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2012 Annual Report and Reflections

A new year is always a good opportunity to look back in a special way, particularly for me because it is also the time I turn a year's leaf in age (I was born 5 minutes before New Year). I enter my 50th year in the Lord full of eager expectation, grateful to the Lord for the privilege of seeing what I see. In a few day's Bracha and I will also be celebrating our 45th wedding anniversary - no small feat on Bracha's part, being wedded to an individual as demanding and as uncompromising as me. I seldom engage in such ruminations, but have chosen to do so now.

God has been good to us. Contrary to confident expectations, certainly with regard to myself, our health is excellent and our energy levels are still high. I am scheduled for the first of two operations for the removal of cataracts toward the middle of February, and that is the worst complaint I could lodge - could, but should not, nor will I express such ingratitude. At the age of 69, I have had a full and satisfying life in the service of the Lord, his cause and his church. I have a wonderful wife and family and a checklist of prayers and aspirations that have been ticked off, with new items added. I have had the privilege of loving many people, and of many of the joys attached to that privilege. Loving is a glorious, God-like thing!

I enjoy the loving and faithful support of God's people, and the affection of my wife and family, all of which enables me to continue serving him and them with eager joy and gratitude. I am occupied with an extremely busy schedule full of exciting writing and teaching projects, all of which have to do with the wonderful grace of God, and involve more than ample opportunities to preach, as well as the privilege of seeing my family on a rather regular basis. Our home is lightened by the cheery presence of our foster-daughter, Rose. (How I wish Avital, Shlomit and Tamar were here, in Israel, with their families!).

My days are as long as ever, and as as full. My efforts are directed at what I believe are worthy goals: glorifying God by building up his church through the ministration of his Word. God ever draws near and my moments are repeatedly sweetened by intimations of God's amazing undeserved but generous kindness. How good in the God we adore!

I've been quite busy of the course of the last year. Apart from successfully completing a thesis for an MA on hermeneutics, I worked on the Romans commentary, toured the US and visited family (our three biological daughters and their families are there, including 7 grandchildren),

preached for our church, taught the young adults, completed editing the last volume of the OT in the Modern Hebrew Bible project and commenced initial work on two more writing projects: an introductory course on systematic theology (long in view, now coming to fruition) and a commentary on Micah as a part of my Devotional Commentary series in Hebrew and English.

I have not been able to hire the kind of help that would allow me to devote more of my time to research and writing, rather than to the nitty-gritty of the work, but my production rate has been acceptable, almost reasonable. Dealing with cataracts, and then with the consequences of the operation, has slowed me down for a bit, but I hope to pick up soon. I'm presently in the throes of planning our next annual trip to the US, during which my family wish to organize a reunion on occasion of my 70th birthday (December 2013). Bracha and I are looking forward to having the whole family together again, if even but for a short week.

I have the satisfaction of seeing many of my longings and national efforts here in Israel coming to fruition: a maturing church, increased hunger for the word of God among young believers, slow but steady steps toward a more coherent doctrinal stance on the one hand and a gracious, forgiving unity in the truth on the other, involvement in society without moral or doctrinal compromise, increased moral courage among believers in Israel ...

I can look back over the years at the development of the church of Messiah Jesus in Israel as few can, after all -- I have been stumbling after the Lord in Israel since 1963. Next year, if the Lord spares me, I will number 50 years since the Lord called me by his grace. When I was converted to Christ, the Hebrew speaking church in Israel numbered some 200-300. Today there are 10,000 of us, if not more. After decades in which the Israeli Christian church was insulated from the society in which it sprouted, it is wonderful to note practical involvement increasing among us.

I am amazed and full of praise to God the impressive generation of young men and women emerging in our churches and proving themselves in the various walks of life in which the nation's citizens engage themselves for their own sustenance, their families' comfort and in defense of the homeland. These young people evidence spiritual and moral courage, testify to their Faith by their lives and by their verbal professions openly and confidently. There is an increased compatibility between what they say and how they conduct themselves.

