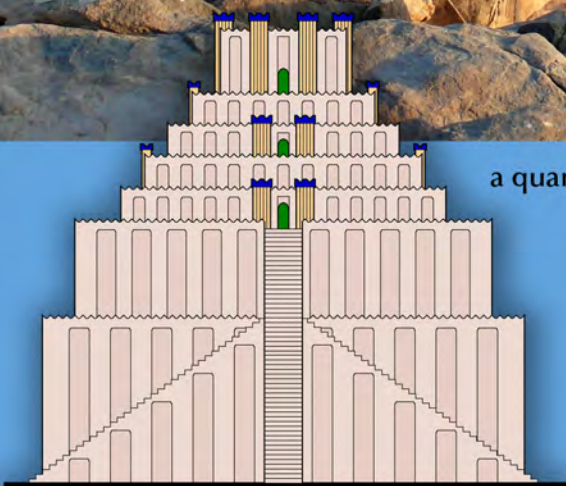


Light

...on a new world



a quarterly magazine focusing on the Bible
and its message for today

Joshua ☀

The Tower of Babel ☀

The Kingdom of God ☀

VOLUME 24.3

Published for the Bexley Dawn
Christadelphians by:

Light Bible Publications

PO Box 362

Dartford

DA1 9GT, England

Editor: Colin Dryland

Correspondence: John Carpenter

Design: Roy Toms

ISSN 0047-4657

The Christadelphians believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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Cover picture:

Pilgrims visit the traditional site of Mt. Sinai. Israel wandered in this area for 40 years before Joshua led them into the Promised Land – see page 22
INSET: ‘Etamananki’ drawing – see pages 11,12

Note:

All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV) except where another version is indicated after the text.

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WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

‘God is not the God of the dead but of the living’

During the three and a half year ministry of Jesus he endured much opposition, chiefly from the rulers of the Jews who are described as the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. These religious rulers of the Jewish nation were in their turn responsible to their Roman masters and were very protective of their position, which they sustained with great pride and determination.

Because Jesus was teaching doctrines which were new to their ears and because the people followed Jesus in crowds, these rulers became jealous of him and

tried to trick him into saying things which the people would not like or that could make him an offender of the Law and so cause him to be removed from the scene. When challenged, Jesus was always able to reason from the Scriptures and put his opponents to silence. To read his replies to their loaded questions in the gospel records is fascinating and very instructive.

The words that form the title of this article are found in three gospel records (Matthew 22.23-33, Mark 12.18-27 and Luke 20.27-38). You are encouraged to read these for yourself.

A hypothetical question

The Sadducees did not believe in a bodily resurrection and the purpose of the hypothetical example they put

forward and the question they asked was designed to confound Jesus who taught that there will be a resurrection. Instead, their flawed logic rebounded on their own heads so that *'after that they dared not question him any more'* (Luke 20.40) and we are told the multitudes were *'astonished at his teaching'*. (Matthew 22.33)

The example they used to test Jesus was about a woman whose husband died and left her childless. The husband had six brothers all of whom had a responsibility under the Law of Moses to raise offspring to their brother, to ensure that the land titles to the family inheritance were not lost. So, as each succeeding brother married the woman and

then died, she remained childless until she herself died. This is quite a foolish story, being purely hypothetical and was invented in an attempt to catch Jesus out. What they wanted to know was, when the woman and her seven husbands were finally raised from the dead, whose wife she would be because they had all been married to her.

Jesus pointed out that whilst ordinarily men and women marry and are given in marriage, in the kingdom of God, after the resurrection, there will be no marriage or even end of life because those accounted worthy to possess that kingdom will be like the angels in heaven. Then he went on to prove from the Scriptures that there is a

An illustrated 'ketubah', the traditional Jewish marriage contract. Jewish law required that a man married his brother's widow if she was childless



resurrection despite the doctrine of the Sadducees.

Old Testament teaching about the resurrection

Jesus directed them to consider how Moses was instructed by God to lead His people out of Egypt. Now the leaders of the Jews took great pride in Moses and regarded him as their greatest leader and the dispenser of what became known as the Law of Moses which he had received from God. Jesus directed these Sadducees to consider God's words at the burning bush. God said to Moses: *'I am the God of your father – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'* (Exodus 3.6).

Jesus now quotes this to his tormentors, and adds: *'For he is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to him'* (Luke 20.38). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been dead for many years by the time of Moses. When we think about these words with reference to the whole of the Scripture we find within them a wonderful hope of resurrection for all who believe in God; just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did.

In a number of places the Old Testament speaks of resurrection. For instance Job referred to a time when he would see God in his flesh after he had been long dead:



Whilst he was living as a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian, Moses witnessed the sign of the burning bush and received a revelation from God that is quoted by Jesus

'For I know that my Redeemer lives, and he shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.' (Job 19. 25-27)

The prophet Daniel wrote of certain ones asleep in death awakening to everlasting life:

'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some

to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt' (Daniel 12.2).

God promised David that he will witness the establishment of his throne for ever by one of his offspring *'when your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers'* (a euphemism for death – 2 Samuel 7.12). God assured David that *'your house and your kingdom shall be established for ever before you. Your throne shall be established for ever'* (2 Samuel 7.16).

After David's death, eventually his kingdom was divided and was destroyed by the Babylonians about 600 years before Christ. Even after the nation's partial restoration under the Medes and Persians, right through to the time of Christ and up to the present time when Israel exists as a State there has not been a king on David's throne in Jerusalem. God promised that there would be a king on his throne for ever. That promise is yet to be fulfilled!

The promises to Abraham

In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul wrote about the tremendous faith of Abraham in the promises that God made to him:

