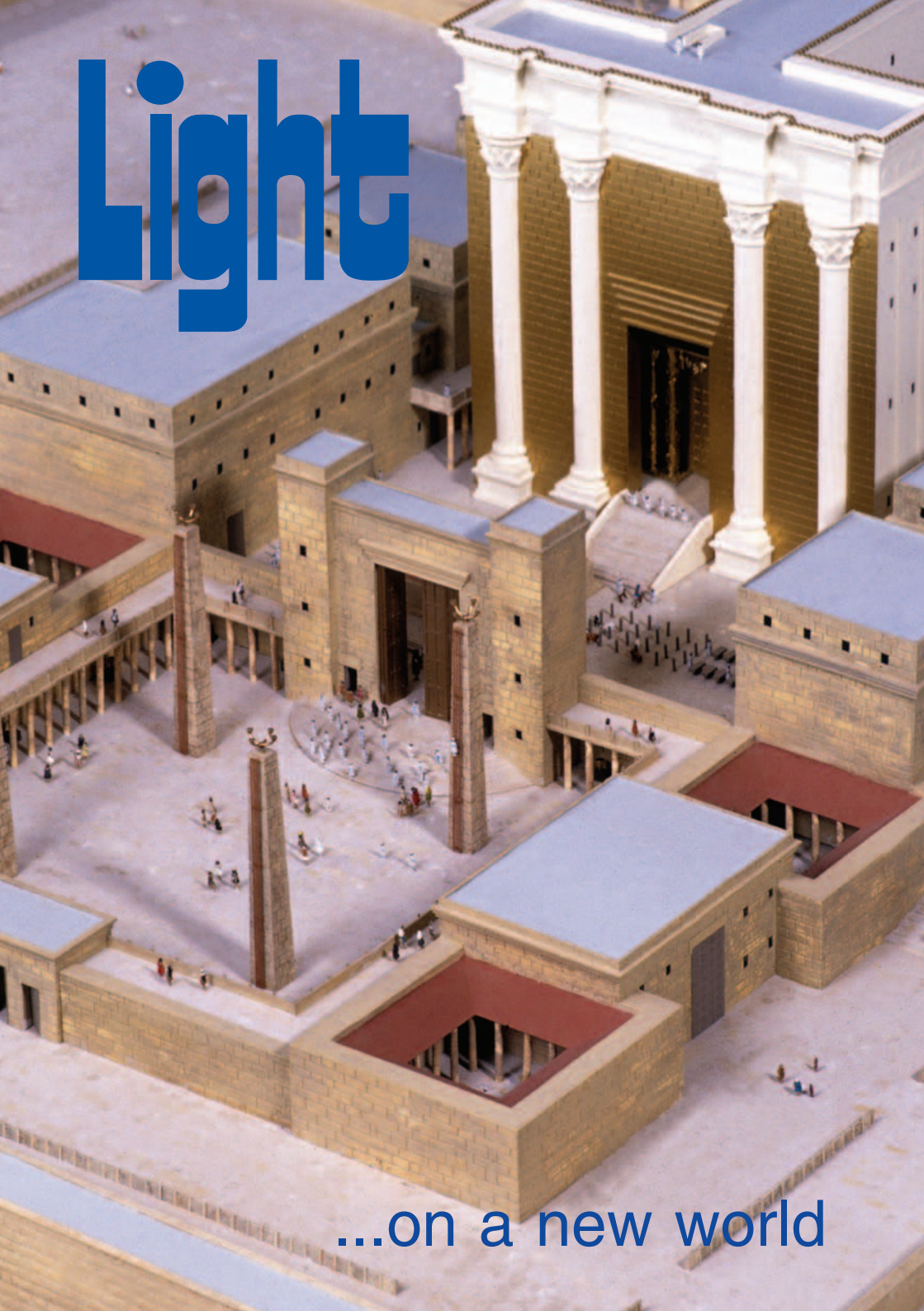
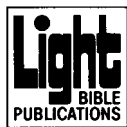


A detailed model of an ancient Egyptian temple complex. The scene features a large central courtyard with several tall obelisks. To the right is a large temple with a portico supported by white columns. In the foreground, there are smaller buildings with red-tiled roofs and a circular plaza where a group of people is gathered. The entire model is set on a light-colored base.

Light

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*Cover: Model of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem
(courtesy of Ritmeyer Archaeological Design)*

*Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV)
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What did Jesus Mean?

‘and being in torments in Hades’

THE story that Jesus told about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus has been used for centuries in the name of Christianity, to prove that at death immortal souls go either to heavenly paradise or the torments of hell, depending on how they conducted their mortal lives. However, an objective reading of the passage in Luke chapter 16 where this is recorded must conclude that, if it is a true description of life after death, its teaching is unique in the Bible and the details are quite absurd. How for example, could it seriously reduce the rich man’s torment, to have Lazarus dip his finger in water to cool his tongue?

