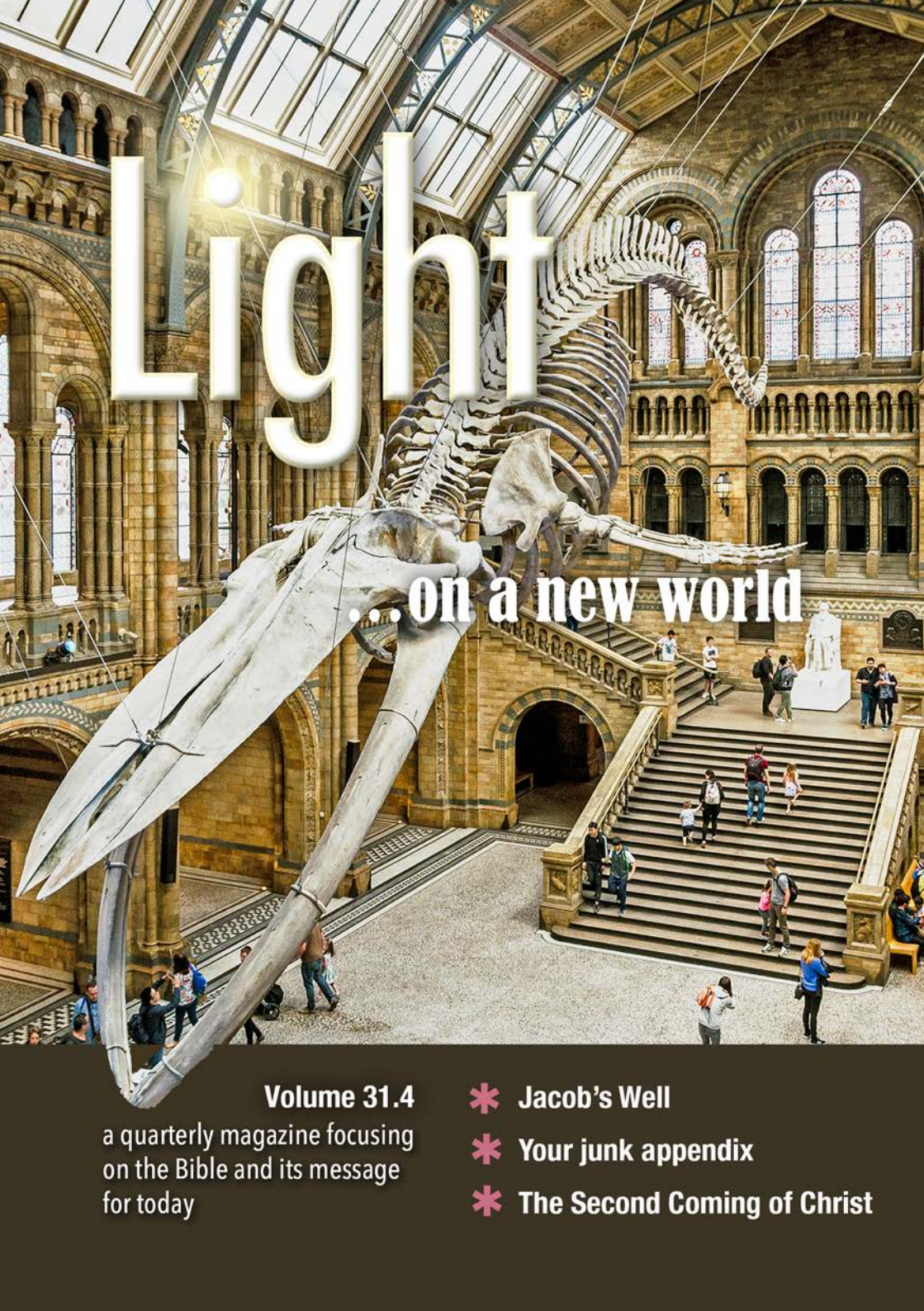




Light

...on a new world

Volume 31.4

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

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cover picture

A statue of Charles Darwin is dwarfed by the skeleton of a blue whale in the Natural History Museum, London. A century ago the human body was described as 'a walking museum of antiquities', due to the number of supposedly useless organs we had inherited from evolution. Today the picture is very different – see 'Comment' article page 23

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WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT

The Second Coming of Christ

Here is a quotation from the Bible – you will probably recognise it as the words of Jesus:

‘And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also.’ John 14:3

What did Jesus mean when he said, ‘I will come again’? This article explores what the Bible says about this subject. Be prepared – you may find that what the Bible says is different from the beliefs of many Christians.

The mission of Jesus

Let us start with an Old Testament prophecy that deals with the mission of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. Compare the words of Isaiah with those of Luke, which describe a reading that Jesus gave in the synagogue. In this comparison we have strong clues about his first and second coming:

‘The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.’

Isaiah 61:1-3

Part of the great Isaiah scroll found near the Dead Sea, dating from around 200 BC. Some two hundred years later, Jesus read aloud from the scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth, and said he was fulfilling the very words spoken by the prophet.



Luke records in his gospel:

‘And he (Jesus) was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the LORD”... And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today is this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”.’