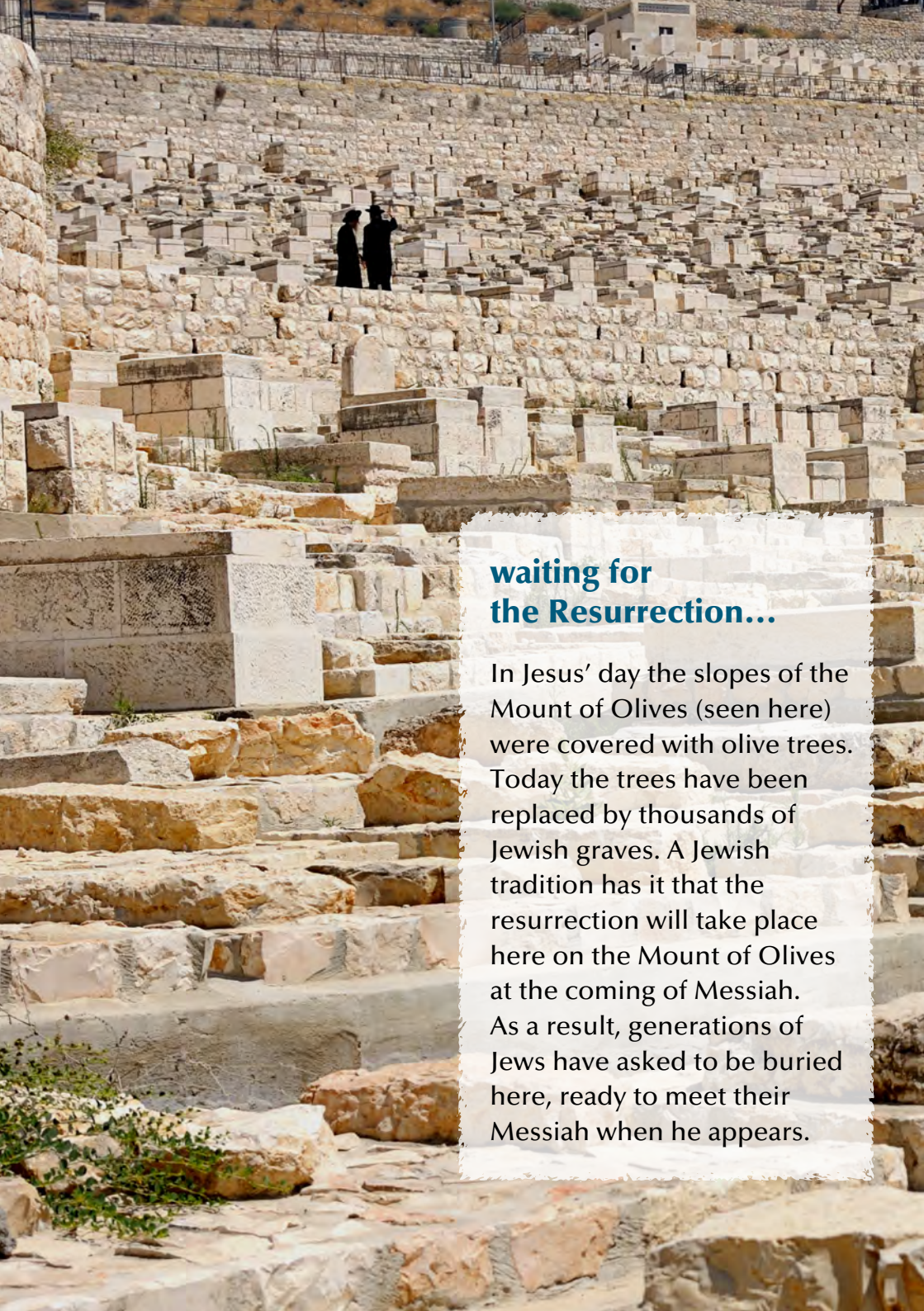
'Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who

are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were' (Romans 4.16, 17 NIV).

The power to give *'life from the dead'* has been vested in Jesus, who is referred to in this way in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: *'And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being". The last Adam (Jesus) became a life-giving spirit'* (I Corinthians 15.45). That is to say, Jesus has the power to make his friends alive even though they are dead. So sure are the promises of God, there can be no doubt that He, through Jesus, will raise to a new life the faithful of all ages who have died. Paul is able to state that God speaks of things that are not as if they were. His word is certain and definite.

New Testament teaching about the resurrection

The New Testament is full of references to the resurrection at the last day. Matthew recorded these words of Jesus: *'And I say to you that many shall come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of*



waiting for the Resurrection...

In Jesus' day the slopes of the Mount of Olives (seen here) were covered with olive trees. Today the trees have been replaced by thousands of Jewish graves. A Jewish tradition has it that the resurrection will take place here on the Mount of Olives at the coming of Messiah. As a result, generations of Jews have asked to be buried here, ready to meet their Messiah when he appears.

heaven' (Matthew 8.11). We should perhaps, pause here and consider the phrase '*the kingdom of heaven*' ('*kingdom of God*' in Luke 13.29). We might think that this refers to God's kingdom in heaven. But when read carefully we can see that the phrase is '*of heaven*'. It refers simply to an age upon this earth in which Divine (heavenly) principles are universally applied, bringing a happy time to the nations of the earth and recognition of God and His goodness. It is in this way that the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled: '*...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*' (Genesis 12.3). Abraham, the father of the Jewish race with his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob (Israel) will, because of their faith, live in the kingdom even though they currently are asleep in the grave.

The raising of Lazarus

The Gospel of John records the sad events leading up to the death of Lazarus who along with his sisters Mary and Martha were close friends of Jesus. Just after Lazarus died, Jesus went to their home at Bethany and was met by Martha who, knowing the healing powers that Jesus possessed said: '*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*' (John 11.21). The reply of Jesus reassured her:

'..."*Your brother will rise again*". Martha said to him, "*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*". Jesus said to her, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?*" She said to him, "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world*"' (John 11.23-27).

Here, one of those closest to Jesus proclaimed her belief in the resurrection which Jesus had been preaching about, and that this unprecedented event would be '*at the last day*'. We need to examine this expression to understand the doctrine of resurrection properly.

The reality of the resurrection

'*The last day*' refers to the time when God will intervene in the affairs of men, to bring Divine rule on the earth under the control of Jesus. He will establish a Divine, worldwide kingdom. There will then be a time of righteousness and peace, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God. This glorious time will be preceded by the resurrection. In his first letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul explains the reality of resurrection. Even in his day there were those in the first century Christian com-

munity who didn't believe in the resurrection and some claimed it had already happened. We urge you to read the whole of his compelling argument in the 15th chapter of this letter.

'But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ's at his coming' (1 Corinthians 15.20-23).

The 'shofar' or ram's horn trumpet occupies an important place in Jewish ritual, from Old Testament times down to the present. Paul says that the Resurrection will be heralded by the sound of the trumpet – 'the last trumpet'

The last phrase of this quotation is very important because it shows us that Christ was to be raised first and that those that 'are Christ's', in other words those who have 'fallen asleep' or died bearing Christ's name, will be raised from the dead when he returns. Paul continues to explain the principle of resurrection and the changes that will come about in those who are accepted by Christ at his return:

'Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So



when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written,

“Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15.50–54).

God’s gift of eternal life

This is the true hope of the Gospel – Jesus will return to raise his sleeping saints and bestow eternal life on those who are found worthy. But what about Christ’s friends who are alive when he comes? What will happen to them? Paul answered this in his letter to the first century believers living at Thessalonica:

‘For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. **And the dead in Christ will rise first**’ (1 Thessalonians 4. 15, 16).

Here Paul refers to those who are *‘alive and remain’* at the coming of Christ who will not *‘precede’* those who are asleep in death. He makes it quite clear that the dead will be raised first and then the living will be gathered afterwards. Clearly this Scripture teaching leaves no room

for belief in an immortal soul as iscommonly taught by most churches. We are told that eternal life is a gift of God and will not be bestowed on his faithful servants until after the resurrection *‘at the last day’* as Jesus told Martha. We believe this day is fast approaching.

