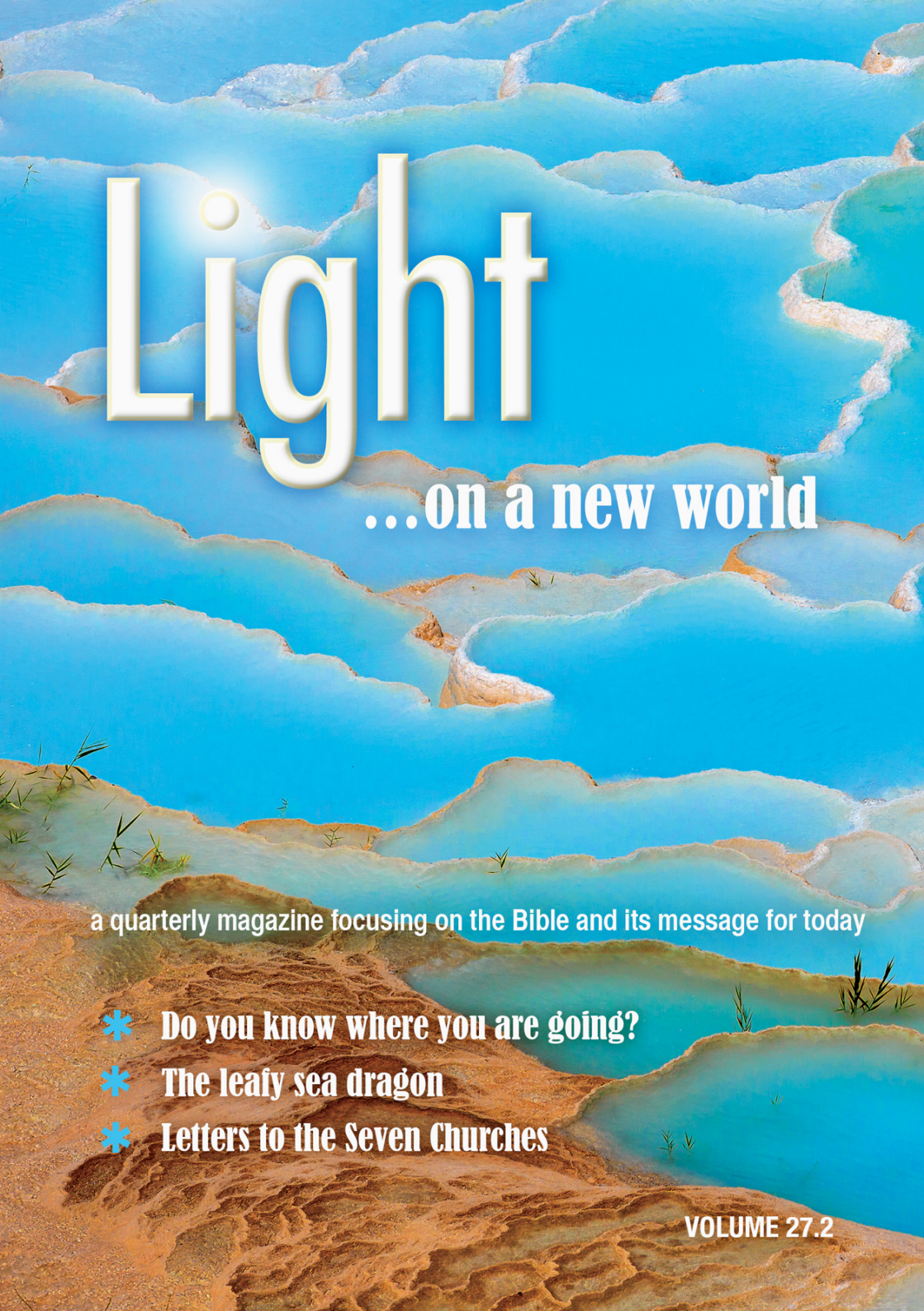




Light

...on a new world

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

- * Do you know where you are going?
- * The leafy sea dragon
- * Letters to the Seven Churches

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COVER:

The hot springs and terraces of Pamukkale, a major tourist attraction in modern Turkey. The springs are close to the ancient city of Laodicia, and may have influenced the letter that Jesus wrote to the church there (see page 13).

Note:

All Bible quotations 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?

“I and my Father are one”

the Law of Moses. On winning the temple back, the Jews only had a day's supply of oil for the Menorah (the seven-branched candlestick) which was always to be kept burning in the temple. The feast in part celebrates the tradition that God miraculously provided oil for the remaining seven days. Whether that is true or not is not important but it sets the scene for this statement of Jesus.

the Feast of Dedication

The Jewish 'Feast of Dedication' celebrates the re-dedication of the temple in the days of the Maccabees, the Jewish freedom fighters of the time. This feast lasts for eight days and is also called Hanukah or the 'Festival of Lights'. It commemorates the time when the Maccabees won back the Jewish temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks in 165 BC. The Greek Empire included the land of Palestine (now Israel) within its borders.

The Greek occupiers had defiled the temple by forcing Jews to worship idols and desecrated the altar by sacrificing pigs on it, animals designated unclean under

Jesus confronted by the Jews

Jesus was in the temple when he spoke these words and we are told his precise location – Solomon's Porch. This was an area on the eastern side of the temple and became a gathering place for the apostles after the death and ascension of Jesus (see page 4). The religious leaders of the Jews asked Jesus to clearly state whether he was the Messiah ('anointed one'). Their purpose was not to understand his mission but to try and undermine his popularity with

the common people. Jesus simply replied that his miracles testified to who he was. But the Jews would neither listen nor try to understand. Their envy and fear of removal from power prevented them from accepting Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus pointed out that there were those among the people who were his sheep, who followed him and heard his voice but this was impossible for the Jewish leaders because they would not listen.

‘I and my Father are one’

Jesus also said that he would give eternal life to his sheep, those who listened to him and they would never perish. They would never be plucked out of his hand because

the Father who gave them to him is greater than all. Then he completed his discourse by saying: *‘I and my Father are one’* (John 10.30). This statement so offended the leaders of the Jews that they picked up stones to throw at him in their fury. This was the mode of execution for those considered guilty of blasphemy under the Law of Moses.

equal to God?

Clearly, this statement of Jesus touched a raw nerve with the Jewish leaders. The nation had been taken into captivity about 500 years before Christ's birth. God caused this to happen because they had turned to idolatry and worshipped all manner of pagan gods. They learned the lesson during 70 years of captivity in Babylon and on their return to Jerusalem they also returned to the worship of the one true God. The Jews of Christ's day vented their anger on him for saying *‘I and my Father are one’*.

Jesus asked the people why they were going to stone him after he had performed so many good

Reconstruction of Herod's temple showing 'Solomon's Porch' on the east side of the temple enclosure.



works. The Jews replied that they weren't stoning him for his good works but for making himself God (John 10.33). This had happened on a previous occasion:

'Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was his Father, making himself equal with God.'