For those who regard this story as a literal description of life after death, there are some serious problems:

- ❖ Neither heaven nor souls are mentioned.
- ❖ If being in ‘*Abraham’s bosom*’ is assumed to be heaven where Abraham comforts the faithful, this contradicts what is written about Abraham (and all the faithful) in Hebrews 11 verses 13, 39 and 40. Jesus also made it clear that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will be raised from the dead in the future. [Luke 20. 37]
- ❖ Souls are said to be the spirit of the person which leaves the material body in the grave. However, in this story, Lazarus is *carried* by the angel and physical body parts – *eyes, tongue, and finger* - are referred to.

- ❖ It is said by some that hell is the punishment for the wicked and heaven the reward of the righteous, but the story says nothing about the moral character of either the rich man or the beggar. If this story is to be taken literally, we must conclude that affluence in this life will mean punishment in the next; and that abject poverty guarantees our future bliss. How does this fit with the considerable wealth of Abraham and others who pleased God?

MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

The parable concludes with a repeated reference to *'Moses and the prophets'*. What did they write about death? When Jacob thought that his son Joseph was dead he mourned many days and he refused to be comforted, saying: *'...I shall go down into the **grave** to my son in mourning'*. [Genesis 37. 35] (The word **grave** is translated from the Hebrew word *'sheol'* - see footnote on page 7)

Why would Moses record Jacob as mourning, if his son had passed into paradise? The reality is that he knew he was no more. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

'For Sheol (the grave) cannot thank you. Death cannot praise you: those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your truth.'

[Isaiah 38. 18]

Moses and the prophets taught that the dead are in the grave and are unconscious. This is supported by other verses in the Old Testament. For example, Solomon wrote:

'For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts...All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust.' [Ecclesiastes 3. 19, 20]

WHY DID JESUS TELL THIS PARABLE?

‘There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.’ [Luke 16.19-21]



‘So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.’

[Luke 16.22, 23]

There is no teaching in the Bible to support the idea of an everlasting soul that, when we die, goes either to a place of eternal fiery punishment or the bliss of living in heaven. So why did Jesus tell this elaborate story?

Although Luke doesn’t call it a parable, the opening words ‘*There was a certain rich man...*’ [Luke 16.19] are identical to those in Luke 16 verse 1 and similar to those in Luke 12 verse 16, both of which are clearly parables. The parables in chapter 16, concerning the unjust steward and the rich man and Lazarus, were directed at the religious leaders of the Jews called the Pharisees: ‘*Now the Pharisees, who were*

lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided him. And he said to them ...'. [Luke 16. 14, 15]

Note also in verse 16 the reference to '*the law (of Moses) and the prophets*', a phrase we have already considered in relation to the story of the rich man and Lazarus. What then is the connection between the Pharisees and this parable?

We have already shown what is taught in the Old Testament about death. During the period between the Old and New Testaments, after the return from captivity in Babylon, the Jews began to adopt ideas that the dead were active in '*sheol*'. Reference occurs in Jewish writing of the period to the '*Bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*'. This thinking is reflected in the belief of Jewish martyrs during the Judean wars circa 170-130 BC who died expecting that '*...after our death in this fashion Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will receive us and all our forefathers will praise us*'. [4 Maccabees 13.17]

This departure from Old Testament teaching about death was the result of Greek thinking originating from Plato, influencing Jewish religious belief. Philo of Alexandria, an influential 1st century Jewish philosopher, assumes throughout his works the Greek thinking of a complete separation of body and soul. Flavius Josephus the 1st century Jewish historian states:

'Now for the Pharisees...they believe that souls have an immortal vigour in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life.' [Antiquities 18.1.3]

These erroneous beliefs of the Pharisees about death and immortal souls are graphically illustrated by Josephus' description of Hades (Greek equivalent of Sheol) in his '*Discourse to Greeks concerning Hades*':

‘Hades is a place in the world...A subterraneous region, where the light of this world does not shine...a place of custody of souls...In this region there is a certain place set apart, as a lake of unquenchable fire...but the just are guided...unto a region called the Bosom of Abraham. But as to the unjust they are dragged by force to the left hand, by the angels allotted for punishment...a terrible and exceeding great prospect of fire...even hereby are they punished; for a chaos deep and large is fixed between them; insomuch that a just man that hath compassion upon them, cannot be admitted, nor can one that is unjust, if he were bold enough to attempt it, to pass over it.’
[*Josephus Complete Works, translated by W. Whiston page 637*]

Does this sound familiar?

WHAT IS THE MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE?