We are living in the last days and time is running out. Will you be one of those people who are alive and ready to meet Jesus when he comes?

John Morse
West Midlands, UK



The great ziggurat at Ur

The Bible stands

THE TEST OF TIME

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Archaeology is the study of ancient people and places through the excavation of the sites of past civilisations and unearthing artefacts and writings. It provides a wealth of knowledge to support the Biblical records of people and events based on archaeological evidence from sources outside the Bible.

It can serve to provide irrefutable evidence to underpin our faith in the reliability of the Bible. This series will look at a number of archaeological discoveries that are designed to do just that.

Ziggurats in Mesopotamia

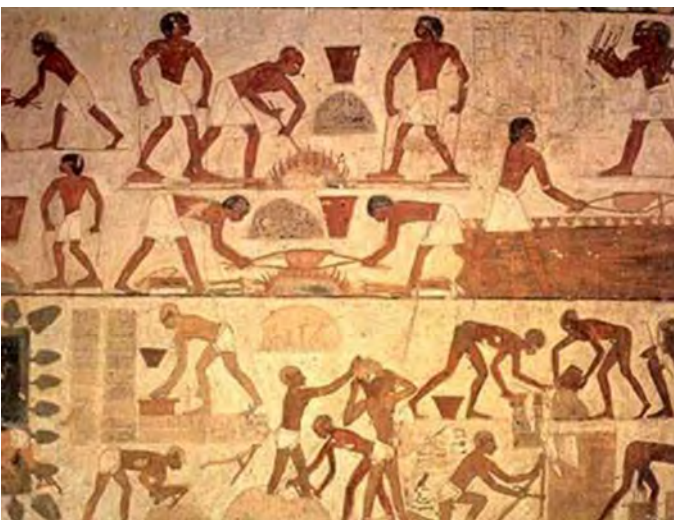
Great stepped temple towers called ziggurats were a feature of Mesopotamian cities. Mesopotamia means 'between the rivers' and refers to the area between the two rivers, Euphrates and Tigris, mainly in Iraq today. The ziggurats were dedicated to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. There are 32 in total, 28 of which are in Iraq. One of the best preserved examples is that of the great ziggurat at Ur dedicated to Sin the moon god, restored and rebuilt to a greater height by

Nabonidus, king of Babylon in the 6th century BC (it should be remembered that even then it would have been an ancient monument!). This was excavated by the well-known archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley (1880-1960) in the early 1920's on behalf of the British Museum and the University Museum, Philadelphia.

Excavations at other sites show that often much older and smaller temple constructions were enlarged and then built on with more elaborate structures. Interestingly, the mortar of the ziggurat's brick is asphalt, matching the specification described in the first book of the Bible: '...“Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly”. They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar' (Genesis 11.3).

Identifying the tower of Babel

The account is in Genesis which tells us about a city founded in about 2500 BC and a tower which was begun but left unfinished because all of a sudden the builders could not understand each other's language! (see Genesis chapter 11.1-9) The Bible explanation in Genesis 11 verse 9 concerning the confusion of languages, uses a play on words, for the Hebrew word 'babel' means 'confusion', whereas the Akkadian name 'bab-ili' means 'gate of the god'. The Hebrew meaning has come through to us in the English word 'babble' meaning a confusion of voices. Astonishingly, the city they called Babel and its tower can be identified today as the ruined city of Babylon in modern Iraq and the site of its ancient ziggurat.



A wall painting from the Valley of the Kings in Egypt shows the process of brick-making in the ancient world

Genesis 11 verse 2 identifies the place where the tower of Babel was originally built as a plain in the land of Shinar. We know from other references (Isaiah 11.11 and Zechariah 5.11) that this relates to Babylonia - in the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament the name Shinar is translated as 'Babulonous'. Babylonia comprised Sumer in the South and Akkad in the

North, the city of Babylon lying in Akkad. The 'tower' literally means 'big place' and the city was called 'Babel'. Such circumstantial evidence therefore connects the tower of Babel with what was once the great ziggurat at Babylon. A British Museum publication states:

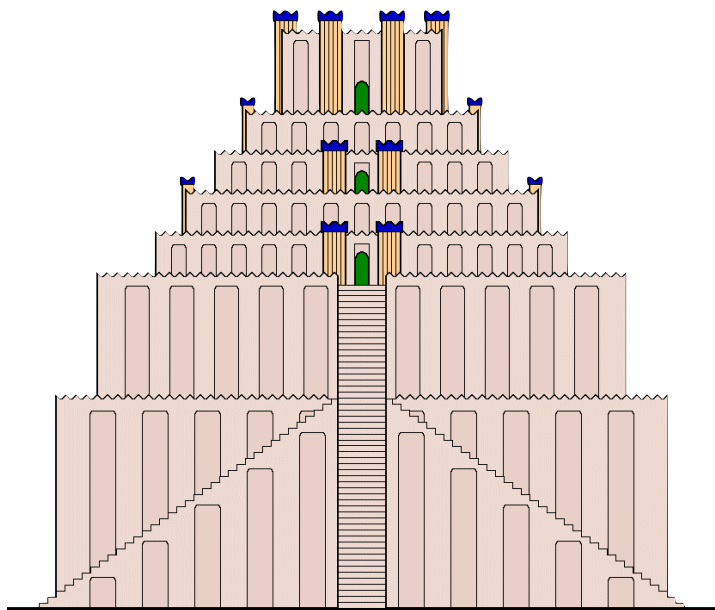
'There seems no reason, therefore, not to connect the migdal (Hebrew word for tower) of Babel with the ziggurat at Babylon, represented today largely by a water and reed filled hole in the ground, the baked bricks of which it was built having been taken for use elsewhere'.

The tower rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar and his father

In the 7th century BC, Babylon's ancient temple was a relic and in ruins by the time Nebuchadnezzar's father Nabopolassar began a reconstruction, which was continued by his son. Their temple was called Etemenanki (see overleaf), which means in the Sumerian language 'temple of the foundation of heaven and earth' and was dedicated to the god Marduk. Nebuchadnezzar recorded that the original tower had been built long before his time: 'A former king built



Aerial view of Babylon showing the huge square hole now believed to be the original site of the Tower of Babel



*'Etemenanki'
drawing showing
the ancient
Babylonian tower
rebuilt by
Nebuchadnezzar*

the Temple of the Seven Lights of the Earth, but he did not complete its head. Since a remote time, people had abandoned it, without order expressing their words. Since that time earthquakes and lightning had dispersed its sun-dried clay; the bricks of the casing had split, and the earth of the interior had been scattered in heaps.'