John 5.18

Jesus' words can easily be misunderstood, especially if we already hold the belief that Jesus and his Father are equal as taught by the doctrine of the Trinity. But if we look at the references carefully they do not say that Jesus was or claimed to be equal to God at all. His listeners interpreted his words in the same way that many people do today.

the Son of God

Before the birth of Jesus, Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that Jesus was to be the Son of God: *'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God'* (Luke 1.35). The phrase *'the Son of God'* cannot

be misinterpreted to mean 'God the Son'.

a prayer of Jesus

In the gospel of John chapter 17, Jesus poured out his soul in prayer just prior to enduring dreadful suffering and a humiliating and agonising death in obedience to his Father. In his prayer he referred to the fact that he was *'one'* with God his Father:

'...that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And the glory which you gave me I have given them, that they may be one just as we are one: I in them, and you in me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that you have sent me, and have loved them as you have loved me.' John 17.21-23

If we believe Jesus said he and his Father are one Godhead, then this prayer requires all the followers of Jesus to join him in that role: *'that they also may be one in us'*. Clearly it is not the intention of Jesus in John chapter 17 to promote the

idea that he and God are part of a Trinity. So how can we take this to be the meaning of the saying of Jesus *"I and my Father are one"* in John chapter 10?

Jesus never claimed equality with God

The idea that Jesus is in all respects equal to his Father is on several occasions denied by Jesus himself. The references are unmistakeable:

'...for my Father is greater than I.'

John 14.28

'Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do.'

John 5.19

'I can of myself do nothing.'

John 5.30

'He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "O my Father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, your will be done"' Matthew 26.42

Jesus the King

Speaking of the time when Jesus shall reign as king over the whole earth, the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that the time will come when his kingdom

will be surrendered to God himself:

'Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet... For he "has put everything under his feet". Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.'

1 Corinthians 15, 24,25,27,28 NIV

Again it is strongly emphasized that when God becomes 'all in all' after Christ's kingship is surrendered to Him, Christ himself will be subject to Him.

There is no suggestion of equality here.

interesting references

Believers in the doctrine of the Trinity, which declares Christ to be equal in all respects with God, turn to a variety of Scripture passages to

support their position. For example, Jesus said to Philip *'He who has seen me has seen the Father...'* (John 14.9). This does give the impression that Jesus and God are the same person but Jesus was not saying this at all. Jesus reflected perfectly the character of God Himself. He was a manifestation of God's character. All that he said and did was in complete harmony with God. This is the sense in which God and Christ are one and the sense in which we see the Father in Jesus. Jesus exhibited and made known the character of God to mankind, which is why we are told to follow him.

Immanuel

These are the words of the angel to Joseph: *'Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which is translated, "God with us"'* (Matthew 1.23). Again we could be misled into thinking that this son was a part of the Godhead as Jesus was *'God with us'*. The sense in which God is with us in Jesus, refers to God sending him to be a sacrifice for sin, to be an example of godliness and to provide the king to rule the world on divine principles. What more

could God do for mankind? God is very patient as the Apostle Peter wrote, He is *'long-suffering towards us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance'* (2 Peter 3.9).

God manifestation

In order to have a correct understanding of many of these references that seem to support the idea of the Trinity, we need to understand *'God manifestation'*.

This is a principle that appears throughout Scripture. It is best explained by considering the angel whose duty it was to guide and lead the new nation of Israel after its exodus from Egypt and during the wanderings in the wilderness. Of him it is said :

'Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him and obey his voice; do not provoke him, for he will not pardon your transgressions; for my name is in him.' Exodus 23.20,21

The angel acted in God's place. He kept Israel *'in the way'*. He gave them commandments. They had to be obeyed. He was able to forgive



Throughout their journey through the wilderness of Sinai, Israel were lead by an angel called by God's name and bearing God's authority.

their transgressions for God's name was in him. We find that the angel is on many occasions called 'the LORD' which in the English Bible is a translation of God's memorial name 'Yahweh'. The angel was actually given the name of God and was to be respected as if he were God.

We have already seen that Jesus also was in the place of God, in that he showed to all men the perfect character of God and provided a template for godliness.

origins of the doctrine of the Trinity

It may come as a surprise that the concept of the Godhead being three persons in one (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit) described as the doctrine of the 'Trinity' is not found anywhere in the Bible. The idea was not formally put into words until AD 325 at the Council of Nicaea just under 300 years after the ministry of Jesus. This Council of Christian bishops was convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine with the aim of trying to obtain a consensus of beliefs in the Church at that time. Its main accomplishments, if they can be called that, were the settlement of issues relating to the nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God the Father.

One of the outcomes of the Council was the creation of a new creed which attempted to define the main tenets of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is described as ‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God’.

Such a concept of God is never taught in either the Old or New Testaments. All that can be found, as we have tried to show, are inferences which can only be seen to support the doctrine if it is already believed.

The Council of Nicea AD 325 – fresco in the Sistine Chapel, the Vatican. Note how far the Church had now departed from the simplicity of original Christianity.

This doctrine is vigorously upheld by the orthodox churches today in direct contradiction to the words of God Himself through the prophet Isaiah:

‘I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides me. I will gird you, though you have not known me, that they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.’

Isaiah 45.5,6

This emphatic statement ‘there is none besides me’ is repeated five more times by the prophet.



Jesus and his Father

An understanding of the true relationship between Jesus and his Father is very important. Jesus was the Son of God and he lived a perfect life of obedience to his Father which no other human being has been or will ever be able to do. This points to the very close relationship between Jesus and his Father. He was totally committed to his Father's purpose in saving mankind from the deadly effects of sin. He had a very close connection with God being constantly in prayer to Him, sometimes all night long.

He also had a complete understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures and we can see this in his answers to his enemies and indeed to himself during the temptation in the wilderness. It was only by these means that Jesus received the strength to live a sinless life and so provide the perfect sacrifice for the remission of the sins of all mankind.

It is also important to realise that if we believe that Jesus is God, we undermine the reality of the tremendous work he performed. His objective was to overcome sin in mortal flesh. He is the only person who has been able to do

that. Because of this he stands far above all humankind in his achievement and at the same time makes it possible for us to obtain forgiveness. It is a privilege to understand the full meaning of the following well known but profound words of Jesus:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

John 3. 16

This hope of everlasting life is only possible by the Father and His Son working closely together in that special sense of being one in purpose, described in the phrase we have considered: *'I and my Father are one'*.

If we unite ourselves to Christ through baptism then our objectives will be the same as his. This means that we will do our best to follow his example and pray for his second coming when his 'sheep' will receive the reward of everlasting life and the earth will be filled with the glory of God.

John Morse
West Midlands, UK

The development of the first century Church

Part 19 (conclusion)

The letters to the Seven Churches

The setting of the last book of the Bible was an insistence on Emperor-worship in the wider Roman Empire and the persecution that resulted. Probably written as late as AD 96 (although thought by some to have been written as early as AD 66), it urged believers to be strong, affirm things which are true and look to the future, the time of the end, when God's kingdom is established. The title of the book is '*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*'. It was a revelation (Greek apokalupsis) of the events leading up to the return of Christ and the final conflict between good and evil that will see the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

Our concern in this article is with what it tells us about first century churches (Greek ekklesias meaning assembly of called out ones i.e. believers), about their faith and how they coped with trials and temptations. It was addressed to



seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (now Turkey). The author was now the glorified Son of Man who we first see in symbol, dwelling among his churches (1.9-20), to whom he now sent specific messages, letters written by the hand of the Apostle John and contained in chapters 2 and 3 (see table on page 14).

dangers faced by the believers

The letters contain specific allusions to the opposition and dangers faced by these communities. First there were the moral and doctrinal dangers referred to in symbol. The Nicolaitans (2.6 and 2.15) were a group whose name means 'vanquisher of the people'.

