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When A False Teacher Calls America “Israel” A Review of *The Mystery of the Shemitah* by Jonathan Cahn

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When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. (Deuteronomy 32:8-9 ESV)

Jonathan Cahn, a popular Christian author, claims that his books reveal mysteries and predict the future. He thus portrays himself as like the Biblical prophets, including the claim of having new revelations. The main point of his book is that America is a second Israel and that she is being judged according to the seven-year Sabbath law called “shemitah” that was given to ancient Israel. This judgment manifests itself in seven-year cycles of stock market collapses or other cataclysmic events. The next one is due the fall of 2015, according to Cahn. I will show that these claims are false and that Cahn is not a true prophet of God.

Prophets Reveal Mysteries

The apostle Paul claims that he was chosen by God to reveal mysteries as were the other apostles. The gospel itself was the mystery of which he spoke. We see this in Ephesians 3:

that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in

the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, (Ephesians 3:3-6)

A mystery is something that would not be known had God not chosen to reveal it through His appointed spokespersons. These are Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament, and Christ and His appointed apostles and prophets in the New Testament. The writings of the Biblical prophets in Scripture are inerrant and infallible. In the Scriptures we have revealed all the mysteries that will be known until Christ returns.

However, Jonathan Cahn, who is not one of the Biblical prophets, claims to reveal mysteries: “*The Harbringer* and *The Mystery of the Shemitah* are not only revealing mysteries but also the sounding of the alarms.”¹ Cahn’s claim to be a revealer of mysteries is strong and severely problematic: “Much that will be revealed in this book has never before been revealed in written form” (Cahn: 2). This is a rather bold claim that echoes the apostle Paul’s cited above. He claims to have special revelation like the biblical authors. The problem is that Cahn did not see the resurrected Christ and was not appointed by Him like Paul and the other apostles.

Cahn has no standing as an apostle or prophet and his writings are not binding as Scripture is.

Referencing his previous book, Cahn repeats his grand claim: “*The Harbringer* contains 14 major revelations or mysteries” (Cahn: 4). Unlike Paul and the other apostles, Cahn was not personally taught by Christ, but he still claims prophetic status based on subjective, inner voices: “I heard an inner voice say, ‘There’s a mystery here. You must seek and find it’” (Cahn: 9). Religious leaders claiming special revelations and special status are nothing new. Hundreds of false groups have started that way. We need to decide whether to believe anyone who claims special revelation beyond Scripture.

When Questions Imply Everything and Teach Nothing

One of the annoying characteristics of many postmodern writers is to use questions that seem to make a claim but have built-in deniability. I noticed this trend when researching the Emergent movement for a book I wrote. They ask questions but refuse to make objective statements, thus creating confusion while appearing to teach something. Cahn follows a similar process, filling his books with suggestive questions so that readers have to scour through every word (as I did) to find out if these are meant to be definitive statements. For example: “Could the mystery of the Shemitah still be at work—moving, impacting, and altering the course of world history—even in the modern world, even in our day?” (Cahn: 42). So he creates confusion with a question, when in fact this is a claim he is making—which I will show is a false one. The Law of Moses that requires cancelling all debts every seven years is not binding on any but Israel in the Old Testament, so it can hardly be the key to world history. Cahn is the master at

sowing confusion.

Is America the New Israel?

Cahn often repeats what I call our national myth—that America is somehow the new Israel. This myth goes back to beginning of our history but cannot be sustained by any biblical standard. The myth is based on the belief that man can unilaterally make a covenant and bind God to it, without God having agreed to anything. Cahn claims, “Embedded in America’s foundation is a prophetic warning. The warning was given on America’s first day as a nation. It concerns what will happen if America should ever turn away from God” (Cahn: 21). For such a warning to be valid and binding, it would have to be issued by an infallible prophet who speaks for God, in this case, beyond scripture. Who, exactly, is America’s Moses, or Jesus, or the apostles? Lacking any such person, God cannot have stated that America is Israel and has a binding covenant. That she does is our national myth.