The Greek historian Herodotus called it the Temple of Zeus Belus, telling of its huge size and its height at 91 metres (300ft). By the time of the Greek empire in the 3rd Century BC it was again in very poor repair and was taken apart by Alexander the Great in an attempt to rebuild it in another location. His premature death, however, intervened and the project ceased.

Babylon has never been rebuilt and occupied

Despite limited reconstruction of walls during the Saddam Hussein era and the temporary use of the site as a military base by the US army during the Iraq war, the majority of the ruins of ancient Babylon remain desolate, and stand as a testimony to the Divinely inspired words of the prophet Jeremiah:

'...I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,' says the LORD; 'and I will make it a perpetual desolation' (Jeremiah 12 25.12).

Justin Giles
Kent, UK



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Part 11: Paul's 2nd missionary journey

In the last article we followed Paul and Barnabas who journeyed to Jerusalem to help resolve the controversy about circumcision and the need for the Gentiles (non-Jews) to keep the Law of Moses. Paul then returned to his base at Antioch with letters from the apostles and elders confirming that the Gentiles need not be circumcised, nor were they required to keep the Law of Moses.

Whilst at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas continued teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord, with many others.

During Paul's travels there are many instances of him re-visiting the new converts, re-enforcing his teaching and giving practical help to his new brothers and sisters in Christ. After he had spent some time at Antioch, Paul said to Barnabas: *'Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing'* (Acts 15.36). So began what has come to be known as the 2nd missionary journey, with Paul choosing Silas (or Silvanus) to accompany him; Barnabas departing separately, took John Mark with him.

The beginning of the journey

Paul and Silas began by travelling through Syria and Cilicia *'strengthening the churches'* (Acts 15.41). Journeying northward from Jerusalem, and then westward into the eastern part of what is now



Turkey, Paul gave help and encouragement to the churches that had previously been established in that region.

Travelling further westward he came to the cities of Derbe and Lystra. In Lystra Paul met Timothy, the young man who became his companion and life-long friend who Paul regarded affectionately as his *'son in the faith'* (1 Timothy 1.1, 2). Timothy had a faithful mother and grandmother, both of whom were Jewesses, but his father was Greek. From childhood he had known the Holy Scriptures, which, as Paul wrote to Timothy later in life, *'are able to*

make you wise for salvation'. (2 Timothy 3. 15)

Paul chose this young man to accompany him, and they took with them the letters written by the elders and apostles at Jerusalem. These concerned the practical issues of living as Christians, rather than under the requirements of the Law of Moses. We read in Acts: *'So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily'* (Acts 16.5). Continuing their journey westwards, Paul, Silas and Timothy went through Phrygia and Galatia and they came to Mysia, and were preparing to go into Bithynia

when God directed them to visit the city of Troas. Whilst at Troas Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man (from Northern Greece), urging him to *'Come over to Macedonia and help us'* (Acts 16.9). Paul responded immediately to this Divinely arranged call and made arrangements to visit Greece for the first time.

'Go into all the world'

This vision was the beginning of much greater events leading to the gospel being preached throughout the Roman world, as Jesus had commanded his disciples: *'...Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'* (Mark 16.15). Departing from the port of Troas they travelled to Samothracia, Neapolis and then to Philippi. The city was named after its founder Philip 2nd of Macedonia and was the chief city of the region. It had been established as a Roman colony by Octavian (later to become Augustus Caesar) around 30 BC.

Paul preached to the Jews on the Sabbath day outside this city, on the banks of the river where the Jews met for prayers. Here Paul

spoke specifically to the women who were accustomed to meeting there. Among them was Lydia, a seller of purple cloth. The record tells us that she came from Thyatira, a city in the Roman province of Asia that was noted for its dyeing trade and she was a worshipper of the one true God. We read of her: *'...The Lord*



The tiny 'murex' shellfish from which the much-prized purple dye was extracted

BELOW: The ruins of Thyatira. Inscriptions confirm the city was a major centre for the dyeing industry due to the quality of its water supply



opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul' (Acts 16.14).

The need for baptism

There was something more that Lydia had to do if she was to become a Christian. She knew from the preaching of Paul that she needed to be baptized, and here in the river was an ideal place for her immersion. So she and her household were all baptized.

Later, in writing to the Romans, Paul explained the vital significance of baptism by full immersion in water – it was a symbolic death and resurrection associating the believer with the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6.1- 6). It was also a symbolic re-birth – a washing away of sins and the beginning of a new life, as Paul wrote:

'But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness' (Romans 6.17, 18).

Lydia's sins were washed away and she became a sister in Christ and an heir of the promises which God had made to Abraham the father of the faithful. God called Abraham to leave his homeland and travel to the land of Canaan (now Israel). God promised that He would give him

that land as an everlasting possession. Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Galatia in which he explained the significance of this for baptized believers:

'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3.27-29).

Following her baptism Lydia persuaded Paul and his companions to stay at her house for a while.

In prison at Philippi

Afterwards Paul met a woman possessed with the power of divination, who made money for her employers by fortune-telling. This woman followed Paul and his companions, crying out and saying: *'...These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation' (Acts 16.17).* Day by day she continued to do this, until it grieved Paul and by miraculously taking away that power, he prevented her from prophesying any further. This caused consternation to her masters, since their considerable livelihood was immediately taken away. Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace to stand before the

rulers of the city. The accusation brought against Paul and Silas was that they were causing trouble in the city and teaching customs which the people, as Roman citizens, could not lawfully obey.

The crowd being stirred up, tore the clothes off Paul and Silas and after a severe flogging, they were thrown into prison. The record in Acts tells us that the jailor put them in the inner prison putting their feet in the stocks to keep them secure. In great discomfort, Paul and Silas could have been forgiven for being downhearted and disgruntled, as

they had been brutally treated and now imprisoned for doing God's work. However, at midnight Paul and Silas both prayed and sang praises to God.

The other prisoners could hear them, and no doubt thought they must have been mad. Suddenly there was 'a great earthquake' and the ground began to tremble violently, shaking the very foundations and opening all the doors of the prison. In addition to

The remains of the marketplace in front of the acropolis at Philippi



this we read that *'everyone's chains were loosed'* (Acts 16.26).

God had acted, not just to release his faithful servants, but also to further His work of calling men and women from among the Gentiles to serve Him. In this instance it was the Philippian jailor and his household. On seeing the men freed from their bonds and likely to escape, his first reaction was to kill himself, for the death penalty was imposed on a jailor under Roman law if his prisoners escaped; but Paul quickly intervened with the words *'Do yourself no harm, for we are all here'* (Acts 16.28). Paul could have let him continue with his suicide attempt, since it is likely that he had treated Paul and Silas mercilessly as their jailor, but Paul, following the injunction of Jesus to *'love your enemies'* and to *'pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you'* (Matthew 5.44), used the opportunity to preach to him the gospel of salvation.