They were spreading wrong teaching, as Paul had predicted many years before in Ephesus (Acts 20.28-31). Balaam's doctrine (2.14) referred to a false prophet (Numbers 22-25) who incited sexual immorality among the Israelites with disastrous results, and this was also happening in the first century.

The synagogue (congregation) of Satan (2.9 and 3.9) comprised those who claimed to be Jews but were not (i.e. Judaisers). As Paul had said, a true Jew is one inwardly, belonging to spiritual Israel (Romans 2.28,29). Jezebel *'that woman'* was now allowed to teach (2.20,21). She had been king Ahab's queen who, centuries before, had promoted Baal worship in Israel and became a symbol of corrupt practices, not only tolerated but encouraged by some (1 Kings 16.31-33).

Then there were physical dangers from the Roman authorities enforcing Emperor worship. At Ephesus *'the devil'* (i.e. gainsayer/slanderer – an apt name for the pagan authorities) was *'about to throw some of you into prison'*. Pergamos, the regional headquarters of Roman government, was *'where Satan's* (the adversary's)

throne is'. This was where *'Antipas... my faithful martyr (witness)... was killed among you...'* (2.13).

the antidote to false teaching

Three churches had succumbed, and needed a specific antidote. Ephesus had lost its first love and was counselled to *'do the first works'* (2.4, 5). Sardis had become a dead church and were told to *'Be watchful'* (3.1-3). Laodicea was self-satisfied, rich and lukewarm but its members were now advised to repent and buy true wealth and clothing (3.16-18). Other churches were told *'Be faithful'* under severe trial (Smyrna: 2.10); to *'repent'* (Pergamos: 2.16); and to *'Hold fast'* (Philadelphia: 3.11).

For those whose faith endured a reward was assured as expressed in these terms: *'to eat from the tree of life'* (2.7); to be given *'the crown of life'* (2.10), *'power over the nations'* (2.26), *'white garments'* and a name in the book of life (3.5); to become *'a pillar in the temple of my God'* (3.12), to dine with Jesus and sit with him on his throne (3.20, 21).



And so from those believers in the first century, down to us in the twenty-first century, comes the exhortation at the end of each letter:

‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

concluding thoughts

This series of articles has examined the way of life and beliefs of the first century Christians in contrast with what passes for Christianity today. Just as a river gets more polluted the further it is from its source, so the beliefs and teachings of the early Christians have been lost in a mass of man-made traditions and doctrines that under-

The hot springs at Pamukkale in Turkey near the ancient city of Laodicea. Jesus’ reference to the disciples there being lukewarm may allude to the tepid water that was piped to the nearby city.

mine the purity of the original message taught by Jesus and his apostles.

In his 2nd letter to Timothy, written near the end of his life in a Roman prison, Paul urged Timothy to:

‘Preach the word! ...For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but... they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables’. 2 Timothy 4.2-4

TABLE BELOW: reproduced with permission from 'Revelation explained' by P. J. Southgate and C. J. Wharton, published by The Dawn Book Supply, 2013.

The seven letters summarised

Church	Feature of Christ in ch.1	Positive	Negative	Advice	Reward
Ephesus	Walks among churches	Intolerance of error	Lost first love	Do the first works	Tree of Life
Smyrna	First and Last	Acceptance of tribulation and poverty	None	Be faithful under trial	Crown of life, survive second death
Pergamos	Sharp two-edged sword	Held fast and some martyred	Doctrines of Balaam and Nicolaitans	Repent	White stone of acquittal with new name
Thyatira	Eyes as flame, feet as bronze	Service, faith, patience	Permitted Jezebel to preach	False teachers punished, others to hold fast	Given power over the nations and the morning star
Sardis	Seven spirits and stars	Few undefiled	A dead church	Be watchful	White garments; names in book of life
Philadelphia	Holy and true holder of the key of David	Kept Christ's word and name; persevered	None	Hold fast	Pillar in God's temple; name of God, Jesus and New Jerusalem
Laodicea	Faithful witness	None	Self-satisfied, rich, lukewarm	Repent, buy true wealth and clothing	Dine with Jesus; sit with him on his throne

The following is a list of some of the important beliefs of the early Christians that we have considered in this series of articles. They are based entirely on the teaching of God's Word. Compare these with what is taught in many churches today:

- ❖ There is only one God the Creator.
- ❖ Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
- ❖ The Holy Spirit is the power of God.
- ❖ The Bible is the wholly inspired Word of God.
- ❖ Man is mortal and dies because of sin.
- ❖ Resurrection is the true hope of believers.
- ❖ Salvation is only possible through Jesus.
- ❖ There is only one Gospel.
- ❖ The Gospel was preached to Abraham.
- ❖ The Jews are God's witnesses.
- ❖ The kingdom of Israel was the kingdom of God in the past.
- ❖ Jesus will return to re-establish the kingdom of God on earth.

❖ Jesus will be king over the kingdom of God.

❖ The reward of the righteous will be eternal life to be enjoyed on earth.

In conclusion we urge you to consider the sound advice of the Apostle Paul addressed to Timothy but so relevant to Christ's true followers in every age:

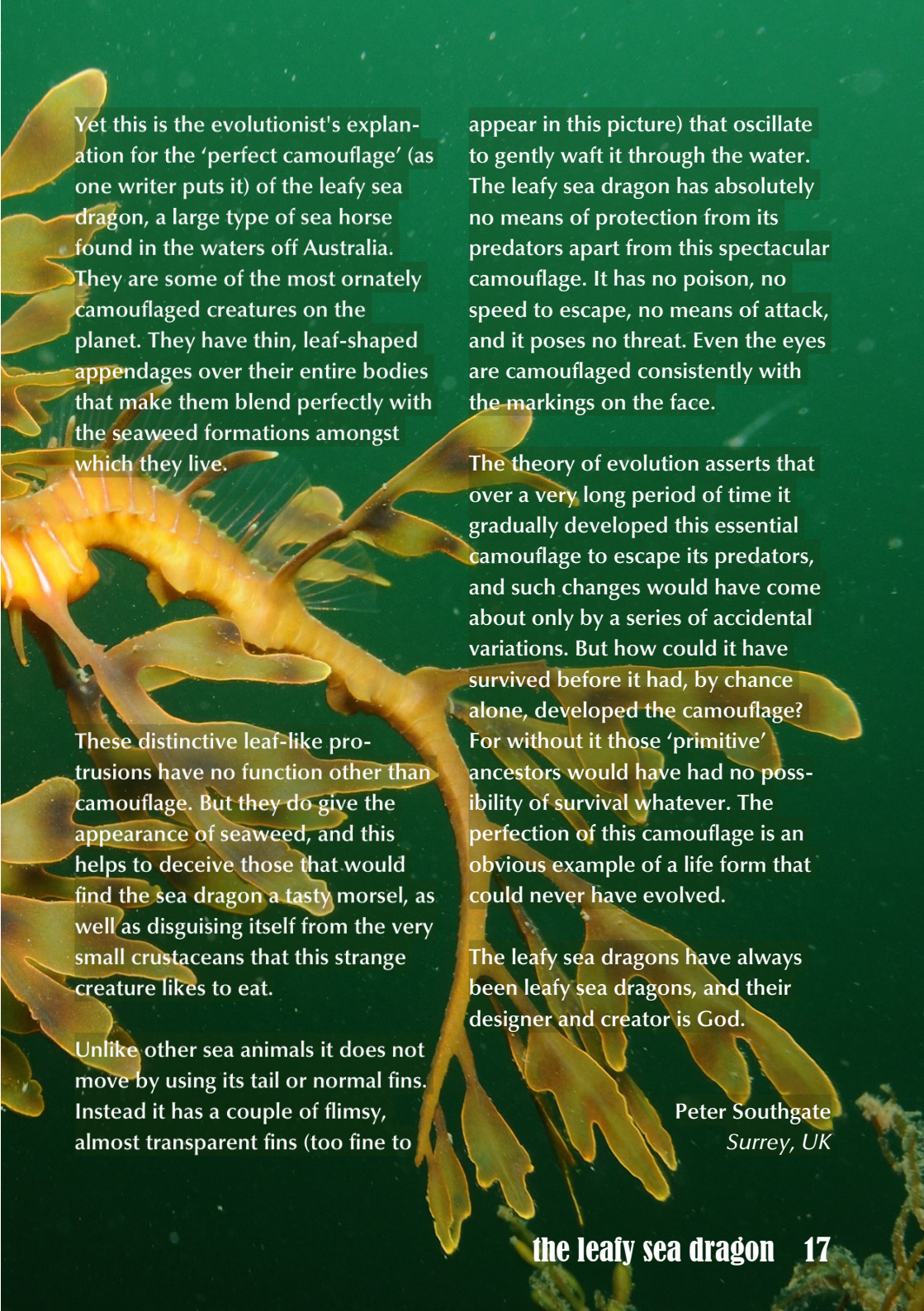
'...continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.' 2 Timothy 3.14,15

Howard Cooke
Surrey, UK

“marvellous are your works!”

I expect all of us have seen pictures of soldiers wearing leaves on their helmets to disguise them from the enemy. But no one would say that, because this added protection would increase a soldier's chance of survival, then in time and by chance all soldiers would gradually sprout leaves on their heads.

the leafy sea dragon

A leafy sea dragon is shown swimming among seaweed. The dragon's body is covered in leaf-like appendages that blend perfectly with the surrounding seaweed, making it nearly invisible. The background is a deep green, suggesting an underwater environment.

Yet this is the evolutionist's explanation for the 'perfect camouflage' (as one writer puts it) of the leafy sea dragon, a large type of sea horse found in the waters off Australia. They are some of the most ornately camouflaged creatures on the planet. They have thin, leaf-shaped appendages over their entire bodies that make them blend perfectly with the seaweed formations amongst which they live.

These distinctive leaf-like protrusions have no function other than camouflage. But they do give the appearance of seaweed, and this helps to deceive those that would find the sea dragon a tasty morsel, as well as disguising itself from the very small crustaceans that this strange creature likes to eat.

Unlike other sea animals it does not move by using its tail or normal fins. Instead it has a couple of flimsy, almost transparent fins (too fine to

appear in this picture) that oscillate to gently waft it through the water. The leafy sea dragon has absolutely no means of protection from its predators apart from this spectacular camouflage. It has no poison, no speed to escape, no means of attack, and it poses no threat. Even the eyes are camouflaged consistently with the markings on the face.

The theory of evolution asserts that over a very long period of time it gradually developed this essential camouflage to escape its predators, and such changes would have come about only by a series of accidental variations. But how could it have survived before it had, by chance alone, developed the camouflage? For without it those 'primitive' ancestors would have had no possibility of survival whatever. The perfection of this camouflage is an obvious example of a life form that could never have evolved.

The leafy sea dragons have always been leafy sea dragons, and their designer and creator is God.

Peter Southgate
Surrey, UK

Bible teaching about

God's promise to King David

David was the second and greatest of Israel's kings, reigning about one thousand years before Christ. Much of his reign was marked by conflict with the nearby nations, especially the Philistines; but as he established a lasting peace, his thoughts turned to his ambition to build a permanent home for the Ark of the Covenant. This sacred golden chest with its overspreading cherubim figures was the symbol of God's presence among his people, but it was still sheltered only by a tent ('tabernacle'), as it had been since the Exodus from Egypt. Now, David thought, was the time to build a beautiful and permanent house for the worship of God.

His intentions were good, but he was to be disappointed. This task, God said through the prophet Nathan, was not to be for David himself, who was too much a man of war, but for his son Solomon. David had wanted to do something for God – instead, God promised to



do something for David: to build David a 'house' of a very different sort:

'...the LORD tells you that he will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his Father, and he shall be my son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But my mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from

before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established for ever before you. Your throne shall be established for ever.'

2 Samuel 7.8-16

who is the seed of David?

Who is this seed of King David that was also to be the Son of God? Note the important clues to his identity:

- ❖ He will be a descendant of David.
- ❖ He will build a house for God's name.
- ❖ His throne and his kingdom will be established for ever.
- ❖ The promise requires King David to see for himself the establishment of his descendant's throne.

Yet as we learn from the New Testament, David died without seeing the fulfilment of this promise (Acts 2.29-31). It can only become a reality if he is raised from the dead.

David's son Solomon partly fulfilled the promise in that he built a temple as God's dwelling place in Jerusalem. Although Solomon was descended from David, he was not

the Son of God. Who then is the descendant of King David who will fulfil God's promise?

The answer is found in Luke's gospel, where we read the words of the angel Gabriel announcing the birth of Jesus to Mary:

'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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

How was it possible for the promised seed to be the Son of God? The answer is found in the angel's words that followed:

'...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that holy one who is to be born will be called the Son of God.' Luke 1.32, 33, 35

These words of the angel Gabriel teach us that Jesus, the Son of God, was born by the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill that great promise made to his ancestor David.

This is confirmed by the words of the Apostle Paul:

'...Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.'

Romans 1.3,4

Jesus himself expressed this great truth at the end of his last message to believers: *'...I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star'* (Revelation 22.16).

These quotations from the New Testament confirm the identity of the promised seed of King David and how he was to be the Son of God.

the coming Kingdom of God

The Bible teaches that the kingship of Jesus is an undeniable fact. Indeed, it is a key factor already noted in the promise to David: *'...I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever'* (2 Samuel 7.14). The wise men from the East travelled all the way from their homeland to Bethlehem to pay

homage to the King of the Jews and they asked: *'...Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him'* (Matthew 2.2).