In his parable Jesus deliberately represents the beliefs of the Pharisees in such a way as to highlight their errors. Not only theirs, but also those of the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection. [Matthew 22. 23]



From Hades the rich man appeals to his ancestor Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers against suffering a similar fate to himself. The rich man ‘*clothed in purple and fine linen*’ represents the Jewish High Priest, Caiaphas, and the ‘*five brothers*’, his five brothers-in-law who all held the High Priest’s office at some point, who were all Sadducees. The High Priest’s garments were made of fine linen and purple yarn. [Exodus 39. 2, 3, 5, 24, 29]

When the Pharisees and Sadducees went to John the Baptist he warned them: ‘...do not think to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”’, [Matthew 3. 9] To Jesus they claimed: “Abraham is our father”, to which he replied: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham”. [John 8. 39]

In the parable, Abraham points out that these ‘brothers’ have the warnings of Moses and the prophets to hear. Earlier in his ministry Jesus had challenged these Jews with the writings of Moses:

‘For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?’ [John 5.46.47]

But the rich man pleaded that it would make a difference ‘if one goes to them from the dead’. Shortly afterwards, Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, was raised from the dead, and what was the response of the Chief Priests?

‘But the chief priests took counsel that they might also put Lazarus to death, because on account of him many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus.’ [John 12. 10, 11]

Abraham’s reply in the parable was certainly true: ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’. [Luke 16. 31]

So it was when the soldiers guarding the tomb of Jesus reported to the chief priests what they had witnessed of the resurrection, that ‘they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole him away while we slept”’. [Matthew 28. 12, 13]

Peter, preaching to Jews on the day of Pentecost had this to say about the words of David in Psalm 16: ‘he...spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that his soul was not left in Hades, nor did

his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses'. [Acts 2. 31, 32] The body of Jesus was in Hades (the grave or the tomb) for 3 days and then rose to everlasting life. No-one would suggest that Jesus was in 'torments' in 'fire'!

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the story of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable based on the absurd beliefs of the Pharisees about death, corrupted from Old Testament teaching by the influence of pagan Greek philosophy. Elements of the parable were a direct challenge to the unbelief of the Pharisees and Sadducees, especially the High Priest's family. They refused to accept the teaching about Jesus in the Old Testament writings that they professed to follow, and would not be persuaded even by the evidence of his resurrection. It **does not** teach that after death some go to a place of fiery torment.

The return of Jesus from heaven to raise the dead bodily from the grave, to give everlasting life to his true followers and then to rule the world with them in righteousness, is the only true Gospel message of salvation from eternal death.

This is the Bible hope for the future – is it your hope too?

Simon Perfitt
Yorkshire, UK

Footnote on meaning of 'sheol', 'hades' and hell (see page 2)

The Hebrew word '*sheol*' occurs 65 times in the Old Testament and is translated into English as '*grave*', '*hell*' or '*pit*'. It means a '*covered or unseen place*'. It is derived from a root word meaning '*to make hollow*'. The Greek equivalent in the New Testament is '*Hades*' which occurs 10 times. The English word '*hell*' is from a Germanic root meaning '*to cover*' – as in '*helmet*', a cover for the head. Biblically *Sheol* and *Hades* refer to the grave where the dead are unconscious. [*Psalm 31. 17*]



From our Mail Bag

A reader has asked if it is only those who have been baptised that are given eternal life and what happens to those who believe in Christ, try to follow the commandments but die before becoming baptised?

Clearly there are two elements to this question and both are connected with God's offer of salvation. Firstly, baptism appears to be a key element in the process and therefore the question arises – are knowledge and belief sufficient without baptism?

After his resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples and told them to go out into the world and preach the gospel, adding *'He who believes and is baptized will be saved'*. [Mark 16. 15, 16] This instruction was confirmed by the Apostle Peter in his address at Pentecost. When asked the question: *'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'* he replied: *'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins'*. [Acts 2. 37, 38]

So the message is quite clear as was further demonstrated by the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian treasury official. He was returning home from a visit to Jerusalem to worship – but that was not enough. After Philip had explained to him the role of Jesus in the Divine plan of salvation, he recognised the need for baptism as an essential requirement and was baptised. [Acts 8.26-40]

Two chapters further on in Acts, there is a similar situation involving Peter and a Roman centurion called Cornelius. He was also

a God-fearing man full of good works and prayed regularly. Yet he had to meet Peter and after an informative discussion about Jesus and salvation he submitted to baptism: '*And he (Peter) commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*'. [Acts 10. 48]

Baptism is a very symbolic act, associating the individual with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and is a pledge to God who saves. In a letter to the believers at Rome, the Apostle Paul reminded them of the meaning of this simple act of obedience:

'...do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.' [Romans 6. 3, 4]

This passage can be linked with the words of Paul, where he says that when Jesus returns to the earth '*the dead **in Christ** will rise first*'. [1 Thessalonians 4. 16] '*The dead **in Christ***' are the same as those described previously as being '*baptized into Christ*', who are the baptised believers.