'What must I do to be saved?'

The jailor called for a light and sprang into the dungeon, terrified, falling down before Paul and Silas and asking *'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'* (Acts 16.30) It was obvious to Paul that his question had not just to do with his position as a jailor, but he had immediately recognized the hand of God in what had happened.

Paul counselled him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he would be saved and his entire household with him.

The narrative about the jailor illustrates the principle that salvation is dependent on hearing the gospel of the kingdom of God and the things concerning Jesus Christ, in order to have that knowledge necessary for baptism. The jailor then treated the wounds of Paul and Silas and he and his family were immediately baptized. This was the first step to being saved, and he took advantage of it immediately while he could. Instead of panic and the prospect of death, he had found the way to life through this miraculous incident. He set a meal before God's two faithful ministers, and it is recorded that *'he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household'* (Acts 16.34).

The following day the magistrates sent word to the jailor to let the prisoners go but on hearing this from the jailor, their new brother in Christ, Paul instructed him to tell the magistrates that they were guilty of condemning innocent men and beating them, even though they were Roman citizens and therefore legally entitled under Roman law to a fair trial. This quickly brought the magistrates to them, who urged them to depart, which they did,

calling at Lydia's house on the way to speak words of encouragement to the new believers before leaving Philippi.

At Thessalonica

Having travelled further westward, Paul came to Thessalonica and on three occasions he preached to the Jews in their synagogue, where they met on the Sabbath days. From their Old Testament Scriptures he demonstrated how the words of the Prophets had foretold that Christ was to suffer and die and to be raised from the dead.

Many Christians are not aware that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ were foretold centuries before in the Old Testament. The Thessalonians were shown the Scriptures to prove this, just like those disciples who had met Jesus after his resurrection on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24.25-27). It is only through the Word of God rather than through the doctrines of men, that we can understand the gospel message of salvation made possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

This preaching was partly successful and some believed and



The Roman Forum in the modern city of Thessaloniki

accompanied Paul and Silas, as did a great number of Greeks and also many women. But the unbelieving Jews were envious, as in Jesus' day – it was for envy that the Jews condemned Jesus to death. These Jews in Thessalonica stirred up a mob and set the whole city in an uproar. This time it was a man named Jason, with other Christians, who experienced the fury of the mob, being accused of having 'turned the world upside down' (Acts 17.6) with their doctrine and speaking contrary to Caesar by preaching Christ as king.

It was the same accusation that Jesus himself had to face in his day – they said to Pilate 'We have no king but Caesar' (John 19.15). The rulers of the city listened to the accusations but this time took security (bail) from the new converts and let them go.

Paul and Silas were immediately sent away by the newly formed ecclesia (church) at Thessalonica and escaped to Berea by night. This was not what Paul wanted, for the Thessalonians were a young ecclesia, and Paul would have stayed there to nurture the believers. But he did leave Timothy there, and later, having heard from Timothy that this ecclesia was prospering, wrote to them two letters of encouragement. In every chapter he reminded them of their hope of the 2nd coming of Christ, of resurrection and reward. He also had to remind them in the second letter that the coming of Christ was not imminent, but that certain things had to happen first – notably a *‘falling away’* from the purity of the gospel message taught by Jesus and his apostles (2 Thessalonians 2.3).

The Thessalonians had understood that Christ was to return but this had the effect of making some give up their occupations and to expect him there and then. Paul showed that this was not the case, and that they should continue to work and to live according to the example set by Christ. Read these two short letters to the Thessalonians, bearing in mind the background and the opposition which they had received from the Jews.

Paul and Silas at Berea

Having arrived in Berea, Paul again went into the synagogue and preached to the Jews. Here he had more success, for they listened to Paul intently and the record in Acts gives them this commendation:

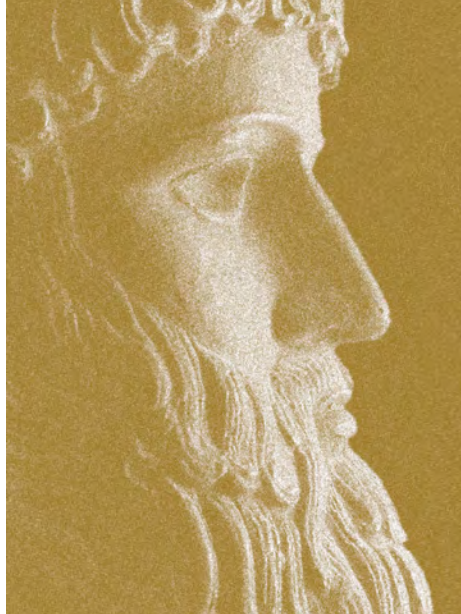
‘These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so’ (Acts 17.11).

Here is a powerful lesson for all would-be Christians. By searching the Scriptures carefully and prayerfully we can with God’s help, come to a true understanding of the Divine requirements for salvation and like the Bereans become followers of Christ or Christians in the fullest sense.

Again Paul’s work was cut short when Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea intent on turning the people against Paul. Seeing that he was in great danger from the Jews, Paul was sent alone to Athens, whilst Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. Paul sailed to Athens to continue his mission of preaching to the Gentiles.

(to be continued)

Clive Brooks
Sussex, UK



BIBLE CHARACTERS

Joshua

Joshua succeeded Moses at the end of the wilderness journey from Egypt to Canaan. Under his leadership the river Jordan was crossed and Canaan (the Promised Land) was conquered.

We are introduced to Joshua in Exodus chapter 17 as a soldier fighting the Amalekites. The generally accepted view is that he was then aged about thirty, a view supported by the description of him at the time as Moses' servant, '*a young man*' (Exodus 33.11).

Then at the end of his life we read that '*Joshua... the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred and ten years old*' (Joshua 24.29). If we

deduct a possible thirty years for his early life as a slave in Egypt and forty years of public service during the wilderness journey, then as God's servant, Joshua still had sole charge of His people for about forty years. All that happened before can be seen as preparation for the final achievements of his life.

Unlike the first forty years of Moses' life spent as a privileged prince in Pharaoh's court, Joshua was born into slavery. He suffered oppression with other Hebrew slaves under cruel Egyptian taskmasters. Moses and Joshua belonged to different tribes and different social backgrounds. Yet somehow the former slave attracted the attention of Moses, who recognised him to be a godly young man with exceptional abilities and leadership potential.

Less than three months after leaving Egypt Joshua was appointed commander of the Israelite army. The slave could not have had previous fighting experience. But he showed great resourcefulness when at short notice he confronted the threat of the Amalekites. He assembled an army of raw recruits, armed possibly with the weapons washed ashore on the Red Sea when Pharaoh's army perished. This ability to organise large numbers of people would later be seen when the twelve tribes obtained their inheritance.