Later during his ministry, as Jesus neared Jerusalem, many grew impatient and thought that the time for his kingdom had arrived. They recognised that he was the promised Messiah, the seed of David who would sit on David's throne for ever. But Jesus used parables to illustrate that the time for his kingdom to be established was still in the future (e.g.see the parable of the minas in Luke 19.11-27).

On another occasion, Jesus' response to the faith of a centurion whose servant he had healed, identifies those who will be in this future kingdom of God and those who will be excluded:

'...many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Matthew 8.11,12

The kingdom of God will comprise both Jews (the descendants of Abraham) and Gentiles with Jesus as their king.

The restoration of the Jews and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 is in harmony with Ezekiel's prophecy of restoration (see Ezekiel 37.1-14) and they are a living testimony that the promise to David will come true. The latter part of this prophecy yet to be fulfilled (verses 21-28) constitutes the true hope of Bible students, who are looking forward to the establishment of the kingdom of God. This will replace the current misrule of the world by mankind and last for ever (Revelation 11.15).

The throne of this kingdom will be in Jerusalem, as it was in the kingdom of Israel under King David:

'At that time Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the LORD, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem; they shall walk no more after the stubbornness of their evil heart.'

Jeremiah 3.17

Jerusalem will be the central place of worship and many people from all races of the world will joyfully flock there for spiritual teaching sessions and worship (Isaiah 2.3; Zechariah 14.16,17).

the spiritual house of God

Jesus spent considerable time during his first advent challenging his contemporaries, teaching the people about his Father and preaching the gospel of the coming kingdom of God. He warned about those who appeared to be Godly but failed to obey God's commands: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven"* (Matthew 7.21).

Doing the will of Jesus' Father involves personal commitment to the things that are clear requirements throughout the Scriptures. They must seek the kingdom as the first priority as Jesus said: *'...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...'* (Matthew 6.33).

Through belief and baptism, individuals can be integrated into the divine family, and therefore David's family (Matthew 12.50). This constitutes God's spiritual house

(Ephesians 2.19,20; 1 Peter 2.5-9) and whose doctrine is the one that the holy writers call upon us to use for direction (2 Timothy 3.15-17). This will lead us in God's mercy to participation in the joy of the coming kingdom of God.

forgiveness of sins made possible

The words of the promise to David demonstrate that God was not going to leave His son unpunished for committing sin (2 Samuel 7.14, 15). However, unlike Saul, the first king of Israel, God's mercy would not depart from David's descendant, Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that Jesus had human nature and he struggled but succeeded in overcoming sin (Hebrews 4.15). This is clearly demonstrated in the record of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, immediately after he was baptized and had received the Holy Spirit.

The writer to the Hebrews illustrates this point of Christ's humanity very clearly (Hebrews 2.14-18). Similarly, the prophet Isaiah foretold what would happen to Jesus during his trial and crucifixion: *'...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised*

for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53.5).

After his resurrection, repentance and forgiveness of sins was proclaimed in the name of Jesus (Luke 24.46, 47) and the apostles were commanded:

'...Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.'

Mark 16.15,16

ruling with Jesus

The Scriptures clearly show that belief and baptism into the saving name of Jesus Christ relates them to the promise to be his co-rulers, as demonstrated in both the Old and New Testaments:

'...the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'

Daniel 7.27

'... they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.'

Revelation 20.6

Jesus' life and teaching during his first advent fulfilled part of the promises of God to King David. Indeed, his teaching is designed to prepare his co-rulers for the coming kingdom of God that we believe will soon be established on earth. This dominion will extend from Jerusalem to all parts of the world (Psalm 72.8).

The mortal inhabitants will include both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) from all nations who will live in harmony in the coming kingdom age (Zechariah 8.20-23). This will only happen when God's will is performed here on earth. The well-known prayer that Jesus taught his disciples as a model for all our prayers opens with the words: *'Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'* (Matthew 6.10).

The kingdom of God will comprise the immortal co-rulers with Jesus and his mortal subjects. Indeed, life during this millennial rule of Jesus Christ will be a tranquil and enjoyable period (Isaiah 32.16-18; Isaiah 65.17-25; 2 Peter 3.13;

Revelation 20.6). Those who will be accepted in the kingdom of God will enjoy the peaceful reign of Christ in fulfilment of God's promise to David.

God, who promised King David a son to reign on his throne for ever, is still in control of what is happening in the world today, despite all appearances to the contrary. The appointed time for Jesus to return to fulfill the promise is fixed in the divine calendar (Acts 17.31). If we allow ourselves to be taught by Him through His Holy Word and follow the teaching and example of His Son, we can look forward to a wonderful future. The last book of the Bible expresses the joy of those who, through the saving work of Jesus, are granted a place in the coming kingdom of God on earth:

'...you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.'

Revelation 5.9, 10

Bramuel Kisuya
Nairobi, Kenya



the Bible stands

THE TEST OF TIME

24 seals and bullae



Seals and bullae – tiny but powerful!

Tiny circular objects about one centimetre across, embossed with a pattern, hardly seem the most exciting of archaeological finds. However, they can throw important light on events and confirm the actual existence of obscure individuals who may only be mentioned in passing in the Biblical record.

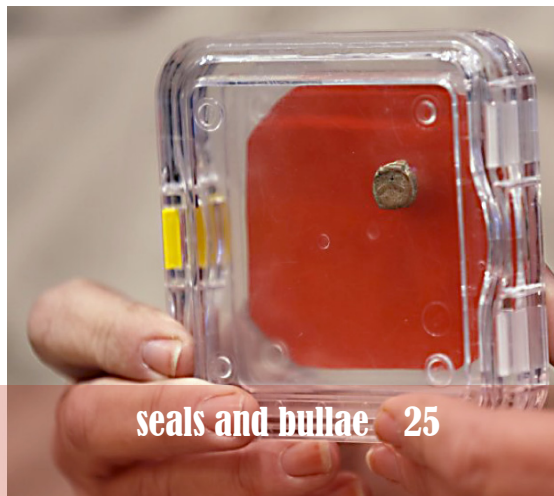
What was the purpose of these seals? In ancient times, they were personal engraved stones, which could be used to make permanent impressions on clay for sealing documents or other secret matters of State. These identified the person making the seal, like a signature. The king's seal was clearly the most important and ensured that the document was authentic. A broken seal on a private document or casket could well mean that it had been opened by the wrong person!

In the ancient Near East, a clay seal known as a bulla (plural bullae) was used to secure the strings tied around rolled-up documents. The bullae were made by pressing a seal onto a wet lump of clay. A stamped bulla served as both a signature and as a means of ensuring the authenticity of the documents. Kings' officials would use a seal on behalf of the king for matters of State.

In the book of Esther we read of the Persian king Ahasuerus issuing laws affecting the Jews: *"You yourselves write a decree for the Jews, as you please, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's signet ring; for a letter which is written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet ring no one can revoke."* (Esther 8.8)

LEFT: the area (marked in red) known as the 'Ophel' where recent excavations have discovered a number of 'bullae'.

RIGHT: the bulla of King Hezekiah, not much more than 1cm wide (see page 26).