It is very clear therefore that to be '***in Christ***' means that a person must believe and be baptised for the remission of their sins and so become '*born again*'. We find this expressed in some words of Jesus in answer to a question from Nicodemus: '*Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"*' and again to emphasise the point Jesus repeats himself: '*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*'. [John 3. 3-5] So it was made clear to Nicodemus that it was essential through baptism to be '*born again*'.

Now regarding the position of those who believe, but die before they have the opportunity to be baptised, it is important that we do not speculate about matters that are not clarified by Scriptural teaching and

this includes the position of those who die before being baptised. If they seriously intended to commit themselves to a covenant relationship with God, but circumstances suddenly ended their life, there may be a reason for this which only God knows. This will be revealed at the return of Christ when those who are responsible are called to his judgement seat. It is God who calls men and women to salvation and we are in no position to question Him.

On the other hand if a person really believes and then decides not to be baptised although they have the opportunity to do so, it could be concluded that they have deliberately delayed their decision. This could be interpreted as a lack of commitment to obey God's command and the clear teaching of Jesus and the apostles about the need for baptism.

There will however be those raised to judgement and eternal life who were not baptised because they demonstrated their faith in God prior to the first advent of Jesus. These were looking for the coming of Christ (the Messiah). Some of them are listed in Hebrews chapter 11; men and women of faith like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses and David to mention a few, never received the promised reward of eternal life in God's kingdom on earth and we are told why:

‘...these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.’

[Hebrews 11. 39, 40]

The reason why the believers down through the ages are still waiting for eternal life and a place in God's kingdom is that the day appointed for this to happen has not yet arrived – for it will be heralded by the return of Jesus. We believe this is very near but meanwhile there is time and opportunity in which to dedicate ourselves to Christ through baptism and prepare for that great event.

Correspondence Secretary



The Development of the 1st Century Church

3. Persecution at Jerusalem

THE events at Pentecost gave the early church a strong impetus for growth. With the possession of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were able to work more effectively to spread the gospel and to perform miracles. The pace of development speeded up but not without some difficult challenges to be faced. In Acts chapter 3 we read about Peter and John going into the temple in Jerusalem (see cover picture). At the entrance they passed a disabled man who had been lame from birth. He was begging and asked them to give him something. The response was something more valuable than money!

A NOTABLE MIRACLE

When Jesus sent out his disciples he told them to *‘preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. And he said to them, “Take nothing for the journey, neither staffs nor bag nor bread nor money; and do not have two tunics apiece”’*. [Luke 9 .2, 3]

Peter replied to the man begging for alms: *‘Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk’*. [Acts 3.6] Peter helped the man get up, his disability left him and he entered the temple precincts. He was well

known and the people there were amazed to see him healed and 'walking, leaping, and praising God'. [Acts 3.8]

Peter did not just perform this miracle to heal the lame man but because it would also give an opportunity to preach the gospel. He attracted the peoples' attention by asking: '*Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this?*' [Acts 3.12] By calling them '*Men of Israel*' he showed that he was speaking to them as Jews. He did so because he had a very specific message for them. He reminded them of the death of Jesus: '*The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses*'. [Acts 3.13-15]

It was faith in Jesus that had healed the lame man. Those in the temple would have been rather taken aback by these comments, as Peter seemed to be accusing them of responsibility for the death of Jesus while also saying that through Jesus the man had recovered. Peter was deliberately being provocative in order to teach an important lesson. He continued: '*Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all his prophets, that the Christ would suffer; he has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*'. [Acts 3.17-19]

Jesus' death and resurrection was a key part of God's purpose. It had to happen for the salvation of sinful mankind to be possible. The Jews that called for the crucifixion of Jesus, and their leaders who arranged it, did so, Peter said, in ignorance of God's purpose. This is an important lesson for us today. Throughout history Jews have been persecuted and the claim has been made against them that they murdered Jesus. Peter said that those involved in that were acting in

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 1ST CENTURY CHURCH

God's purpose. He appealed to the Jews in Jerusalem saying that the time had now come to put those things behind them and to recognise Jesus for what he was – the long promised Messiah sent by God *'to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities'*. [Acts 3.26]

THE APOSTLES ARRESTED

The effect of these events was to convince many people of the gospel truth. Some 5,000 believed but the actions of the apostles did not please the temple officials who had them arrested and put in prison until the next day. The Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, was brought together. Bringing the apostles before them they asked *'By what power or by what name have you done this?'* [Acts 4.7] Peter responded robustly:

"let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief corner-stone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." [Acts 4.10-12]

This gave the Sanhedrin a problem, as compared with their members, the apostles were uneducated men yet they spoke with confidence and boldness. The lame man had clearly been healed and the only explanation was that Peter and John were responsible. The Sanhedrin knew that, if they let them continue preaching and performing miracles, then their own authority would be undermined. The people would probably turn against them seeing them as ineffective rulers. They decided to ban any teaching in the name of Jesus but they had not expected the confidence of the apostles, who responded: *'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'*. [Acts 4.19, 20]

Their confidence was strengthened and they prayed for boldness to preach in the face of the threats from the Sanhedrin. [Acts 4.29] The work resulted in a multitude of believers. We are told that they were all of one mind and were so united in their work that they held their possessions in common for the use of all. This enabled them to help the less well off and to achieve some equality between them.

ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA

This sharing of possessions resulted in sad events that provide a strong lesson about human nature. A married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, sold something that they owned. Ananias, with his wife's knowledge, brought the proceeds to the apostles. He gave the money as if it was the whole proceeds of the sale despite it being only part – the couple had retained some of it for their own use. Peter rebuked Ananias strongly: *'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God'.* [Acts 5.3-4]

We note from Peter's words that it was not essential for all possessions to be shared. Ananias and Sapphira could have kept the possession, or the money, or they could have said that they only intended to put a part of it into the common pool. Their sin was implying that they were giving all the proceeds while holding some back. The result was immediate – Ananias fell down dead. Three hours later Sapphira came in, not knowing about Ananias. Peter asked her if they sold the possession for the amount that Ananias had said and Sapphira confirmed that they did thus making herself party to the deception. She also fell down dead, making the witnesses very fearful.

These events seem harsh but are there to show the way we must serve God. Our service must be wholehearted – there is no room for half measures. We either believe in God's word and His promises or we do not. We either have faith in the work of Jesus as our saviour

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through his death and resurrection or we do not. We cannot half believe, or half serve. Jesus said: *'No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon'.* [Matthew 6.24]

THE APOSTLES IMPRISONED

After these events the apostles continued preaching and many people joined them. Sick people were brought to Peter from Jerusalem and other towns for healing. This was just what the Sanhedrin did not want. The apostles continued to preach a message of hope to any who would trust in Jesus. Their words were very different from those heard in the temple and synagogues where people learned of the Law of Moses from the Old Testament and followed the many rituals of the Law – rituals made even more rigid by the overzealousness of the leaders. True religion had been changed into something that offered hardship but little hope.

In contrast the apostles preached a message of real hope. They showed that Jesus, who had been rejected by the Jewish leaders, was the Messiah. They showed how he fulfilled Old Testament prophecies and confidently taught how further prophecies would be fulfilled in the future.

The religious leaders did not want to listen. *'Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him ...and they were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison.'*[Acts 5.17-18] They arrested and imprisoned the apostles without trial but little did they know that they were paving the way for the hand of God to work again: *'But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life." And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught'.* [Acts 5.19-21]

The apostles were not going to be deterred by being imprisoned. God had released them and, without fear, they went straight to the temple to continue preaching. What happened next, though serious, also seems to have some humour about it. We read that *'the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, "Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!"'* [Acts 5.21-23]

What did those officers think when they found the prison securely locked and guarded but their key prisoners gone? Even as the High Priest and the temple elders met to question them they were in the very place they were not meant to be – in the temple preaching. The anger on hearing this news must have been palpable but it would be tinged with some fear as the events seemed to be getting out of control. The temple Captain is told to fetch the apostles and they are asked: *'Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood on us!'* [Acts 5.28]

The answer given was not the one that they wanted to hear: *'Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to his right hand to be Prince and Saviour; to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him"'*. [Acts 5.29-32] Then they spoke again with boldness and set out the gospel to the leaders. Peter was putting into practice the advice that later he gave to others:

'... "the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And his ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those

who do evil.” And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. “*And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.*” But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evil-doers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.’ [1 Peter 3.12-16]

THE ADVICE OF GAMALIEL

It would have been wonderful if the High Priest had heeded these words, but he did not. Instead the furious Jewish elders plotted to kill the apostles. However, in God’s wisdom, there was a man present called Gamaliel who showed commendable common sense. He was a Pharisee and a doctor of the law. He urged caution quoting other apparently zealous men who stirred up the population as the apostles seemed to be doing. The advice of Gamaliel was:

‘Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves as to what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – lest you even be found to fight against God.’ [Acts 5.35-39]

This was masterly advice, typical of a lawyer who saw that acting against the apostles could create unrest among the people. He also recognised that if the apostles were putting forward their own teachings without substance, then the crowd would soon recognise the falsehood.

He also saw that if the apostles truly taught the word of God then there was nothing the Council could do against it and succeed. In this he unwittingly saw the reality of the situation and through his wise words was paving the way for the gospel to spread.

The Council heeded Gamaliel's words and reduced the punishment of the apostles to a painful beating and also commanded that there must be no further preaching. How did the apostles react? We read that *'they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease from teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ'.* [Acts 5.41, 42]

The hand of God was at work through all of these events and by these means the development of the early church continued to progress. In summary, we can draw key lessons from this period:

- ❖ Although the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus no blame should be laid against them for this because it was the purpose of God that was being fulfilled by them.
- ❖ God works out His purpose through men and women of His choice though they may not be aware of it.
- ❖ Jesus was given by God to bring forgiveness of sins and salvation from death through his death and resurrection.
- ❖ Service to God and belief in His word must be wholehearted – God does not accept half measures. It must also be honest and open as God does not accept deception.
- ❖ Jesus' followers should always be ready to give an answer concerning their faith and be prepared to suffer persecution in order to serve God.