I thank God for this from the bottom of my heart. The early church impacted its environment above all by force of the faith she radiated in the course of daily life: slaves and slave-owners, Jews and Gentiles, men and women from all walks of life and social strata worshipped God together with no distinction, shared resources and meals, challenged and supported each other, and thus demonstrated how the Gospel transforms human societies from the bottom up. Roman society at the time longed for such a transformation, and God timed things so that the church arrived on the scene "in the fullness of time." Israel is increasingly ripe -- and needful -- of a revolution, of a spiritual and moral transformation of the very foundations of society. Otherwise, we shall be ripe for judgment, and if the prophetic word has any meaning for today, judgment is what we may fully expect.

My heart's prayer is that such moral and social involvement of the church in Israel will increase, but not at the expense of the call to our people in terms of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah to turn from themselves, from a headlong dash toward a beckoning, hedonistic nationalism, and from their mistaken religion to the Faith of Jesus, the exalted Son of God, the Savior of the world and the promised Savior of Israel. Israel's only future, the nation's only hope, has to do with Jesus and their fealty to him.

As you can see, my aspirations and dreams are still larger than earthly reality would justify, but none are beyond the reach of God's almighty grace, nor - I believe - beyond the scope of his Word. I am not too old to dream, but am definitely too old to day-dream. As I have often quoted, I still believe: "the vows of God are upon me, so I may not stay to play with shadows or pluck earthly flowers till I my work have done and rendered up account." Or, as Frost put it, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep - but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep." I am driven by a sense of urgency that is the product of my awareness of needs and of opportunities, my encroaching age and - I hope - the work of the Spirit.

Contrary to earlier assurances and in spite of the fact that I had undertaken formal studies at the urging of the College in order to be able to teach there, it presently looks unlikely that I will be teaching **Israel College of the Bible**. The College has indicated no practical interest. However, a group of churches is in the process of establishing another academic program, supplementary to courses offered by the College, and I am presently preparing a course titled **Introduction to Systematic Theology**.

As readers of **MaozNews** will know, one of the items on my list of projects was the composing of a Systematic Theology in Hebrew. I was therefore willing to undertake this writing project at once, even at the cost of setting my work on Romans aside for some time. So far, I have written about half of the course – eight out of 13 lectures. These will be honed in the process of instruction, slightly enlarged upon and then published in the form of a book.

I must also prepare an expository series on the book of Micah, the preparations for which involve extensive study of the book and an exegetical treatment thereof. Since most of the work involved in producing **a book on Micah** will have been done, I am completing the 10-15% more work that needs to be done, and will then have another commentary ready for the publisher. I doubt there will be time for me to translate it into English and offer it to an American publisher, but we'll see. Translation of my own work does not take up a good deal of time. However, I am eager to get back to **Romans** and to complete that project.

A book on Hermeneutics is still being considered, as are some other projects, but I am limited in my capacity by time, gift and the lack of more efficient methods and of help in administration and research.

Please pray with me that I will make the most of these remaining years. I could wish no more for myself - or for anyone else. Pray with me that God would glorify himself through the salvation of Israel, that he would allow peace to reign in the Middle East, and that Israel will blossom and bud and fill the face of the earth with fruit. If the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness? (Rom. 11:12) To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Eph. 3:20-21).

Have a blessed 2013! I wish you God's blessing in the course of this coming year, and much of his presence.

Understanding Syria

A dominant status in the Middle East necessitates control of or friendly relations with Syria. Syria's importance in the regional system is as ancient as history (the kingdoms of Aram and Assyria) and stems from its geostrategic location. Egypt is not really Arab. The only truly historic

Arab country facing Europe is Syria, serving as a bridge between Europe, Asia and, further south, Africa.

The current civil war in Syria has once again made the country a battleground between powerful international forces. Syria is now the axis of the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry. Recent convulsions in the Arab world repeatedly have brought religious Sunni Islamist parties to power, joined by the (much earlier and peaceful) Islamist revolution in Turkey that has been going on for the past decade, since Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist Party came to power. This axis is supported by the Sunni Islamist countries in the Persian Gulf (especially Saudi Arabia), for which religious ideology is always a central element in foreign policy.

