

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Harbinger: *Right Message, Harmful Exegesis*

Few would doubt that one of the publishing sensations of 2012 was *The Harbinger* by Jonathan Cahn, senior pastor of Jerusalem/Beth Israel Worship Center in Wayne, New Jersey. [In his congregation, he is generally referred to as “Rabbi.” Cahn also gave the Keynote Address at the Presidential Inaugural Prayer Breakfast on 21 January 2013. The beginning of his address was quite powerful with the remaining part of his address being a summary of his book.] A messianic Jewish congregation, Cahn’s church is probably the largest such congregation in America. Set in a fictional narrative framework, *The Harbinger* centers on a set of nine small clay discs (called “seals”) which, the book argues, are from eighth century BC Israel and are directly connected with Isaiah 9:10:

“The bricks have fallen down,
But we will rebuild with hewn stones;
The sycamores are cut down,
But we will replace them with cedars.”

In the book, the nine seals are given over a period of time to journalist Nouriel Kaplan by a mysterious figure identified only as “The Prophet.” In the book, Kaplan relates his conversations with The Prophet to Ana Goren, a Manhattan publishing executive. These then are the three characters of the book. Ostensibly fiction, Cahn clearly uses the book to relate incontrovertible facts about both Israel in the 8th century BC and America in the early 21st century.

Theologian David James, who has both debated Cahn and written a significant book about *The Harbinger*, argues that Cahn “believes he has discovered nine signs, or omens (“harbingers”), and an ancient mystery in the Isaiah passage that ‘explains everything from 9/11 to the collapse of the global economy.’ Furthermore, he believes that these nine harbingers have appeared once again in America beginning with the 2001 terrorist attacks. Based on Cahn’s arguments and massive amounts of ‘evidence,’ the reader is to conclude that it would be impossible for all of this to have happened by mere coincidence—and therefore the only reasonable explanation is that God must have orchestrated everything. The overall purpose of *The Harbinger* is to explain that an ancient mystery revealed by these harbingers is a call to America to repent for rejecting God and abandoning the foundations upon which the country was built. The mystery therefore also warns of the imminent danger of God’s judgment if this call is ignored.”

In summary, here are the harbingers Cahn sees using Isaiah 9:10 and how they apply to both 8th century BC Israel and 21st century America:

1. **The First Harbinger:** The Breach. For Israel in the 8th century BC, God removed His hedge of protection from Israel, with Assyria's invasion being the result. For America, God removed His hedge of protection, with the terrorist attacks on 9/11 being the result.
2. **The Second Harbinger:** The Terrorist. For Israel, the Assyrians were like modern day terrorists. For America, the terrorists of 9/11 were like 8th century BC Assyrian terrorists.
3. **The Third Harbinger:** The Fallen Bricks. The clay bricks of Israel's 8th century BC walls, were like the "bricks" that fell at the World Trade Center on 9/11.
4. **The Fourth Harbinger:** The Tower. For Israel, their leaders in the 8th century BC defied God by rebuilding the city without any evidence of repentance. For America, its leaders defied God by planning to rebuild the towers destroyed on 9/11.
5. **The Fifth Harbinger:** The Gazit Stone. For Israel in the 8th century, they used quarried and dressed stones to rebuild, rather than clay bricks. For America, quarried Adirondack stone was the cornerstone of the new tower at the 9/11 site.
6. **The Sixth Harbinger:** The Sycamore. For Israel, most of its fig-mulberry (sycamore) trees were cut down by the invading Assyrians. For America, a lone American sycamore stood in the yard of St. Paul's Chapel near the World Trade Center and was knocked down as a result of the collapse of the Towers on 9/11.
7. **The Seventh Harbinger:** The Erez Tree. Israel in the 8th century BC intended to replace the destroyed Sycamore with cedar trees, in defiance of God. For America, a Norway spruce was planted at Ground Zero as an act of defiance against God.
8. **The Eighth Harbinger:** The Utterance. Words of defiant pride and arrogance were uttered by Israel after Assyria's invasion. For America, when its leaders repeat Isaiah 9:10, they are vowing to defy God's judgment on America.
9. **The Ninth Harbinger:** The Prophecy. For Israel, Isaiah 9:10 was a prophecy from God as to what would happen to Israel. For America, Isaiah 9:10 is likewise a pronouncement of judgment from God.

Although Cahn denies he is applying Isaiah 9:10 directly to America (he says it merely reveals a "pattern" of God's judgment), it is next to impossible to read the book and not reach that conclusion. I have had numerous people during 2012 ask me about *The Harbinger* and each one clearly reached that conclusion. If Cahn did not wish people to draw that conclusion, he failed. But I rather suspect this is indeed the effect he wanted.

