,<sup>77</sup>

sitting upon the throne of David,

and ruling any more in Judah.”<sup>78</sup>

The “prosperity” spoken of in verse 21 and the absence of prosperity spoken of in verse 30 are focused on the political successes and failures of Josiah’s royal descendants.

*J*eremiah 23.<sup>5</sup>

Jeremiah’s 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter represents a long denunciation of Judah’s religious leaders. They have not appropriately shepherded the flock. In the course of this denunciation, there is a short section in which Yahweh, promising to one day provide a faithful shepherd, declares,

“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD,

that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch,

and a King shall reign and *prosper*,<sup>79</sup>

and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.

In his days Judah shall be saved,

and Israel shall dwell safely:

and this is his name whereby he shall be called,

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

The “prosperity” of this future “righteous Branch” will be found in the manner and security of his reign. He will be just in his domestic policies and effective in his international policies.

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<sup>76</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

<sup>77</sup> Hebrew *škl*.

<sup>78</sup> Verse 30.

<sup>79</sup> Hebrew *škl*.

There is nothing in the entire chapter that reflects upon economic concerns.

*J*eremiah 32.<sup>5</sup>

Jeremiah 32 reports that while the forces of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem, Jeremiah was imprisoned for treason inasmuch as he had predicting Judah's defeat. The text provides us with the very seditious words that earned Jeremiah this charge.

“Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall take it; and Zedekiah king of Judah shall not escape out of the hand of the Chaldeans, but shall surely be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon, and shall speak with him mouth to mouth, and his eyes shall behold his eyes; and he shall lead Zedekiah to Babylon, and there shall he be until I visit him, saith the LORD: though ye fight with the Chaldeans, ye shall not *prosper?*”<sup>80</sup>

Once more, the “prosperity” that Zedekiah will be denied is military victory against the Babylonian army.

*J*eremiah 33.<sup>9</sup>

Jeremiah 33 represents an oracle Jeremiah utters while still imprisoned. This oracle, rather than being a threat of impending destruction, is one of future hope and promise. In the course of the oracle, we hear the following:

“And it [Judah] shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and an honour before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear all the good that I do unto them: and they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and for all the *prosperity*<sup>81</sup> that I procure unto it.”

There is not space to quote the entire oracle, but the following summary will give the reader a good and complete idea of the nature of the promised future prosperity.

Judah, soon to be stripped of its inhabitants, will once more be inhabited. Its inhabitants will

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<sup>80</sup> Hebrew *šlh*. Jeremiah 32.<sup>3-5</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Hebrew *šlm*.

dwell and work and play in peace and security. They will engage in all the normal activities lost to them through the Babylonian captivity: marriage festivities, temple worship, and secure keeping of flocks—flocks currently absent, lost, and pillaged (verses 10-14). As the crowning promise, Yahweh declares,

“In those days, and at that time,  
 will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David;  
 and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land.  
 In those days shall Judah be saved,  
 and Jerusalem shall dwell safely:  
 and this is the name wherewith she shall be called,  
 The LORD our righteousness.

For thus saith the LORD; David shall never want a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel; neither shall the priests the Levites want a man before me to offer burnt offerings, and to kindle meat offerings, and to do sacrifice continually.”<sup>82</sup>

Judah will see a restoration of all the political and religious institutions that were lost at the hand of the Babylonians. As we have seen in another oracle uttered by Jeremiah, this restoration will take place through the reinstatement of the monarchy. A Davidic king will always sit on Judah’s throne and will reorder the temple cult.

Once more, we see that the focus of “prosperity” is on national security and the proper functioning of political/governmental institutions. While we can assume that this will be accompanied by corporate economic benefits, there is no mention, and certainly no focus on this.

*l*amentations 1.<sup>5</sup> and 3.<sup>17</sup>

Two passages speak of “prosperity” in the Book of Lamentations. In the first Judah’s

“adversaries are the chief,  
 her enemies *prosper*.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Jeremiah 33.<sup>15-18</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

Judah's enemies rule over the nation. This is what is meant by their "prosperity."