The Shi'a axis has undergone important changes over the past decade, forming a Shi'ite Crescent, which includes Iran (not an Arab country), the new Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The linchpin of this crescent is Syria. While the majority of Syrians are Sunni, the Alawite minority, related to the Shi'a, has forged an alliance with Iran, which has lasted for over 15 years. Syria is now at a crossroads. The battle being waged there is not purely domestic; various players in the region aspire to have Syria in their camp.

Non-state organizations, such as Hezbollah (Shi'ite) and Al-Qaida Wahabi-Sunni) are also involved, as well as a rag-tag contingent of radical Islamists from every splinter group possible, each vying for supremacy in a country already divided between Alawities and Sunnis, Kurds and Druze, secular and religious. The toppling of Assad's regime and rise of a Sunni regime led by the Muslim Brotherhood remove Syria from the alliance with Iran, Syria returning to its natural place in the Arab world, as part of the Sunni axis.

A possible severing of Syria from the Shi'a axis with Iran would of course be good news. Such a return would not be unproblematic; it could have implications for Jordan's King Abdullah, who is at loggerheads with the Muslim Brotherhood opposition in his country. It would tighten the Sunni noose around Israel, further embolden Sunni Islam and possibly put an end to the likelihood of a peace agreement in the Middle East for some years to come. Not that all Sunni relations are void of strain. Egypt and Turkey presently vie for leadership roles in the Sunni world, and Egypt is strenuously opposed to the Hanbali version of Islam, common in Saudi Arabia.

In addition, it remains to be seen whether cultural Islam and religious Islam are able to forge a manageable relationship. While the convulsions in the Middle East have propelled religious Islam, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, into power because the Brotherhood was the only organized force on hand, ready to take over the reins of government, the convulsions were primarily the product of cultural, no-religious Muslims, who now feel their revolutions have been high-jacked. It is valid to ask whether the Brotherhood, should it lose an election, yield power, or if the so-called Arab Spring has simply replaced one kind of dictatorship for another. Events in Gaza and in Egypt do not bode well, nor do developments in Turkey.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Ismailia in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), a charismatic Arabic teacher with rare organizational abilities, perceived to this day in mythological terms. The movement was part of an Islamic wave that rose in opposition to the trends of secularization, Westernization and the nationalism prevalent in parliamentary monarchist Egypt. It remains and primarily anti-Western reactionary force among Sunni Muslims and, as such, a means by which religious and cultural identity is defended. As such, it firmly rejects "decadent Western culture," views Islam as the pinnacle of truth and is as firmly

committed to the implementation of an Islamist religious program for the whole of national life. The movement's major innovation was in espousing control over all aspects of life by a conservative view of sharia, the Islamic legal system, combined with a limited but coherent willingness to adapt to modern realities. It views "dawah," preaching and the establishment of a broad community base, the means by which it should seek to enlist support from the masses. The movement's greatest innovation was its organizational use of these concepts, thus increasing its public influence.

The Brotherhood spread quickly, mostly among the educated urban population, becoming the strongest extra-parliamentary force in Egypt before the 1952 revolution, and soon branched out beyond. It engaged the public in areas of pressing social need, organizing schools and clinics, promoting welfare and reaching out to the needy. It was suppressed during the reigns of Gamal Abdul Nasser and Anwar Sa'adat, although the latter permitted them some freedoms toward the end of his rule. The Brotherhood slowly worked its way into the Egyptian political system while gaining increased popularity with the Egyptian public.

In the relatively free elections held in 2005, the movement won a quarter of the seats in parliament by running "independent" candidates. The regime responded by "fixing" the 2010 the elections, so that no member of the Brotherhood would be elected. President Mubarak's neglect of Egypt's economy, rising unemployment, and corruption, his heavy hand and the popularity of the Brotherhood combined to lead to the revolution.