Why is *The Harbinger* a book with the correct message (calling America to repentance) but with a faulty and potentially dangerous exegesis of Scripture? Several thoughts:

1. Although Cahn denies this, his book explicitly expects the reader to draw a connection between Israel as a covenant nation with God and America as a nation with a similar covenant relationship. For example, the dialogue between Nouriel Kaplan and the Prophet strongly implies that America is the new Israel. In chapter 19, "The Mystery," Kaplan has a dream that involves the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem under King Solomon. In the middle of the dream, King Solomon remarkably and bizarrely transforms into the first president of the United States, George Washington. As David James shows, in an interview with Glenn Beck, Cahn connected Israel returning to the place where it was dedicated to God (i.e., Temple Mount) and America returning to the place where it was dedicated to God, downtown Manhattan, America's first capital: "two

parallel nations, two parallel places of dedication, two parallel places of destruction, and two parallel covenants.” Cahn keeps trying to deny such a connection, but whether explicitly or implicitly, this is the connection people are drawing. Further, one of the reasons Mormons are so enthusiastically endorsing this book is that the entire Mormon faith rests on the proposition that America is where the “lost tribes” of Israel came after the Assyrian invasion in 722 BC. America is the new Israel. But the Bible clearly states that Israel is in an unconditional covenant with God called the Abrahamic Covenant. America has no such unconditional covenant connection whatsoever to God. To even allude to such a relationship, as *The Harbinger* clearly does, is unbiblical and wrong.

2. Cahn violates one of the most basic principles of hermeneutics—the literal, historic grammatical method of interpretation. His hermeneutic is an allegorical one, where there are mysteries hidden deep in the text that, apparently, he has now uncovered. This allegorical interpretation of the Bible is terribly dangerous and subjective because there is no test for it. This is the mystery he sees in Isaiah 9:10 and, because he sees it, it is true and applicable to America. I know of no biblical scholar who would argue that Isaiah 9:10 can be directly or indirectly applied to America. Yet, Cahn clearly wants us to think so. The subtitle of his book shows this: *The Ancient Mystery That Holds the Secret of America’s Future*.
3. In chapter 17 of David James’s book on *The Harbinger*, James makes an important argument about Jonathan Cahn and his intellectual roots. He demonstrates quite convincingly that Cahn is influenced, if not actually propagating, an important form of Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah. Indeed, in Cahn’s book he has a dialogue between Kaplan and Goren, the editor, in which Kaplan visited a bookstore in Brooklyn filled with “all sorts of mystical Hebrew writings. That was his passion—finding meaning in mystical Hebrew writings.” The introduction of “Hebrew mystical writings” fits a pattern of many of Cahn’s sermons available online at his church’s website. The term “mystery” is used rather frequently and consistently. He instructs his parishioners to “listen to the rabbis.” That he is influenced by Jewish mysticism is clear and this helps us understand the genesis of his book *The Harbinger*. It is consistent with the tradition of Jewish mysticism, something that has unquestionably influenced Cahn.

The tragedy of *The Harbinger* is not its message: America does need to repent. Sin and its ugly consequences are pervasive in America and when one reads Romans 1:18-34 one sees the universal consequences that apply to every person, tribe or nation that defies God. The downward spiral of those verses characterizes every civilization in human history that has rejected God. America is suffering those consequences not because it is in a special covenant relationship with God but because God has established His moral law and to defy it is to experience these consequences. For those of us who love God’s Word, *The Harbinger* is a sad book. Cahn has taken an obscure verse in one of the most magnificent chapters of the Bible, Isaiah 9, which applies to Messiah Jesus, and turned it into an allegory that talks about America. This is not a “mystery” that applies to America and there is no “Isaiah 9:10 Effect” as the book implies. In Isaiah 9:10, Cahn has not discovered some esoteric mystery that has been hidden for 2,700 years. He has taken a verse that has nothing to do with America and through the twisting of words, through stretching the meaning of words and through downright misrepresenting the

text of Scripture, caused people to believe directly or indirectly that God is speaking to America in this verse—and to our doom if we ignore it.

The Harbinger has a legitimate message—America needs to repent. It is a nation that God will hold accountable for the pervasive nature of sin in this country. But, that is the message of the Gospel itself. Humans are sinners; Jesus came to die for that sin; we appropriate that finished work of Jesus Christ by faith. The simple Gospel message is missing in *The Harbinger*—and that is a glaring omission, for it is the key to America’s repentance—not heeding an obscure mystery found in Isaiah 9:10 that has nothing to do with America.

See David James, *The Harbinger: Fact or Fiction?* I highly recommend this book, for it places *The Harbinger* and Jonathan Cahn in a context that both explains the appeal of this book to the spiritually shallow religiosity of America and why Cahn wrote the kind of book he did.