When the Amalekites were defeated at Rephidim, the sight of Aaron and Hur holding up the arms of Moses with the rod of God outstretched, was a sign to Joshua that God was fighting Israel's battles.

Moses' assistant

For forty years Joshua was trained by the leader he would eventually succeed and the two men worked closely together. The first time Moses went up into the Mount Sinai he '*... arose with his assistant Joshua*' (Exodus 24.13). Joshua continued to be known as 'Moses' assistant' until after the death of Moses (Joshua 1.1). Subsequently this protégé of Moses continued to obey his instructions implicitly. When the land finally rested from war

we read that '*As the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did. He left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses*' (Joshua 11.15).

It was at Sinai that Joshua learnt something of the majesty and glory of God. Chosen to accompany Moses into the Mount, for forty days on the lower slopes this young man shared an experience that would make a lasting impression on him (Exodus 24.12-18). However, when they returned together to the camp, Joshua heard the shouting of the people as they danced before the golden calf. He said to Moses: '*There is a noise of war in the camp*' (Exodus 32.17).

The traditional site of Mount Sinai in the Sinai Desert



Things were different the second time, when Moses climbed alone to the top of the mountain. *'Joshua ... did not depart from the tabernacle'*. This was the *'tabernacle (tent) of meeting'* that had been placed outside the camp of Israel where Moses communed with God (Exodus 33.7-11). Moses had every confidence that Joshua's presence in the camp would prevent a repeat of the idolatry that broke out when he was previously away receiving the law. Joshua was entrusted with the responsibility of guarding the tabernacle, or special tent, from intruders.

Joshua never lost confidence in the outcome of the journey. For example, two years later as one of the twelve spies he saw the Amalekites dwelling in the south of the land. Contrary to the evil report of the ten spies, Joshua and Caleb declared, *'If the LORD delights in us, then he will bring us into this land and give it us...their protection has departed from them, and the LORD is with us. Do not fear them'*. It took great courage to go against the majority view. *'And all the congregation said to stone them with stones'* (Numbers 14.8-10). As men of principle, Joshua and Caleb were prepared, if necessary, to die for their faith. As is testified of both men, *'they have wholly followed the LORD'* (Numbers 32.12).

Joshua was greatly influenced by the example of his mentor. He saw close at hand the peculiar pressures and responsibilities of being a national leader doing God's work. He came to appreciate Moses' great patience under provocation, his wise counsel and often lonely stand for what was right.

The succession

Theirs was a partnership of youth and experience and they needed each other. Joshua was a willing pupil and Moses took care to equip his successor with the necessary skills needed to continue the work. The man appointed to lead needed to command respect:

'Then Moses spoke to the LORD, saying: "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd"' (Numbers 27.15-17).

In the sight of all Israel Moses gave his successor this charge:

'Be strong and of good courage, for you must go with this people to the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall cause them to inherit it. And

the LORD, he is the one who goes before you. He will be with you, he will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed'. (Deuteronomy 31.7-8)

After Moses died in the land of Moab, we are told that *'Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; so the children of Israel heeded him, and did as the LORD had commanded Moses'* (Deuteronomy 34.9).

The conquest of Canaan

Now as sole leader Joshua had to apply to the challenges ahead what he had learnt as Moses' assistant. God addressed the new commander of the people:

'Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan,

you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them... Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses... No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you... Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go' (Joshua 1.2-9).

On the very same day Joshua, as a man of action, organised the crossing of the river Jordan which took place three days later, and also sent two spies to Jericho. His first and most famous victory was the capture of this key city, which gave access into the interior and the start

Israel circles Jericho for the last time before the walls collapse



of the central, southern and northern campaigns of conquest.

Before this crucial battle Joshua was stopped in his tracks by a surprise meeting with a man with a drawn sword, who claimed to be *'Commander of the army of the LORD'* (Joshua 5.13–15). Joshua acknowledged the presence of this angel of God and his own subordinate position. This unusual incident is reminiscent of the appearance of the angel to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3.1-5).

The taking of Jericho lasted seven days. For six days the armed men silently circuted the walls once, the priests carrying the ark of the Lord:

'But it came to pass on the seventh day that they rose early, about the dawning of the day, and marched around the city seven times in the same manner ... And the seventh time it was so, when the priests blew the trumpets, that Joshua said to the people: "Shout, for the LORD has given you the city! Now the city shall be doomed by the LORD to destruction, it and all who are in it. Only Rahab the prostitute shall live, she and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent"' (Joshua 6.8-17).



The 'tel' of ancient Jericho as it is today, clearly showing the areas excavated by archaeologists

With Jericho securely shut up and its inhabitants prepared for a long siege, the tactics seemed futile. Yet the city was not destroyed by the circuiting of the walls, by the blowing of the trumpets, or by the great shout at the end. Rather as we read in the New Testament, *'By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days'* (Hebrews 11.30). Only God could achieve what seemed an impossible outcome, but He used the army's faithful co-operation to bring about the destruction of the city.

This miraculous victory was the first of many. For example, the great battle in the valley of Aijalon was an unprecedented day when the sun



MAP showing the various stages of the conquest of the Holy Land led by Joshua

life, everything is attributed to God:

‘So the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which he had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that he had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand’.

The forty years of preparation and then the application of what he had been trained to do in

miraculously stood still. Similarly before the Amorite kings were executed Joshua said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed; be strong and of good courage, for thus the LORD will do to all your enemies against whom you fight’ (Joshua 10.12-14, 25).

Review of achievements

When Joshua’s achievements are summed up towards the end of his

the conquest of the land achieved the desired result. ‘Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass’ (Joshua 21.43-45).

Joshua was resourceful in everything he did. But he retained a great humility and relied on God to fight alongside his armies. His commitment to serving God never wavered as he said at the end of his life:

‘... But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD’ (Joshua 24.15).

From slavery in Egypt his story ends with him settled into his inheritance in the hill country of Ephraim. Even after his death his influence carried on: *‘Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had known all the works of the LORD which he had done for Israel’* (Joshua 24.31).

Link with the work of Jesus

When the twelve spies were sent into Canaan *‘Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Joshua’* (Numbers 13.16). In Hebrew the new name means ‘Yah saves’ or ‘Saviour’, as does the name Jesus which is the equivalent in the Greek language. This is no coincidence because Joshua was a type of Jesus the Saviour.