Elsewhere, the Brotherhood spread, taking on local characteristics, to Algeria and Sudan to the west, elsewhere in Africa, and to Jordan and Syria.

Israel's Elections

Elections in Israel are scheduled for January 22. Some time for the usual coalition horse-trading will pass before the new Government is formed. It could be anyone's guess who will lead the next Government and what its policies will be.

That takes some explaining. Israel is a parliamentary democracy, not a republic. A republic elects its leader (usually a President), in whom executive powers are vested, and he appoints his Government. Parliamentary elections mean that the people vote for parties, and the party that garners a parliamentary majority forms the Government. Such a majority may be achieved by gaining over 50% of the seats in parliament, or by forming coalitions with other parties that, together, create such a majority.

In the present elections, 18 (!) parties are competing for 120 seats in the Knesset (Israel's parliament). At least 5 or 6 of them will not cross the required threshold. Votes for them will be lost. There are 3 Arab parties, with each one presently expected to gain 4 seats each. The two Jewish Orthodox parties are expected to have 17 seats, 11 of which will belong to Shas – representing Occidental Orthodox Jews and the remainder representing European-influenced Orthodoxy. The main contenders are Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-Beiteynu (after uniting with former Foreign Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman's party), Shelly Yechimovitch's Labor Party, Naphtali Bennet's HaBayit HaYehudi, Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid and former Justice and then Foreign Affairs ministeress Tsipi Livni.

Netanyahu's party has veered far to the right, so that the Prime Minister now finds himself to the left of most of his party. Bennet's party has been so far the surprise of this election campaign, rising from 7 seats to a projection of 11-15, largely at the expense of Netanyahu's Likud-Beiteynu. Bennet is stringently to the right of Netanyahu, drawing most of his support

from the West Bank settlers and their avid supporters. Labor has adopted most of Netanyahu's stances as to negotiations with the Palestinians, but has focused on a rather radically left-wing social policy that appeals to some and is causing concern to others.

The remaining two parties are, to date, almost non-entities. Lapid was a journalist and a popular TV talk show host. He has never managed a company or made economic decisions beyond the scope of his family affairs. But he has expressed frustration with the economic and social running of the country, and has been joined by highly competent and well-proven individuals. Livni is known as "Mrs. Clean" (a pejorative in Israeli politics), a former Mossad agent who served in government posts. She has been joined by competent leaders of equal rank, experience and expertise as has Lapid With Netanyahu and Bennet on the right, and Labor on the left, Lapid and Livni are both running more or less on the same ticket and competing over the same voters. However, Livni seems to be the only contestant who might seriously be considered by the general public as Prime Minister in place of Netanyahu.

The Arab parties are unlikely to be invited into government; they are too nationalistic (as are most of the other – "Jewish" – parties). The religious parties have almost always been the kingmakers, and they hold the balance of power so that some have described Israeli elections a process whereby the public decides with whom the Orthodox will form the next Government...

The major issues in the present elections are: building further in the West Bank or engaging peace negotiations with the Palestinians; the Iranian nuclear threat; the pressing need to reduce the national budgeted deficient by some 12%; sharing the economic burden by encouraging the Orthodox to work while offering the Arab population better education and better economic opportunities; a new electoral system and governmental system; relations between Israel as a modern State and Judaism as represented by the Rabbinic establishment; freedom of the press, and the independence of the Judicial system. The latter two have repeatedly come under attack in the last few years, ominously, for not being "patriotic" enough – grave issues, each!

Family News

There is really not much to report on the home front. **Avital, Shlomit, Tamar** and their families are as happily and as busy with life as ever. The children are growing, and with them grow the challenges. The same is true of **Katya. Rose** spent 7 out of 21 intended weeks in South Africa, working as a salesperson. To my delight, she bravely refused to engage the methods often used in these circumstances and has returned home. She is now back at school and seeking part time work as a dental assistant. **Bracha and I** are enjoying each other and grateful to still have each other at our age and after 44 years of marriage (as of January 18).



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