The truth is that God draws out the boundaries of all nations through His providence. The truths revealed in Romans 13 and elsewhere about how Christians relate to civil governments applied to Rome when Paul wrote and all civil governments in history. Only Israel was directly established by God and had a binding covenant mediated through Moses who God chose and appointed. America has neither a Moses nor a binding covenant. We are not the new Israel and never have been. The moral laws of God that do apply are found in the Bible and they apply to all people in all nations.

Cahn falsely claims that any nation can become a covenant nation: “Such a prophetic sign could be given to any nation as long as that nation in some way matched the description or shared the attributes of ancient Israel in 586 BC” (Cahn: 56). Cahn obviously fails to understand what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 32:8, 9 (cited at the beginning of this article). Only Israel was directly under Yahweh, all the other nations are under the “sons of God.” No

other nations had an Exodus, a Sinai, or a Moses. All nations are ruled by God’s providence and are under the principalities and powers (‘sons of God’ of Deuteronomy 32:8). America is no exception. Cahn again repeats our national myth: “Those who founded America not only foretold its future blessing—but also gave warning. It was this: If America ever turned away from God, then the same judgments that fell upon ancient Israel would fall upon America” (Cahn: 61). Israel had Moses and the prophets who spoke inerrantly for God. Who speaks bindingly for God beyond Scripture for America? There is no such person.

I reject Cahn’s claim that America is somehow Israel. All the moral laws of God always apply to all peoples in all nations. They are revealed in Scripture. All geo-political entities have boundaries that are drawn out by God in His providence and have leaders that His providence allows. In these important ways America is like all nations. We are *not* Israel. Furthermore, no man or nation has the power or authority to bind God to a man-made, unilateral covenant. Unilateral covenants in the Bible are established by God, not man. We need to reject the myth that America is a special covenant nation and start thinking Biblically rather than mythologically.

No Seven Year Sabbath Law Applies to America

Israel as a covenant nation was given a special seven year Sabbath law that she did not keep. Judgment did come as a consequence. The law is stated in Exodus 23:10-11:

You shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.
(Exodus 23:10, 11)

This law is the “*shemithah*” that Cahn references. It is further defined in Deuteronomy:

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed.
(Deuteronomy 15:1, 2)

This release of debts is the *shemithah* and Cahn claims that this law is binding on America and that God has been judging us for not keeping it. Cahn marks that date on the Hebrew calendar as Elul 29: “On Elul 29, all debts are canceled and all credit released, and the nations financial accounts are transformed and wiped clean” (Cahn: 33). So he goes from this to the startling claim that this all applies now: “The result is not only relevant but also surprisingly applicable to our day: the effect and repercussions of the Shemithah extend into the nation’s financial realm, economic realm, and the realms of labor, employment, production, consumption, and trade” (Cahn: 44).

Since there is no infallible prophet from God for America, we American citizens did not know we were under this all-encompassing law. Some of us bought mutual funds as part of an IRA. We did not know that God would require the cancellation of the hundreds of contracts that any given mutual fund represents every seven years. If we had known this, we never would have an IRA because it would be useless to help us in our old age. According to Cahn, we have been under binding law that we never knew about nor could we have known about. I certainly knew that Israel was under such a law, but was (and am) sure that I am under the New Covenant whose terms are spelled out in the New Testament. So in Cahn’s version of things, there is an accumulation of moral guilt for breaking a law we had no way of knowing we were under. Furthermore, given the complexity of modern economics, contracts would be

worthless if all were annulled every seven years. For example, who would lend money for someone to buy a house?