Seals could be made of semi-precious stones or just engraved limestone. Meticulous sifting of waste material in specific locations has revealed these little treasures that can be such an important link with real historical Bible characters who actually owned and used them in daily life! The finds rarely consist of the seal itself, but much more frequently, the more fragile impression of the seal forming the tiny clay bulla. The use of one seal would obviously result in hundreds of impressions, some of which have survived for thousands of years! Here are some recent examples of such treasures, of great interest to students of the Bible.

Recent meticulous excavations have been carried out at the foot of the southern wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (see aerial view page 24). They are called the Ophel excavations, led by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute of Archaeology under the direction of Dr Eilat Mazar. She has been active for over 30 years in excavations in the ancient city of David and around the Temple Mount.



The 'bulla' of King Hezekiah of Judah, showing the inscription which is clearly readable.

These Ophel excavations have unearthed many treasures, but in December 2015 it was announced that an impression of the royal seal of King Hezekiah himself had been found!

Hezekiah king of Judah, was one of the rare 'good' kings who, according to the Bible, brought the nation back from idolatry, re-dedicated the temple and reinstated the proper worship of Yahweh. He held a great national Passover feast for Judah and the people of Israel to the north, the like of which had never been known. The Bible testifies of Hezekiah:

'...that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any who were before him'

2 Kings 18.5

So was this king a true historical character? If we needed absolute proof it is here in this tiny clay fragment, bearing the king's personal seal. The bulla, which measures just over a centimetre in diameter, bears a seal impression depicting a two-winged sun disk and contains a Hebrew inscription that reads *'Belonging to Hezekiah, (son of) Ahaz, king of Judah'*. Why should Hezekiah's seal bear an image of the sun? We know he was definitely not a sun god worshipper – far from it! However, when he was sick, God did perform a miraculous sign for him by moving the sun's shadow back on the sundial of his father Ahaz (see 2

Kings 20.9-11). We cannot be sure of course, but that might be why the sun featured on his seal!

The bulla was discovered along with 33 other stamped bullae during wet-sifting of dirt from a refuse dump, adjoining a 10th century BC royal building in the Ophel. This seal is over 2,700 years old. The historical detail established from such finds is both astonishing and faith strengthening.

Other recent finds confirm the historical accuracy of even the smallest details about people who lived at the time of the Prophet Jeremiah. The seal impression belonging to Gedalyahu ben Pashur (Gedaliah son of Pashur – see Jeremiah 38.1), a minister of Zedekiah the last king of Judah, was found in a dig in the ancient City of David, a treasure some 2,600 years old (see page 29 top).

Earlier, in 2005, another belonging to Yehukual ben Shelemyahu was found close by. This Jehucal was a fellow royal officer, referred to as Jukal (Jeremiah 37.3 and 38.1 – see page 29).

Both of these characters appear next to each other in the following verse:

‘Now Shephatiah the son of Mattan, Gedaliah the son of Pashhur, Jucal the son of Shelemiah, and Pashhur the son of Malchiah heard the words that Jeremiah had spoken to all the people...’ Jeremiah 38.1

Both bullae (**see opposite**) were found just outside the Dung Gate close to what is believed to be the remains of David’s palace. The impressions are tiny, complete and in perfect condition, measuring just 1cm across, and it is all the more remarkable that they had survived in such harsh conditions.

Another seal bears the name of Temech listed in the book of Nehemiah as one of the servant families of the Nethinim. They helped Levites in the temple service in Jerusalem and were sent to Babylon after its destruction in 586 BC.

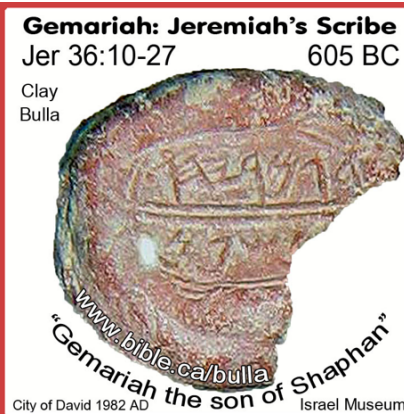
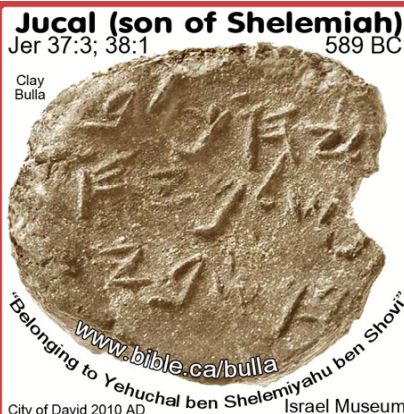
In 1982 the Israeli archaeologist Yigal Shiloh discovered a cache of bullae in a nearby site including one with the name of Gemaryahu ben Shaphan, a minister and scribe

in the reign of Jehoiakim (608-597 BC) (**see opposite**). This Gemariah son of Shaphan is mentioned by Jeremiah: *‘Then Baruch read from the book the words of Jeremiah in the house of the LORD, in the chamber of Gemariah the son of Shaphan the scribe, in the upper court at the entry of the New Gate of the LORD’s house, in the hearing of all the people’* (Jeremiah 36.10). Shaphan, his father, worked for King Josiah (2 Kings 22.3).

Further Biblical characters whose seals have been found include the following:

- ❖ The false prophet Hananiah son of Azariah (Jeremiah 28.1-17 – **see opposite**).
- ❖ The staff officer Seraiah son of Neriah (Jeremiah 51.59 – **see opposite**)
- ❖ Pedaiah son of Jehoiachin in the royal line in exile (1 Chron. 3.18).
- ❖ Jerameel (son of Jehoiakim) sent to arrest Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36.26).
- ❖ Elishama the scribe (Jeremiah 36.12).

This list is not exhaustive [Source: the on-line Museum of Bullae and Seals of Judea and Israel].



What does all this mean to us? These fascinating finds simply serve to confirm the historical accuracy of the Biblical record in even the smallest details, so that we may have confidence in its record and message. God has allowed these vital clues to lay dormant for thousands of years so that in this age of scepticism, the discerning person may have confidence in the truth of God's Word the Bible.

In the words of the archaeologist Dr Mazar: 'One cannot help being astonished by the credibility of the Biblical source as seen by archaeological finds'.

Justin Giles
London UK



from our mailbag

Was Jesus forsaken?

A reader has asked why Jesus said ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ when he hung from the cross? You would not have expected the Almighty to have abandoned His Son at this critical time so that he was totally bereft of divine help.

I think this question has its answer in the circumstances that led to his crucifixion. Jesus knew what he had to do and needed to do alone. The words Jesus spoke on the cross ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27.46), are a quotation from Psalm 22 verse 1. Jesus often quoted from the Old

Testament Scriptures and this Messianic Psalm clearly pointed forward to his coming as the Saviour. Another verse in this Psalm reminds us that God did not forsake His Son: ‘... *he has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has he hidden his face from him; but when he cried to him, he heard*’ (Psalm 22.24). Other Messianic Psalms include similar words.

Matthew’s Gospel record gives a very telling account of the mental struggles that Jesus underwent in the garden of Gethsemane just before his crucifixion: ‘... *he (Jesus) began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then he said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death”... “O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will”*’ (Matthew 26.37-39).