In the third chapter, the poet speaks for his decimated nation. Beaten down by Yahweh's heavy punishment, the nation complains,

"Thou hast removed my soul far off from peace:

I forgot *prosperity*."<sup>84</sup>

The blessed days of national peace and security have been so thoroughly reversed that they are less than a distant memory. Only the current devastation occupies the mind.

*Ezekiel 16.*<sup>13</sup>

Ezekiel 16 contains an extended metaphor in which Israel is compared to a bride and Yahweh is compared to a groom. Israel, announces Ezekiel, did "*prosper*<sup>85</sup> into a kingdom," or "grow into a royal queen." This was accomplished through Yahweh's generosity.

"Then washed I thee with water; yea, I throughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. I clothed thee also with broidered work, and shod thee with badgers' skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and broidered work; thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil..."<sup>86</sup>

This is, what, our second Old Testament passage in which prosperity seems to be connected to material well-being? It may be putting too fine a point to it, but the "prosperity" is not to be found in the material goods, but in the political position she attains through them. The generous material blessings showered on the abandoned child allowed her to grow into a queen. It would be a stretch to associate the material blessings with faithfulness on the part of

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<sup>84</sup> Hebrew *ʾôb*.

<sup>85</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

<sup>86</sup> Verses 9-13



the child. Rather, they are the result of Yahweh's faithfulness. As the metaphor proceeds, we find that all these material blessings were used by the royal wife to buy for herself lovers. As before, this is not the most ideal passage to utilize in the attempt to justify the possession of wealth as a blessed bestowal from God for one's faithfulness.

*Ezekiel 17.*<sup>9-10, 15</sup>

After being exiled to Babylon, where the royal family swore an oath of allegiance to the King of Babylon, Judah breached the oath by attempting an alliance with the Egyptians against the Babylonians. In this passage Ezekiel addresses this breach of covenant, declaring that their attempted alliance with Egypt would fail.

“But he rebelled against him in sending his ambassadors into Egypt, that they might give him horses and much people. Shall he *prosper*?<sup>87</sup> shall he escape that doeth such things? or shall he break the covenant, and be delivered? As I live, saith the Lord God, surely in the place where the king dwelleth that made him king, whose oath he despised, and whose covenant he brake, even with him in the midst of Babylon he shall die. Neither shall Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company make for him in the war, by casting up mounts, and building forts, to cut off many persons: seeing he despised the oath by breaking the covenant, when, lo, he had given his hand, and hath done all these things, he shall not escape.”<sup>88</sup>

As we have grown accustomed, “prosperity” is a political matter in this passage. “Will the planned military/political alliance *succeed*?” “No, it will not *prosper*.”

*daniel 6.*<sup>28</sup>

This verse represents the concluding comment concerning Daniel after his miraculous rescue from the famous lion's den. It comes immediately after the report about King Darius' edict that Yahweh be honored throughout the kingdom. Its focus seems to be on Daniel's promotion within the Persian regime's administration.

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<sup>87</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>88</sup> Ezekiel 17.<sup>15-18</sup>

“So this Daniel *prospered*<sup>89</sup> in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.”

*daniel* 8.<sup>12, 24, 25</sup>

Daniel 8 contains one of the prophet’s visions of future political events. In the course of the vision, he sees that a foreign ruler—usually interpreted as Antiochus Epiphanes—rises up and dominates Jerusalem such that it puts a stop to legitimate daily temple sacrifices. This ruler “cast down the truth to the ground; and it practiced [dominated], and *prospered*.”<sup>90</sup>

After the vision, Daniel is given the interpretation. In this interpretation, we read the following about the vision’s ruler:

And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall *prosper*,<sup>91</sup> and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people. And through his policy also he shall cause craft [deception] to *prosper*<sup>92</sup> in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand.

Here, “prosperity” is success in conquering and ruling with arrogant and deceptive and destructive force. Such rule will, as it always does, undoubtedly bring short term economic riches to the unjust king. But such materialistic success is not the point of this passage. Prosperity is, once more, political and militaristic.