Stock Market Collapse as Proof of *Shemittah*

The main evidence that Cahn gives for his claims is the fact that cataclysmic events such as stock market collapses have happened according to seven year patterns. He has pages of charts that document this. Supposedly this happens as God's judgment on America for not keeping the *shemittah* law that ancient Israel was under. For example, Cahn writes: "Thus if the mystery of the Shemittah is still in effect, we might expect that there exists a connection between the Hebrew month of Tishri and a collapse in the financial realm—as in that of a stock market crash" (Cahn: 71). Interestingly, Cahn fudges on his claims and admits that *shemittah* was only binding on Israel:

Only Israel was compelled to keep the Shmittah as an observance. As an observance, the Shemittah applies to one nation. But as a prophetic sign, it may apply to any nation. As an observance, the Shemittah comes regularly, every seventh year. But as a sign, it is not bound to any schedule or regularity. But when it does appear, it will manifest the essence of the Shemittah, its effect and mystery, in the form of a sign. (Cahn: 76, 77)

If this is confusing to you, it should be, because it makes no sense. If the remission of debts every seven years is not binding, then how are we being judged for not doing it? Furthermore, if the seven-year pattern is not to be expected, then how does Cahn find the *shemittah* in the stock market where he sees a seven-year pattern? The only "prophetic sign" that remains is that the stock market sometimes drops and a lot of people lose money. Even though he claims the seven-year pattern is not necessary, his book has pages of materi-

al showing such a seven-year pattern. On pages 81 though 86 he documents a seven-year pattern by citing America's history with cataclysmic events. These, he says, are prophetic signs of judgment.

The process of proving this claim is very confusing. After admitting that we have no way of knowing whether the various seven-year events are landing on what would have been the Jewish *shemittah* if it could be traced forward through the millennia, he goes on to claim certain dates are the *shemittah*: "In the midst and depths of the collapse is the biblical Year of the Shemittah, which began September 1902 and ended on September 21, 1903" (Cahn: 83). But we really cannot know that. So by backwards reasoning he states that because certain events happen, it must be on the biblical *shemittah*. So goes the process of confusing the reader.

In a classic example of begging the question, Cahn states, "We have witnessed an amazing correlation. In the past four decades of modern history the economic and financial realms of America and the world have followed the ancient mystery that ordains economic cessation and financial collapse taking place according to a seven-year cycle" (Cahn: 99). The only real facts that Cahn has to go on is that the old covenant law of Israel ordained the seven-year Sabbath and sometimes the stock market drops precipitously according to seven-year cycles, but not always. Cahn shoehorns this into his implausible theory: "Could any of the five great peaks, apogees, downturns, and collapses of the last four decades bear a more specific connection to the *once-in-seven-years* Shemittah of ancient times"? (Cahn: 99). The reality is that it does not.

A stock downturn does not equate to the cancelling or remission of debts called for in the *shemittah* law. For example, if a person is invested in the stock market with a specific company or mutual fund, a downturn does not cancel the various contracts that are represented by the stock. That one's investment is worth less than it was is not the same as the annulment of the investment. The same stock still exists and

may go back up again. In Israel they were told to annul the debt all together. So Cahn is not even talking about the same thing. Other than when there is a bankruptcy, that a given investment is worth less money does not mean it was cancelled and worth nothing at all. His categories are wrong.

Not only is this the case, but the pattern is not perfect. *Shemittah*, by law, had to happen every seven years (though as we know, Israel failed to keep it). Cahn admits that there was no collapse in 1994 though that year should have fit the pattern. He states, "Nothing has to happen in the next Shemittah" (Cahn: 238). Let us apply this to the next such event in September of 2015. What we know now, according to Cahn's categories, is that the stock market may collapse, or it may not. Cahn states, "The coming Shemittah will end September 2015" (Cahn: 239). So before I read his book, I knew that the American stock market may or may not go down this September. After I read his book I know that the stock market may or may not go down this September. I have gained no new knowledge of this matter. What kind of revealed mystery adds nothing to our knowledge? A rather worthless one I must say.

It is not clear to me how we repent of having stocks if we are not clear that it is a sin to do so. God is evidently angry with Americans making such investments, or at least not divesting themselves of them every seven years. I own a modest IRA that I started in the 1980's which managed to survive through these many cycles and I have some money to help pay medical bills. How does that make me a worse sinner and invite God's wrath? It seems to me that Cahn is a guilt monger who never gives us a good way to repent of whatever it is that puts us into the supposed *shemittah* cycle. He needs to tell us straight up whether he knows it is a sin for any one of us to have an IRA or be involved in the stock market – and if so why. I cannot see this and intend to keep what I have available for future medical bills no matter what happens in September. I do not believe Cahn and do not accept the idea that he speaks for

God. If I lose my investment, that is part of God's providence and I trust I will keep praising His name no matter what.