John Hitches
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Nations in Prophecy

Israel (Part 2)

IN the last issue we considered a large number of Bible prophecies about Israel from books as diverse as Genesis, Deuteronomy, Samuel and Isaiah. We saw how important to God Israel is, and how the future of the whole earth is closely linked with the future of Israel. We saw how their defeats and their victories, their scattering throughout the earth and eventual return to their land have all been predicted hundreds and in some cases thousands of years before their fulfilment. We also noted that in spite of all the hardships and disasters that the Israelites would suffer, God would make sure that they would remain a distinct race of people.

In this article we will look at prophecies about Israel in the rest of the Bible, including prophecies given by Jesus himself. We begin with a book which contains more prophecies about Israel than any other.

PROPHECIES IN EZEKIEL

Ezekiel was a Jewish priest taken captive by the Babylonians. His prophecy records further divine punishments on the nation of Israel, of which Ezekiel chapters 5 and 22 are good examples. The book also includes prophecies about the return of the Jews to their land and tells us about events which will follow their return in the 'latter days', events which are yet to be fulfilled. The prophecy gives God's motivation for allowing their return: *'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Because the enemy has said of you, 'Aha! The ancient heights have become our possession...' I have spoken in my burning jealousy against the rest of the nations and against all Edom, who gave my land to*

themselves as a possession...I will multiply men upon you, all the house of Israel, all of it”’. [Ezekiel 36.2-10]

The founding Charter of one of the Palestinian movements which is opposed to Israel contains the following clause:

‘The Islamic Resistance Movement believes that the land of Palestine is an Islamic Waqf consecrated for future Moslem generations until Judgement Day. It, or any part of it, should not be squandered; it or any part of it, should not be given up...the same goes for any land the Moslems have conquered by force, because during the times of (Islamic) conquest, the Moslems consecrated these lands to Moslem generations till the Day of Judgement...Any procedure in contradiction to Islamic Sharia, where Palestine is concerned, is null and void.’(A translation of Article 11 of the Hamas Covenant 1998)

The claims of Arab nations to the land now occupied by Israel are a fulfilment of prophecy and a prime motivator behind God’s decision to allow His people to return to the land they left so long ago.

The second reason for this latter day return to the land is for the benefit of people from foreign nations: *“And I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD”, says the Lord GOD, “when I am hallowed in you before their eyes”.* [Ezekiel 36.23] The return of Israel to their land after such a long period of time serves as a telling witness to the existence of God and to the importance of His people.

As for the Jewish people, they were to return to the land, but they were not to do this as part of any great religious revival (unlike the return from the earlier Babylonian captivity). Ezekiel continues: *‘For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land’.* Eventually there will be a religious

revival as foretold by the prophet: *'Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you...you will keep my judgements and do them'*. [Ezekiel 36. 24-27]

THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES

The next chapter in Ezekiel contains two visions which portray in more symbolic language the return of Israel to their land. The first of these visions is the famous vision of the valley of dry bones where God creates from the dry bones a great army described as *'the whole house of Israel'*. In the second vision Ezekiel was commanded to write the names used to describe the two kingdoms of Israel on two sticks and join them together to symbolise a time of unity in the future, when Israel are back in their land.

The first part of this prophecy has been fulfilled. Against all the odds, the nation of Israel returned to their land, with the State of Israel being declared in 1948. The nation of Israel has been able to establish itself as the dominant power in the region, but they cannot as yet be described as a truly godly nation. God has not yet *'sprinkled them with clean water'* and they are still a long way from being fully united. The state of everlasting peace described at the end of chapter 37 is yet to be fulfilled.

A CONFEDERACY OF NATIONS TO ATTACK ISRAEL

The next chapter predicts that a confederacy of powerful nations will descend upon Israel *'from your place out of the far north'* [Ezekiel 38. 15] and it is at this time of great distress for the Jews that God will directly intervene: *'I will rain down on him, on his troops, and on the many peoples who are with him, flooding rain, great hailstones, fire, and brimstone'*. [Ezekiel 38. 22]

This confederacy clearly originates from the far north of Israel and has been connected with Turkey, Russia and her neighbours. The

allies of this coalition are more readily identifiable and include Persia (modern Iran), Ethiopia and Libya. [Ezekiel 38 .5]

Russian interest in Israel lessened during the Soviet era but has increased in recent years, partly as a result of the huge numbers of Russian Jews emigrating to Israel and partly due to a renewed partnership between the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church, which has historic claims on various holy sites in Jerusalem. Both Vladimir Putin and ex-prime minister Sergei Stepashin have been



Middle East map showing nations of
Ezekiel 38

personally involved in some of the moves to increase Russian involvement in Jerusalem (see the Economist article for 19th December 2009 for further information). Whether or not Russia is the prime-mover in the great northern invasion of Israel remains to be seen but it is clear that there is going to be at least one further war in the Middle East, involving many nations. This will be the trigger for divine intervention, to defeat the invaders and to save His people Israel.