*daniel* 11.<sup>27, 36</sup>

In Daniel 11, the prophet is once more describing future intrigues among nations. The vision once more places us squarely in the political realm. Their intrigues will bring temporary rule, but in the end they will not “prosper.” Of one king, often interpreted as anti-Christ (how many are not?!), we read,

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<sup>89</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>90</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>91</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

<sup>92</sup> Hebrew *slh*.

“And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall *prosper*<sup>93</sup> till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done.”<sup>94</sup>

The king will succeed in his evil purposes for a time. Eventually, however, God will put a stop to his blasphemy. Not a passage one wants to use to extol the blessedness of “material prosperity,” obviously.

Zechariah 1.<sup>17</sup>

Zechariah references some of the same foreign powers that subdue and destroy Jerusalem about which Daniel spoke. Zechariah also sees Jerusalem’s restoration.

“Therefore thus saith the Lord; ‘I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem. Cry yet, saying, ‘Thus saith the Lord of hosts; My cities through *prosperity*<sup>95</sup> shall yet be spread abroad; and the Lord shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem.’”<sup>96</sup>

Undoubtedly, the building of the temple and of the city will require material resources. But that is not the emphasis here. The emphasis is on Judah’s political and national “reversal of fortune.” They will no longer be dominated by foreign powers, but will dwell securely.”

Zechariah 7.<sup>7</sup>

“Should ye not hear the words which the LORD hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in *prosperity*,<sup>97</sup> and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain?”

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<sup>93</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

<sup>94</sup> Verse 36

<sup>95</sup> Hebrew *ʾôb*

<sup>96</sup> Verses 16-17

<sup>97</sup> Hebrew *šlh*.

Zechariah does not specify the nature of past “prosperity” to which he alludes. It could be economic or only political. The emphasis seems to be on the “habitation” of the land. Later, through the prophet, Yahweh will remind:

“I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.”

Zechariah 8.<sup>12</sup>

In the eighth chapter of Zechariah, Yahweh makes ten statements concerning blessings he is prepared to pour out upon Israel. Verse 12 is found in the sixth statement, consisting of verses 9-13. Here is the statement in full.

“Let your hands be strong, ye that hear in these days these words by the mouth of the prophets, which were in the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built. <sup>10</sup>For before these days there was no hire for man, nor any hire for beast; neither was there any peace to him that went out or came in because of the affliction: for I set all men every one against his neighbour. <sup>11</sup>But now I will not be unto the residue of this people as in the former days, saith the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup>For the seed shall be *prosperous*;<sup>98</sup> the vine shall give her fruit, and the ground shall give her increase, and the heavens shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. <sup>13</sup>And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing: fear not, but let your hands be strong.”

Of all the passages in which our prosperity word group has been utilized, those in both the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament, this passage may contain the strongest economic sense. The promise is that with the completion of the temple, planted seeds will sprout, vineyards will flourish, and moisture will be abundant. One might wish the language to more direct—perhaps speaking of the “prosperity” of people rather than harvest—but this should be read as indicative of economic well-being.

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<sup>98</sup> Hebrew *šlm*.

In addition, Judah's poor status among the community of nations will improve. The population of the capitol, Jerusalem, will once more fill the city and dwell in peace. This is political. Both the economic and political seem focused at the corporate level rather than the private.

While the nation could justify assuming that it would see economic prosperity with the completion of the temple, it would not seem justifiable for the individual to assume that he or she could expect individual "prosperity."

### **Conclusion**

Well, there you have it. It seems pretty clear to me that "prosperity" in the Hebrew Bible is predominately about a nation's military and political strength, security, and endurance. In those few passages that have, often little more than, a hint of materialistic perspective, it seems that we are not to think of economic well-being at the personal and individual level. Nowhere can we find justification for individuals to claim economic prosperity as a rightful corollary to their personal righteousness.

Perhaps the reader sees things differently. I would invite them to lay out their case.

We have now examined the "prosperity promise" as found in the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible. We have also examined the concept of "prosperity" in general as it is found in the Hebrew Bible. We have now only to examine "prosperity" in general as found in the Book of Mormon. We will do this in Part 3 of this study.