Confusing God's providential will and moral will is a common error. Providentially, God rules over His own universe. What happens includes good and evil, but God uses it all. We can, and must, distinguish good from evil by using Biblical truth to know God's moral will and apply it to life. For example, we know that the murder of unborn babies is sin because humans are created in God's image, and human life is to be protected. Cahn correctly identifies abortion as moral evil. But his assumption that stock market collapses or recessions are God's hand of judgment based on the *shemitah* law he identifies are tied to God's anger about abortion cannot be proven. We can prove from Scripture that abortion is moral evil but we have no authoritative prophet to state that seven-year stock market collapses are specifically God judging America for abortion. Nor can we link cataclysms in nature to judgment for certain sins unless there is a prophet who speaks for God to tell us this is the case. Cahn's categories are wrong and he often identifies other issues that cannot be proven to be sin according to God's moral law.

Is God Angry About Tall Office Buildings?

Jonathan Cahn identifies the existence of tall office buildings such as those which were destroyed on 9/11 as sin which God is judging. He has a large section of his book describing towers as symbols of greatness, human pride, the tower of Babel and symbols of America's greatness. He claims that his first book cites a warning to America about this given in 1789. Tall towers are, in Cahn's mind, sin against God that will bring judgment.

Again his categories are in error—confusing providence and God's moral law. The sin of the tower builders at Babel is clear in the Bible. Their tower was a ziggurat which was used for pagan religious purposes such as an astrologi-

cal edifice. God's disapproval is clear in the Bible. It does not follow that office buildings are modern towers of Babel. Perhaps the motive for a tall office building is to have a small footprint in a dense city.

Suppose the total office space of one of the tall towers that Cahn objects to was built in Texas on a huge acreage of land, only spread out. Would God be happy with that office because it did not go up in the air? It is not clear in the Bible that it is a sin to build tall offices or to do business in such an office. When I was in Bible College I had a job in the tallest office building in Minneapolis to help pay my tuition. I do not believe I was sinning against God because of the location of my job. Cahn's categories are false and unbiblical. Providentially people have jobs in cities where some office buildings are tall. Are they thereby risking God's judgment because of the sinfulness of such buildings? No!

Cahn states, "We have seen it (the rising and crashing of world markets) coalesce with a mystery of the towers, again joined to the dynamics of rising and falling. And we have watched it move on the stage of world history determining the rise and fall of nations, the ascendancy of world powers and the collapse of empires" (Cahn: 228). What Cahn describes is God's providential rule over human history. Such rule does not mean that the height of office buildings is to be limited by God's moral law. It does not mean that we can discern God's moral law by watching who prospers and who does not. Jesus commented on this:

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them

were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:1-5)

What Jesus taught shows that we cannot discern who is or is not pleasing to God by studying various events that unfold in history. The gospel calls all to repent. America is not more sinful because of the existence of office towers, even if they are destroyed. The moral will of God is found only in Scripture.

America As One of the Nations

When the apostle Paul preached to the pagan worshippers at Athens he spoke to them about the true nature of God, whom they did not really know. He preached Christ and the resurrection. In the course of his message, Paul stated: "and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). This statement contains more theology than Cahn shows that he understands. If God determines boundaries and appointed times by His sovereign will, then Jonathan Cahn cannot discern God's moral will from studying history as he tries to do. Nations filled with wickedness sometimes prosper, and others that are less wicked are sometimes destroyed by powerful, wicked nations. Good and evil must be determined from the Bible, not who does or does not prosper in history.

America is one of the many nations that has come into existence since creation. As I stated earlier, America is not Israel, does not have a covenant with God and has always been characterized by both good and evil. We know the difference only if we know and apply the Bible. Much evil has been done in this country in the name of God; that is clear. But we know that only if we have true discernment that comes from solid theology. Some believed that the early settlers were like Moses and the Israelites, America was the new Israel and the native Americans the Canaanites.ⁱⁱ America was "founded by

God” no more or no less that all nations come into existence by God’s providence. The only unique nation in the Bible was Israel.