Jesus was troubled about his approaching death and would have preferred another way, yet he recognised that it was vitally

RIGHT: night falls in a grove of ancient olive trees. The name Gethsemane comes from Aramaic meaning ‘oil press’ and implies the garden of Jesus’ agony was an olive grove.



important that he acted in accordance with God's will.

important that he acted in accordance with God's will. As he hung on the cross, what had to be accomplished was by him alone without any relief or assistance from his heavenly Father.

The final cry of Jesus that followed was another quotation from the Psalms. He said: *"Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit". And having said this, he breathed his last*' (Luke 23.46 – see Psalm 31.5).

We can conclude that God did not abandon His Son, for Jesus knew that after three days he would be raised from the dead as he predicted when speaking to his disciples: *'From that time Jesus began to show to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day'* (Matthew 16.21).

As his life ebbed away, in his distress Jesus called out *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me'* when addressing his Father in prayer. He summoned up all his strength to endure alone those final moments of intense suffering and to fulfil the destiny appointed

for himself and for all those who come to God through him.

This critical point in Jesus' life brings out his humanity as a representative of mankind, which allowed him to be the perfect sacrifice to open the way for us all to benefit from God's offer of salvation and to escape from the inevitable consequences of Adam's transgression. In the letter to the Hebrews we are also reminded of God's assurance to all who put their trust in Him: *'I will never leave you nor forsake you'* (Hebrews 13.5).

God's plan of salvation from the beginning, was to provide a saviour who shared our human nature but as the Apostle Peter wrote, Jesus *'committed no sin, nor was guile found in his mouth... who himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness – by whose stripes you were healed'* (1 Peter 2. 22, 24).

Correspondence Secretary



taxi rank at Miami airport

Do you know where you are going?

Throughout the world one of the great growth industries of modern times is international travel. For some time in the UK the government has been considering how it can provide additional runway capacity to meet anticipated future demand for air travel. Meanwhile many large cities face the problems associated with traffic congestion and the resulting pollution. In more rural parts of the world, such as the prairies of Canada or the steppes of Asia, people still travel hundreds of miles across land by bus or train. Others still travel by more

traditional means such as horse-back, camel or donkey.

We sometimes comment that we know where we are going but we wonder where everyone else is heading. It does not seem to matter what time of the day or night – there is always someone else on the road. Of course travelling is not a new phenomenon. From earliest history, mankind has travelled from one place to another, to find food, to escape from enemies or simply to discover new lands.

Abraham's journey

The Bible records a number of very important journeys. One of the earliest was that made by Abraham. He was told by God to leave his homeland and travel to a place that He would show him:

‘Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you’. **Genesis 12.1**

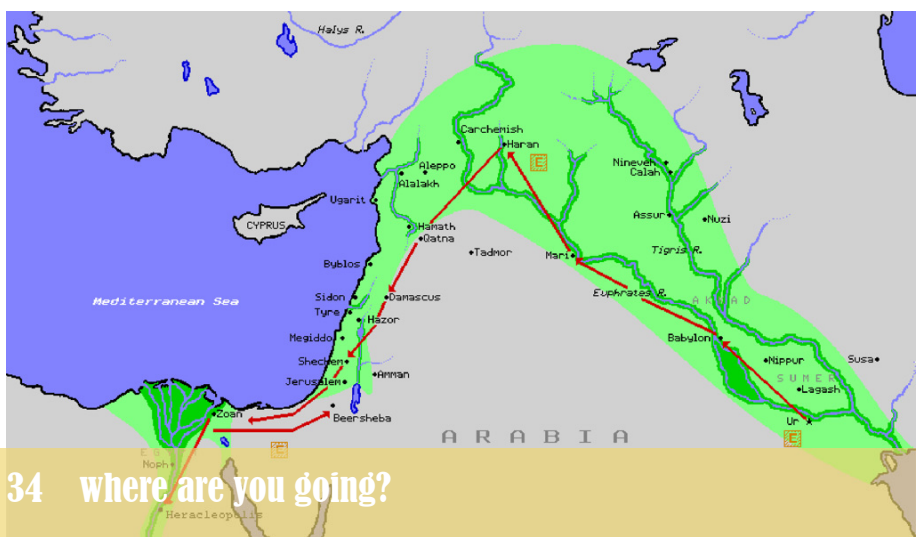
So Abraham started the journey not knowing what his final destination would be. It began at Ur of the Chaldeans in what today is known as Iraq and continued across the 'Fertile Crescent' through Syria and Canaan (now Israel) down into Egypt. From there he returned to

the land of Canaan. This would have been a total distance in excess of 1,600 miles. The journey would have been made on foot or on the back of an animal – there was no modern public transport available for Abraham!

He made the journey because he trusted in God. Even though he did not know where God was taking him he was sure that it would be for his ultimate benefit. Indeed God had told him this would be the case when he said:

‘I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him

One of the most extraordinary journeys of the ancient world: the migration of Abraham and his family around the Fertile Crescent



who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

Genesis 12.2,3

The history of the children of Israel, Abraham's descendants through his grandson Jacob (Israel), demonstrates the partial fulfilment of this promise to Abraham.

the wilderness journey

The book of Exodus tells us about the journeys of the children of Israel after they left Egypt where they had been harshly treated. They had been forced to carry out hard labour - particularly brick-making under very harsh conditions. They pleaded to be released from Egyptian bondage and Moses was chosen by God to lead the people and was told:

'...you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.'

Exodus 6.7,8

The Israelites did not know at the time that their journey from Egypt to the land of promise would take

some forty years. Having been released from Egypt by God, after He had inflicted plagues on the Egyptians, the people set out in hope of a better future in this land that was unknown to them. They started the journey but they did not know the destination. As with Abraham they had faith that God would bring good things to them at the end of the journey. But they failed to uphold God's law and did not maintain their faith in God with the result that a whole generation perished in the wilderness.

New Testament journeys

Other journeys are recorded in the New Testament. A familiar one is that made by Joseph and Mary from their home in Nazareth, southwards to Bethlehem, in order to take part in the census. This journey was made under difficult conditions as Mary was heavily pregnant. Yet Mary and Joseph made the journey in order to meet their legal obligations and also because they had faith that God would be with them. The journey was necessary to fulfil the Old Testament prophecy that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5.2).

Jesus himself travelled widely with his disciples during his ministry. Towards the end of those journeys *'he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem'* (Luke 9.51) knowing what lay ahead of him. He travelled that lonely path to fulfil his mission as the Saviour.

The Apostle Paul also travelled far on his 'missionary journeys', to preach the gospel, the good news about the coming kingdom of God. In addition to travel on foot he also travelled long distances by sea. In a letter that he wrote to the first century Christians at Corinth he spoke about being shipwrecked three times and of spending a day and a night *'in the deep'*, that is in the sea. He also mentioned the *'perils of robbers'* as he journeyed - a peril that still exists in many areas today (2 Corinthians 11.25, 26).

Travel was still very difficult in the times of Paul, but he travelled because he knew that he was carrying out God's work. He believed that through his work he could bring great benefit to others. He journeyed because he had confidence that Jesus Christ was the Saviour - the Jewish Messiah that had been promised for so long.