The remaining chapters of this remarkable prophecy predict that a great temple will be built at Jerusalem, to form the centre of world-wide worship of God. (See Ezekiel chapters 40 to 48)

Before we leave Ezekiel, there is one more important quotation in words addressed to Zedekiah, the last king of Israel: *'Now to you, O profane, wicked prince of Israel, whose day has come, whose iniquity shall end, thus says the Lord GOD: "Remove the turban, and take off the crown; nothing shall remain the same....Overthrown, overthrown, I will make it overthrown! It shall be no longer, until he comes whose*

right it is, and I will give it to him”’. [Ezekiel 21. 25-27] From the New Testament we learn that the identity of the future king of Israel is Jesus Christ.

PROPHECIES IN MICAH

Micah lived at the same time as Isaiah and his short book includes similar passages to those found in Isaiah, possibly to emphasise their certainty to what was by that time a somewhat sceptical audience. Micah chapter 4 begins with the same wonderful words as Isaiah chapter 2: *‘...out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’*. [Micah 4. 2, 3]

These two prophecies clearly relate to the future when the Lord will enforce His will, resulting in the destruction of weapons of warfare and an end to military training and armed conflict. This future time of peace for the earth, when even *‘nations afar off’* shall renounce war is linked closely with the future of Israel because the same chapter describes this coming age as *‘the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem’*. [Micah 4. 8]

PROPHECIES IN ZECHARIAH

Zechariah was one of the prophets who returned from Babylon during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. He wrote: *‘Behold, I will save my people from the land of the east and from the land of the west; I will bring them back, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem’*. [Zechariah 8. 7, 8] Here was a prophet who had personally returned from the Babylonian exile, predicting that there would be another time when the Jews would return to their land. The prophecy goes on to speak of a happy time when anti-Semitism (racial hatred of Jewish people) will have finally ended: *‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you”*’. [Zechariah 8. 23] The end of hatred for the Jewish people most clearly

identifies this prophecy as yet unfulfilled because throughout history the Jews have been hated and persecuted like no other race.

Zechariah chapter 9 contains the notable prophecy about Israel's king coming into Jerusalem riding on *'the foal of a donkey'* [Zechariah 9.9] a prophecy that Jesus consciously applied to himself in New Testament times (see Matthew 21.1-9). It then goes on to say that this king would one day reign over the whole earth: *'...He shall speak peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth'*. [Zechariah 9. 10]

Zechariah chapter 10 again describes the return from captivity but it is chapter 12 which really captures attention. Firstly we are told that Jerusalem, Israel's capital city, would endure a siege, a prophecy fulfilled many years later when the Romans captured and ultimately destroyed the city. But little prospect is held out for those nations who would bear rule over the city after the Jews had been removed from the land. The city is described as being a *'very heavy stone...all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces'*. [Zechariah 12. 3] This is a very long term prophecy because the Jews would be absent from their land for nearly 1,900 years. During that time Jerusalem has passed from the control of one power to another and even to this very day Jerusalem has proved the accuracy of the prophecy with the city still proving to be an insurmountable stumbling block to achieving lasting peace in the region.

The chapter describes one final attempt by nations to attack Jerusalem, but this time *'the LORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem...it shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem.'* [Zechariah 12. 8, 9] But then, a remarkable event will take place: *'...I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for him as one grieves for a first-born'*. [Zechariah 12. 10] This can only be referring to a future time when Jesus, the one the Jews *'pierced'* is

finally accepted by them as their saviour. One can only imagine the remorse that will be felt at that time, but the next chapter continues on this theme, with a promise that Jesus will make it possible for the people to be cleansed from sin.

The final chapter of this amazing prophecy recounts the great and dreadful battle when God, through Jesus will destroy those nations which have tried to take control of Jerusalem. There are obvious parallels here with Ezekiel chapter 38.

JESUS AS A PROPHET

Jesus is introduced to us in Matthew 1 verse 1 as *'the son of David, the son of Abraham'*. In this way, Jesus is directly linked to Israel's founding father and her most illustrious king. Luke records the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary telling her that *'you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and call his name JESUS....the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end'*. [Luke 1. 31-33] This is an unmistakeable prophecy that Jesus Christ will one day reign over Israel forever on David's throne. It is abundantly clear then, just from these two quotations alone, that Jesus (and the New Testament for that matter) is inseparably linked with Israel and with the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament.