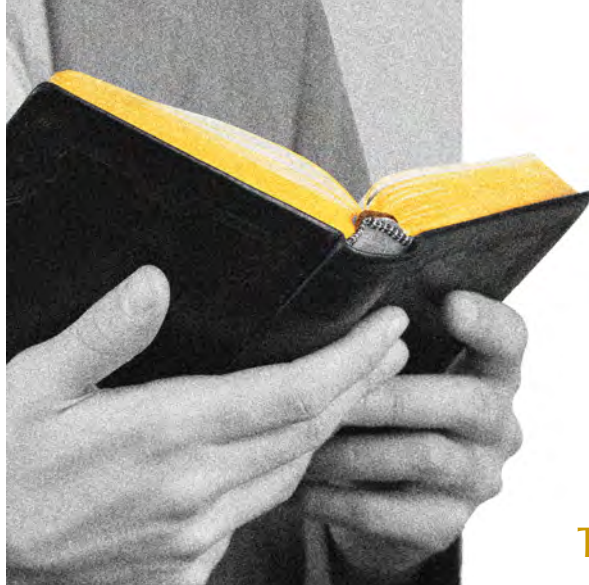
Under Joshua *‘the land had rest from war’* (Joshua 14.15). This was a foretaste of the far more permanent rest to be secured by Jesus when he returns to establish the future kingdom of God on earth. In the New Testament, we are reminded that the lessons of Israel’s history are important to the followers of Christ, for they *‘were written for our admonition’* (I Corinthians 10.11).

If we are to enter the ‘rest’ that God has promised, we must heed the warning from the example of the unbelieving generation of Israelites that died in the wilderness under Moses’ leadership. In contrast, we must display the kind of faith that Joshua had. In so doing, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that we can look forward to that future time of ‘rest’:

‘Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it... There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience’

(Hebrews 4.1, 9-11 NIV).

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BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT:

The kingdom of God

Many people enjoy visiting another country. Some may like cultural visits to explore cities and ancient sites with guidebook in hand. A guidebook is essential if we wish to visit different places – it not only tells us how to get there but also gives us background information about our destination, where to go, where to stay and what to see. Sometimes a guidebook is not enough and we need a guide to show us the way and to tell us about the places we will visit.

You may be wondering what this has to do with the coming kingdom of God – quite a lot when you think

about it. The teaching of Jesus concerned the ultimate destination for the discerning traveller – it was all about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the only really worthwhile destination to plan for – in fact you could say it is a destination beyond our wildest dreams. You won't find it shown on a modern map and you won't find a description of it in a brochure from a travel agent or in a travel guide. However, like any other destination, if you want to get to the kingdom of God you need to make preparations. Before you set out on this journey of a lifetime, there are a few basic questions that need to be answered:

- ❖ Where is the kingdom of God?
- ❖ Who is the king?
- ❖ What will it be like when we get there?

❖ What preparations need to be made beforehand?

To find the answers to these questions we must turn to a rather special guidebook. In the Bible, the first book in the New Testament tells us that Jesus had just commenced preaching at Capernaum, a town by the Sea of Galilee. If you were to travel to Israel you could still see the ruins of this place today on the shores of Galilee – it's amazing to think that 2,000 years ago Jesus was also there. Sadly with all the turmoil in the Middle East at the present time, many people don't choose to visit Israel – but in the future, things will be totally different.

'The gospel of the kingdom'

The urgency of the message of Jesus was immediately clear to his hearers: 'Repent' he said, '*for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*' (Matthew 4.17). As you can imagine there were mixed reactions to this message but some of his hearers responded positively to the words of Jesus. Some, like Peter, Andrew, James and John, became his disciples. Afterwards '*Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching **the gospel of the kingdom**, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people*' (Matthew 4.23). This message is the theme of all four Gospel records and it also features

very prominently in the rest of the New Testament.

Before we consider the answers to the four questions we posed at the start, it would be helpful to understand what Jesus meant by '*the gospel of the kingdom*'. The word '*gospel*' is derived from two old English words, which literally mean 'a good story' or 'good news'. (For special edition '*Light on the Gospel*' see back cover). Sometimes you may hear someone say something like 'take my word as gospel'. What they are really trying to say is that they are not lying – there is no question about the truth of their words. However, here we are concerned with the words of Jesus – he always spoke the truth with authority and his message was from God, as he said on one occasion: '*...as my Father taught me, I speak these things*' (John 8.28).

In the Greek text of the New Testament the word '*gospel*' is used 72 times which is an indication of its importance – it is a vital part of the Christian message. Today for the most part the Bible is a closed book. People look elsewhere for satisfaction in life but there isn't much good news. Has the gospel message lost its force nearly 2,000 years after it was spoken?

Jesus had a unique message for his 1st Century hearers. It was really

good news and had a dramatic and immediate effect. Matthew tells us that *'his fame went throughout all Syria' and 'great multitudes followed him'* (Matthew 4.24,25). More important than this was the force of the message which he spoke. For many years the Jews had not only experienced the harsh occupation of their country by the Romans, but also their religious leaders had replaced the simple teaching of The Law of Moses with mere ritual and

formalism. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees with these words from their Old Testament scriptures:

'Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: "These people draw near to me with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men"' (Matthew 15.7-9).

Jesus focussed on those particularly who should have led by example when he told the people about the kingdom of God. He said to them: *'...unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven'* (Matthew 5.20).

Truly this was a special message. Jesus did not tell the people to organise a national rebellion against the Roman authorities but rather he told them to break free from the hypocrisy of their religious leaders. He told them to look instead for God's kingdom to come, for this was

'Tephillim' (phylacteries) worn by a Jewish soldier in prayer. Jesus condemned the Jewish leaders for the excessive ritual and formalism they had added to Moses' Law



their only hope for the future; no time was to be lost in preparing for the coming kingdom. There was no mistaking the urgency of the message – a personal, inner transformation was the key to the inheritance of the kingdom of God and that process had to begin at once. We read that when Jesus had finished speaking *‘the people were astonished at his teaching’* (Matthew 7.28)

Where is the kingdom of God?

What did Jesus mean by this phrase *‘the kingdom of heaven’* or *‘the kingdom of God’*? How did his hearers understand this message? Is it a literal place? Is it here on earth or is it somewhere else?

Our guidebook supplies the answer to these questions. Think first of all about the model prayer of Jesus, universally known as the Lord’s Prayer. This tells us that the kingdom is a heavenly kingdom because it is God’s kingdom. People all over the world have recited these words many times without ever thinking about what they might really mean. Note the words carefully: *‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’* (Matthew 6.10). This prayer contains a very specific request for God’s kingdom to be set up on earth so that God’s will may be

done on earth in the same way as it is now done in heaven by the angels.

The teaching of Jesus concerning this coming kingdom on earth was nothing new to his hearers because it was also the message of the Old Testament. The first indications of this are found right back in the first book of the Bible. There we find that the Jewish patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were promised by God an inheritance in the land of Canaan (now the land of Israel), as a reward for their faithfulness. God said to Abraham:

‘...Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are – northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants for ever...Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you’ (Genesis 13.14,15,17).