In his earlier life Paul had not believed in Jesus – on the contrary, he had persecuted those who followed him and caused great terror among the Christians. It was on a particular journey as he travelled to Damascus, that Paul saw a vision from heaven and heard the voice of Jesus. He was literally stopped in his tracks and started on a new life (see Acts 9.1-9).

The broad way and the difficult way

Paul would have been familiar with the teaching of Jesus when he spoke of service to him being a journey. Jesus used the example of travelling along two different routes. One of these routes was wide, straight and easy to find and follow. It appeared to be very attractive. It was a route followed by many people. The other route was narrow and difficult and only a few people chose to follow it.

The lesson of this teaching was in the destination that was being sought. The two routes led to different destinations. The broad way that attracted so many to it actually led to destruction. In contrast, the unattractive road led

to a new life – but sadly, few found that way. This was what Jesus said:

‘Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.’

Matthew 7.13,14

Jesus was putting the two choices before us. We can ignore him and his teaching and enter the broad way and the end result will be our destruction. On the other hand we can, like Paul, choose to put our trust in Jesus. But the way may not then seem as attractive, for we will be entering through the narrow gate onto the difficult road.

Jesus commands us to put aside the things of this life that will lure so many to destruction. If we choose to follow him, certain aspects of our lives will seem more difficult. The commands of Jesus mean we will have to change our lifestyle.

If we have been following the broad way it will come as a shock to turn onto the narrow way. What destination do we really want to reach? We could stay on that broad way, enjoying the things of today’s

world that pander to our tastes, the ‘eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die’ syndrome. Certainly that broad way will end in destruction, for our rejection of Jesus will bar us from the gift of eternal life.

There is a difference if we choose to enter by the narrow gate. The journey itself may be harder, the route will be more difficult to find. However, when we reach the destination we will be glad that we rejected the broad way because we will have come to something that offers us so much more. Paul summed it up in a letter he wrote to believers at Rome:

‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Romans 6.23

The journey to the kingdom

Although the way that Jesus has shown us is a difficult choice, we have a very helpful guide to following it contained in the Word of God. The Bible must be our ‘road map’ if that is the route we choose to take. It is, in fact, our only reliable guide. If we follow it carefully and put its instructions



For these refugees from Syria the journey is difficult and dangerous, the destination very uncertain. God promises to change the world we live in.

into practice, then we should have relatively little difficulty following the route, as the Psalmist wrote: *'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path'* (Psalm 119.105).

During our daily lives many of us have to travel from one place to another. We need to get to work, to purchase food, to take children to school or perhaps to visit friends or relatives. For all these journeys we

need to make appropriate arrangements. As we travel we encounter many other people also travelling but we do not know their planned destinations.

For each of us there is a much longer journey that should also be thought about. It is the journey through life. For many people there is little thought about the future; they just 'take life as it comes'. However, in the end there are only two destinations and two choices, as we have seen from the words of Jesus. There is life and there is death.

There will be eternal life in the kingdom of God. This will be a time of peace and righteousness, a time when there will be no war or pain, no discrimination or victimisation, no famine or drought. No one will flee from one country to another in fear of their lives.

The alternative is eternal death – to go to the grave with no hope for the future.

Which way have you chosen for your journey through life?

Do you know where you are going?

John Hitches Norfolk, UK

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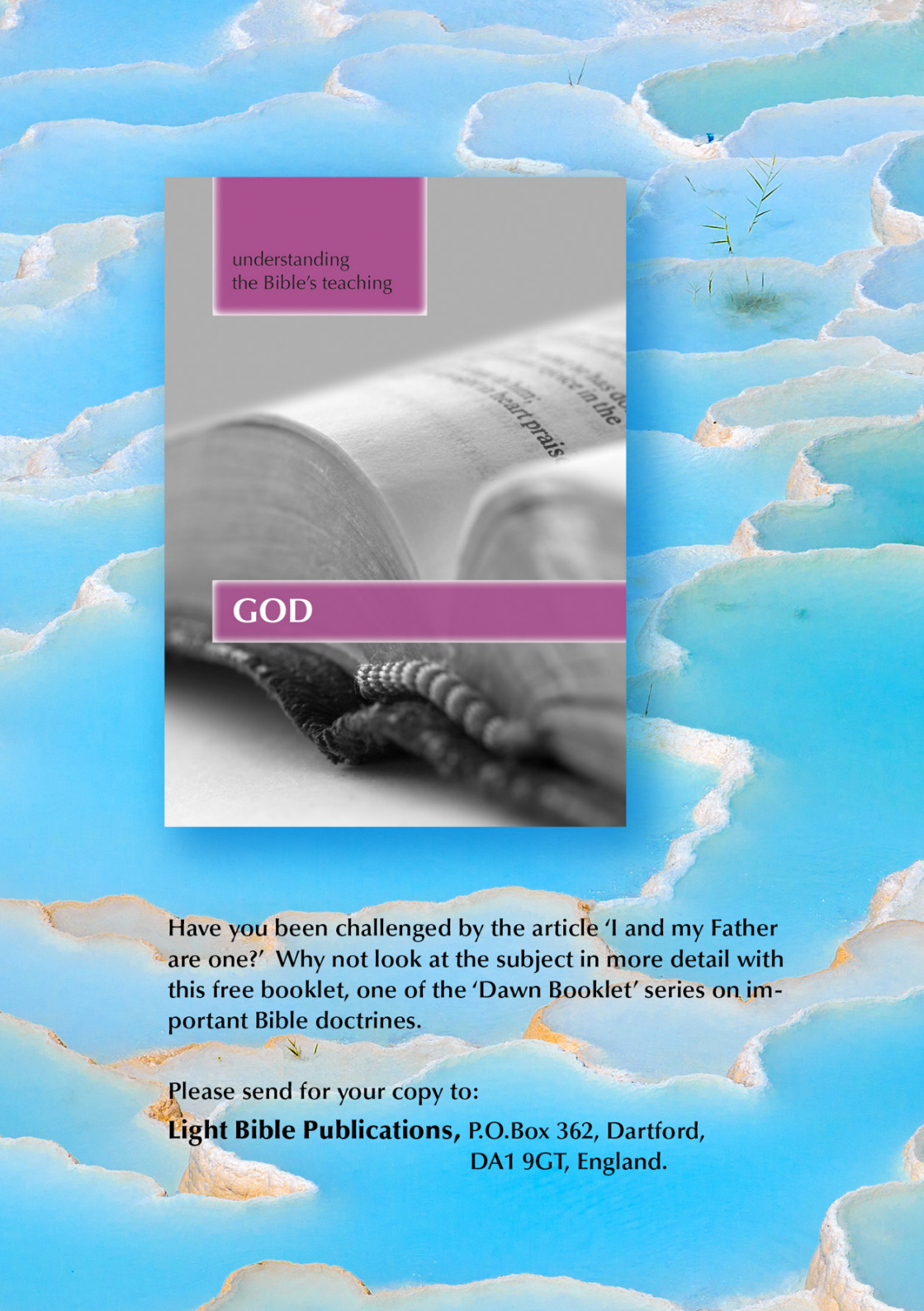
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