The literal nature of the coming kingdom is further emphasised when Jesus promised the twelve disciples that they would reign with him: *'...Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'*. [Matthew 19. 28]

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus' disciples expected that this kingdom would be immediately established, for they said: *'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'* Jesus replied that

it is God alone who determines when such events will take place. [Acts 1. 6, 7] It should be noted however, that Jesus in deferring to his Father for the timescale, implicitly endorses his disciples' assertion that one day the kingdom will be restored to Israel.

The most significant prophecy given by Jesus himself clearly signals that a number of very significant events would take place before he would be accepted by the Jews as their king. This prophecy was given on the Mount of Olives, directly opposite Herod's temple in Jerusalem (see cover picture) and for its detail right down to the use of the eagle symbol (see previous article in Volume 22.4) and the breadth of history is very similar to Moses' great prophecy in Deuteronomy chapters 28 and 30. Jesus predicted that the temple at Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Romans, that there would be many false Christs and the genuine believers would suffer a time of persecution. However one day Jesus would return in a manner so unmistakeable it is likened to the effect of lightning. This remarkable prophecy, sometimes called the Mount Olivet Prophecy can be found in three of the Gospel records (Matthew chapter 24, Mark chapter 13 and Luke chapter 21).



Jesus and his disciples on the Mount of Olives

PROPHECIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

These letters were written by Paul, Peter and others to early Christian believers, many of whom were from a non-Jewish background, so it's not surprising to find much less by way of prophecies relating purely to Israel. There are however many prophecies about the return of Jesus Christ to the earth. For example, both the first and second letters to the Thessalonians mention the return of Jesus in every chapter. In spite of the slight change in emphasis we should not conclude that the prophecies and promises relating to Israel have in any way been superseded. The writer of the majority of the letters, the Apostle Paul, gave testimony towards the end of his life that he was at that time in prison chained to a Roman soldier *'for the hope of Israel'*. [Acts 28. 20]

The letters are useful in explaining the relationship between Jews and non-Jewish believers in a world which was about to experience massive changes. Paul's letter to the Romans in particular explains that Israel had been separated from God for a certain period, but this had made it possible for others to benefit from God's promises. For example Paul explains that *'hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in'*. [Romans 11.25]



Jews praying at the Western Wall

The Jews as a whole, in rejecting Jesus, have suffered a kind of spiritual blindness which continues to this very day. But the prophetic part of Paul's statement predicts that this '*hardening*' or '*blindness*' (KJV) will not last forever, just until the '*fullness of the Gentiles*' has come in to the same relationship with God enjoyed by the Jews. The '*Gentiles*' is a word used to refer to non-Jews and the word '*fullness*' refers to a vessel being filled up. It is as if God has determined a certain number of people from other nations should be given an opportunity to benefit from the promises given to Israel and the Jewish people were to be '*blinded*' until this point is reached.

CONCLUSION

What began as a short survey has turned into a fairly lengthy two part article and even this has only looked briefly at the detailed prophecies concerning God's people, the nation of Israel. We hope that it has demonstrated just how numerous the prophecies relating to Israel are and how the true Christian Gospel taught in the Bible is closely linked with the future of Israel. It will be seen that we are already well advanced through God's prophetic framework of events leading up to the establishment of the worldwide kingdom of God.

We are greatly blessed to be able to open history books and see how many of the events predicted in the Bible have come to pass. We can therefore have even greater confidence in the certainty of God's Word and we can be assured that the times of the Gentiles are coming to an end and Jesus Christ will soon return to reveal himself to Israel. A time of great trouble is coming but this will be followed by a time of everlasting joy for all those who, in the words of the prophet Isaiah are among '*the ransomed of the LORD*'. [Isaiah 51.11]

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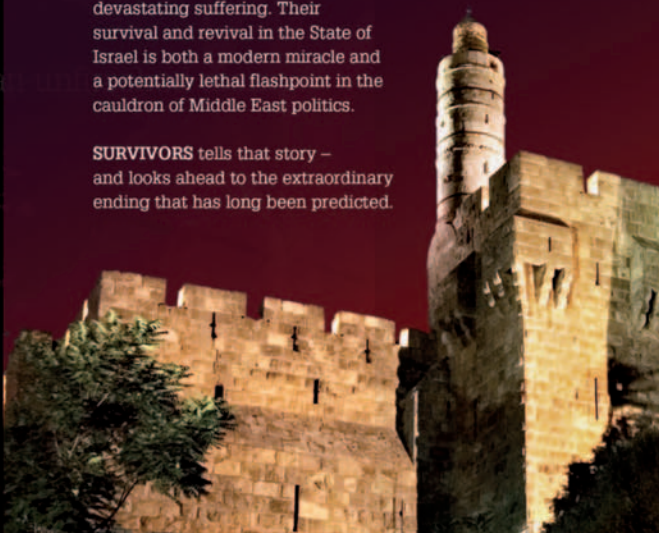
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"If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you..."

PSALM 137

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