

SURVIVING THE HAMMER

A Devotional Meditation on SHOFTIM (JUDGES)

Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9; Isaiah 49:5-6, 51:12-53:12;
Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 11:31-32; Philippians 4:4-7

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Recently I had occasion to revisit some of the classic works of science fiction that helped shape my worldview. It is ironic that most of these works were penned by sceptics, agnostics, and atheists. Although some of these authors were at least nominally Christian or Jewish, their cosmology was more materialist and rationalist. They might acknowledge the supernatural, or a higher being or beings that somehow influence the universe, but they shared a common view that man is the measure of all things, and that we are simultaneously the masters of our own fate, and the cause of our own undoing.



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These authors never tempted me to walk away from my identity in Messiah Yeshua. Quite the opposite; they showed me the alternative of living without hope for eternity, or with a hope built entirely on faith in flawed human beings. That kind of wishful-thinking hope simply cannot compete with the peace of Christ that has sustained me since childhood. Even so, they succeeded in teaching me how to dream about a better world, and about what our eternal future might be like.

Of course, the eternal future we expect is one in which Messiah reigns over the whole earth and we serve his Kingdom as resurrected and perfected images of our Creator. That's a hope my science fiction heroes did not share, as I was reminded when I reviewed one of my favorite novels. In that story, a comet struck the earth and caused global devastation.

The authors depicted the impact of the comet like the blow of a hammer shattering the earth. Their vivid descriptions of the devastation included the reactions of people to the sudden realization that the world as they knew it was ending. Some lost all inhibition and indulged in the urge to do whatever they pleased, including the vilest things. Some carried on in ignorance, either willful or otherwise, until they succumbed to disaster. Others did what they could to escape to higher ground where they would be safe. Often that meant doing so by whatever means necessary, including theft, deception, and murder. Some cooperated with others, such as family, friends, neighbors, or strangers thrown together with them by circumstance.

Only one character took thought of life beyond survival through the immediate dangers. He went to great lengths to preserve books and other useful items that would help people establish new communities and rebuild civilization. In the end, it was his sacrificial forethought that brought an optimistic conclusion to the apocalyptic story.

What was lacking, however, was reference to a Creator. The people of faith in the novel were more decoration than anything else. They were caricatures of fanatical cult members with nothing to offer other than annoyance, life-threatening disruptions to get attention, and meaningless calls for repentance to stave off judgment. I found it very sad that such gifted authors could find nothing substantial to say about the biblical foundations of our civilization, or of the Jewish and Christian multitudes who had crafted and shepherded that civilization through millennia.

Why is that?

It's not for lack of trying. Saints and martyrs from both halves of God's Covenant people have done their best in each generation to pass on what they have learned from the word of God and from previous generations. The revivalist Protestant traditions of my upbringing are but one example of the vibrant faith in the God of Israel that still lives in many Christian and Jewish expressions, all grounded in the Torah revealed through Moses. On that we agree, even though our Jewish brethren disagree with our understanding that Yeshua is Messiah Son of David who taught and lived out the Torah, as did his apostles. What we should be able to agree on is that the principles of Torah are the foundation of what we have called Judeo-Christian, or Western, Civilization, and which I now call biblical civilization.

That's a civilization worth fighting for. It doesn't start with warriors, though. It starts with judges and rulers who understand God's principles and apply them in their homes and communities. Every man and woman serves in this role over his or her own heart. That's where God's government really begins. It happens as we come into covenantal relationship with our Creator and seek to learn his ways because his ways are right.

This kind of self-governance is what Paul had in mind when he wrote,

But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

1 Corinthians 11:31-32 ESV

This kind of self-correction is more than religious behavioral modification. It is the natural outcome of lives restored to the image of our Creator and living as if his Kingdom were already covering the entire earth.

This is the kind of society envisioned in God's Torah. People who rightly judge themselves are able to choose judges and rulers who can make decisions for the community and the nations. The people trust such rulers because they trust the God who raised them up. That's the kind of society that is worth fighting for against external enemies, internal divisions, diabolical deceptions and subversions, and all manner of plagues and disasters that might come. It's a society that has direction because it has a foundation, and that's what makes it hopeful for the future, now and in eternity.

We can argue and speculate on when and how the world as we know it will end, but that is secondary to building the kind of Kingdom civilization that will endure beyond the apocalypse. We want to be in that kind of civilization when the hammer falls.