The promise was repeated to Abraham’s descendants – to Isaac and to Jacob the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Although those Jewish patriarchs lived in that land and were buried there, they never possessed any part of the land during their lifetimes. In the letter to the Hebrews the writer comments on this in these words:

‘By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place



LEFT: the fathers of the Jewish people lived in tents in the land that God had promised them – they understood the promise was for the future

which he would afterwards receive as an inheritance... By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (Hebrews 11.8-10).

This is a promise that still awaits fulfilment at God's appointed time in the future. Jesus reminded his hearers that *'many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven'* (Matthew 8.11).

The Bible tells us about the faith of men and women in ancient times who like Abraham, looked for the coming kingdom. We read that *'These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off...And truly if they had called to mind that country from*

which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country...' (Hebrews 11.13,15,16). The kingdom will indeed be heavenly in the sense that it is God's kingdom but there is no doubt about it being set up on earth. This is what God promised to Abraham, to Sarah his wife, to Isaac and Jacob, to Moses, David and all those other men and women who lived their lives and died in faith – there is a list of some of them in Hebrews chapter 11.

If you, like us, believe God's Word the Bible, there can be no doubt about the answer to the first question:

the coming kingdom of God will be set up on earth.

Who is the king?

Every kingdom must have a king. The kingdom of God will be no exception. The guidebook leaves us in no doubt about the identity of its king. What did Jesus say to Pilate the Roman governor, when he was standing trial for his life? Pilate asked him a question: *'Are you a king then?'* and Jesus replied *'You say rightly that*

I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world... (John 18.37).

The city of Jerusalem which is so often in the news at the present time, was the place where the ancient kings of Israel reigned. In reality, God was king and the children of Israel were constituted the kingdom of God (see Exodus 19.3-6 and I Samuel 8.4-8). David was perhaps the most famous of those kings and he was promised a descendant who would sit on his throne in Jerusalem for ever.

Did this ever happen? No – Israel has not had a king for some 2,500 years. The last of the long line of kings that followed David was told by the prophet Ezekiel concerning his kingdom: *'...It shall be no longer, until he comes whose right it is, and I will give it to him'* (Ezekiel 21.27). Who is the one who has the right to occupy David's throne in Jerusalem? The well-known words of the prophet Isaiah leave us in no doubt as to the answer:

'For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David

and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this' (Isaiah 9.6,7).

Confirmation of the identity of the next king to sit on David's throne was given to Mary by the angel Gabriel when he announced to her the good news concerning the birth of her son Jesus:

Israeli stamp showing a painting by Marc Chagall of Israel's most famous king – King David



'He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob (Israel) for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1.32,33).

Here then is the answer to our question about the identity of the king – it is Jesus Christ himself – the one who preached the Gospel, the good news about the coming kingdom of God.

What will it be like when we get there?

The guidebook doesn't leave us without providing more details about the coming kingdom of God. There are many references to this

throughout the pages of the Bible. In the Old Testament there are word pictures which describe the beauty of God's heavenly kingdom on earth. The words of the prophet Isaiah for example contrast the world as it is now, the problems which present leaders are facing, with the world as it will be when the kingdom of God is established. Read the following passages carefully:

- ❖ Concerning worship:
Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2-4
- ❖ Concerning the king:
Isaiah chapter 11 verses 1-10
- ❖ Concerning security:
Isaiah chapter 32 verses 16-18
- ❖ Concerning Jerusalem:
Isaiah chapter 65 verses 17-19

Note the reference from Isaiah chapter 65 concerning Jerusalem. It will not always be the subject of international disagreement but will be the capital city of God's kingdom on earth.

What will it be like? The Bible gives us the answer – the world in which we live will be changed beyond recognition. Human government will be replaced by a divinely appointed king and all that is wrong with this world will be put right. In the New

LEFT: The intractable problems of today's insecure world will be banished in the kinadom



Testament the Apostle Peter quotes from Isaiah chapter 65 and describes it like this: *‘Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells’*. Then he adds a personal message for his readers: *‘Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by him in peace, without spot and blameless’* (2 Peter 3.13,14).

What preparations need to be made beforehand?

Earlier we referred to those men of faith like Abraham and David and many others, men and women whose lives are recorded in the Bible as examples for us to think about. They had one great priority in their lives – to obtain an inheritance in the kingdom of God. The followers of Jesus, the 1st Century Christians, looked for God’s kingdom more than anything else. They were prepared to give up everything this life had to offer in order to get there. The object of Jesus’ teaching was to enable his hearers to re-focus their lives – and there is still every reason to do so. Coming back to the analogy of the holiday guide – preparation is required (a list of things to take, passports, visas, injections etc). It’s foolish to go mountain climbing in the Himalayas with only T shirts and shorts to wear; it’s foolish to sit in the hot sun for any length of time

without protection from its harmful rays.

In his teaching, Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. The guests arrived and one man came who was not dressed for the occasion – what happened to him? He was ejected! (Read Matthew 22.1-14). We all have a choice – we can prepare for that great event now or we can ‘do our own thing’ to use a modern phrase and where will that lead us? In a sense we are all on a journey – we are travelling to a destination. Jesus spoke about the broad way, which leads to death and the narrow path, which leads to life. He said *‘...narrow is the gate and difficult is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it’* (Matthew 7.13,14).

For many people, the present life is filled with good things and the anticipation that they will continue. On one occasion Jesus encountered a young man who appeared sincere and receptive to the concept of unending life in the kingdom of God. It seemed also that he was a God-fearing man: *“All these things”* he said, *“I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?”* Jesus said to him, *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me”*.

It proved too big a price to pay, for we read that *'he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions'*. (Matthew 19.20-22)

For many others though, the present life is a continual struggle. Long hours of hard work are needed to provide for the necessities of life. Jesus had an answer to this problem too; much of his time and attention was taken up teaching people with these sorts of pressures – the poor of this world. They were the ones most likely to respond to the Gospel message rather than those already satisfied with their present situation. Jesus said: *'...do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek...But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you'* (Matthew 6.31-33).

The seeking which Jesus spoke about has to be an active ingredient in our lives. This involves seeking *'his righteousness'* too. The need for preparation was constantly emphasised in Jesus' teaching. It was not just because God had promised to

care for His children in this present life, but more importantly – because the present life could end at any time! And sooner or later, the kingdom will come. The important question was and still is – will you be prepared for it? Will you be ready?

There is a wonderful future ahead which God has prepared for those who seek Him. That's the message of the Gospel – the good news of God's coming kingdom on earth. Are you prepared to give it first priority?

Now is the time of opportunity – now is the time to assess your own position in the light of Jesus' teaching and to consider the examples of those who obeyed the call of the Gospel in the past, to believe the Gospel of the kingdom, to be baptized as Jesus commanded (Mark 16.16) and to follow the guidebook to life very closely, with your eyes firmly fixed on the place where you are going.

Editor

Jesus asked the rich young man to get rid of all excess baggage on his journey to the kingdom



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