Cahn buys into the lie that America is somehow the new Israel: “America, having been formed after the pattern of ancient Israel, was now following the course of Israel’s apostasy. Thus it could be no accident that the same harbingers that appeared in the last days of ancient Israel were now reappearing in America” (Cahn: 230). If America never was the new Israel with a covenant like Israel’s, then Cahn’s entire thesis falls apart. As it is he feeds our national myth, perpetuates it, and uses it to falsely identify what is or is not “sin.” It is not a sin to own stock in corporations nor is it sin to build tall office buildings. It is not sin to have a 30-year home loan that is not to be nullified in seven years. Cahn’s categories are horribly confused and he thus dumps guilt on ordinary people going about ordinary life and fails to identify the true issues of postmodernity. The prevailing idol of modern Americans is pagan nature worship. People honor supposed “mother nature” and refuse to come to Father God! This issue Cahn never mentions.

The Year of Jubilee

As I read Cahn’s *Shemitah* book I thought of Jesus’ claim that in Him, the true year of Jubilee had come. We find that in Luke 4:18, 19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are oppressed, To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18, 19)

In Christ we find release from sin and freedom from the bondage we were all in. Those who come to Christ are truly free.

The “favorable year of the Lord” is likely a reference to the year of Jubilee that was to be celebrated after seven sets of seven-year cycles. The year following would be the 50th, the year of Jubilee. This is described in Leviticus 25:22-17. Jonathan Cahn rightly describes the Jubilee as taught in Leviticus 25 (Cahn: 262). But he apparently is unaware that Jesus announced its fulfillment in Himself in Luke 4:19. Those who come to Christ find true and complete freedom from their unpayable debt of sin to God! The NET Bible notes explain: “*The year of the Lord’s favor* (Grk “the acceptable year of the Lord”) is a description of the year of Jubilee (Lev 25:10). The year of the total forgiveness of debt is now turned into a metaphor for salvation. Jesus had come to proclaim that God was ready to forgive sin totally.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Since the only true Jubilee is now found in Christ, there is no point to Cahn’s claim that the seven-year cycle of Shemitah must be kept by America to avoid judgment. We do not need to know the cycles (which he admits we cannot), we need to come to Christ. To Cahn’s credit, he does include the gospel in his book (Cahn: 250, 251). I rejoice that he points to the need for the salvation that Christ offers. But I lament that his book does not take into account the important ramifications of this. The Jubilee has come in Christ and we have no need to follow seven-year cycles that Israel never followed even when she was under them!

Conclusion

We only know God’s moral will from the Bible. Trying to learn it from reading signs and world events is the realm of

the pagans. Cahn’s *Shemitah* book does the latter. God’s moral will is not found in the stock market, only Scripture. There is more than one possible cause for whatever we observe in the world. To claim that because the Bible describes a seven-year law of *shemitah* and the stock market sometimes follows a seven-year cycle does not prove that the violation of the *shemitah* law caused the stock market events. Claiming so is a basic logical fallacy called “asserting the consequent.” This fallacy is like saying that “all normal cats have four legs, Fido has four legs, so Fido must be a cat.” There are other reasons for having four legs than being a cat.

The seven-year pattern that fuels Cahn’s book is a massive logical fallacy. It takes the idea of a seven-year cycle and uses it to make it appear that America is the new Israel and is under a law that Israel was under. Neither is the case. This book will mislead anyone who believes it. Therefore do not believe it.

End Notes

ⁱ Jonathan Cahn, *The Mystery of the Shemitah, The 3000-Year-Old Mystery That Holds the Secret of America’s Future, The World’s Future. . . And Your Future!* (Lake Mary, FL, Charisma Media, 2014) 252.

ⁱⁱ See James Morone, *Hellfire Nation, The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003) 74.

ⁱⁱⁱ Biblical Studies Press. (2006). *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Lk 4:19).