Luke 4:17-21

Notice that Jesus applied the first part of Isaiah’s prophecy to himself. He told them it was being fulfilled as they listened to him. Who could deny the truth of this? This was at the start of his ministry, and there would shortly be ample evidence before them that he was able to fulfil this role as the gentle preacher who also healed their sick. Jesus did not quote the entire passage in Isaiah. The words he did not read aloud have to do with a future role – not the role of preaching the Gospel message.

Jesus is the Christ

Did Jesus fulfil this prophecy?

Clearly, he stated that it was about him. We would be foolish to disagree with his assessment of this. However, equally clearly, he did not fulfil the entire prophecy, which you will note from the above comparison, continues after the words quoted by Jesus. We need to acknowledge that his work foretold by Isaiah has only been partly completed. There was, and still is, more to come!

Jesus was quick to distance himself from some of the practical aspects of his role as the ‘Christ’ or the ‘Messiah’ (both words mean ‘anointed one’), even though he was very quick to encourage the disciples to believe it was his destiny.

A future work

The Bible tells us that the work of Jesus was incomplete when he died and later ascended to heaven after his resurrection. We should look at some of those final exchanges with the disciples before he ascended to the right hand of his Father. We find these in the first chapter of Acts. The disciples asked him about his coming kingdom, that is the unfulfilled part of his work:

‘Therefore, when they had come together, they asked him, saying, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And he said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own

authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”’

Acts 1:6–8

Does this say they were mistaken about the Kingdom? Not at all. Jesus’ response was not to tell them they were mistaken, but to tell them that a lot more work had to be done, a lot of things had still to happen, and it would be quite a while before that time was to come. Shortly after this, Jesus was taken from them but they were left in no doubt about his second coming:

‘...while they watched, he was taken up, and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly towards heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven”.’

Acts 1:9–11

The very last message the disciples received after Jesus left them, was that he would return. We also need to fully understand that his return was to be as they saw him go. This is really important, because it means Jesus must return and be recognised, just as people recognised him as a person at that time; one who walked among them. Jesus was no figment of their imagination! As far as his public appearances were concerned after his resurrection, he was seen and handled as a being with substance. So, remember this, when Jesus returns he will do so as the ‘Christ’, and he will return bodily.

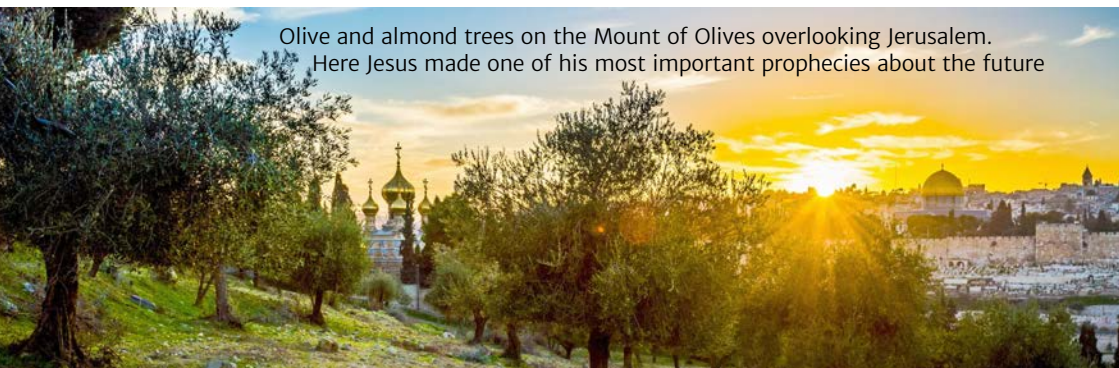
How will we recognise his return?

The disciples asked a similar question and Jesus gave them the answer:

‘Now as he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?”’

Matthew 24:3

The disciples linked ‘*the end of the age*’ with the coming of Jesus, and he



Olive and almond trees on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem.
Here Jesus made one of his most important prophecies about the future

was happy to discuss the issue with them. He gave them a number of signs to be alert for. He warned them not to be taken in by fraudulent, premature claims of his return in these words: *'For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be'* (Matthew 24:27). He advised them that his return would not be hidden, but would be seen as lightning when it strikes and illuminates the whole landscape:

'Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory'

Matthew 24:30

Jesus often refers to himself in the New Testament narrative as *'the Son of Man'*.

This is a clear description of people witnessing the return of Jesus, and *'all the tribes'* or nations on earth at that, not just a privileged few. There are also a number of allusions to the return of Jesus in Matthew chapter 24 and we encourage you to carefully read this chapter.

The return of Jesus Christ is clearly referred to during his life on earth and after he went to heaven. The Apostle Paul makes many references to this, and some of them are found

in his first letter to the Christians at Thessalonica:

1:10 **'and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.'**

2:19 **'For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?'**

3.13 **'so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints'**.

4.16 **'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.'**

5.2 **'For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night.'**

As you read those quotations, one from every chapter of the letter, did you notice anything about the characteristics of the second coming? Paul was assured that when Christ comes it will be sudden, without warning, like the unexpected *'thief in the night.'* And the first thing that will happen is that those who are *'in Christ'* will be raised from the dead.

What will Christ do when he comes?

Paul answers this very succinctly in his second letter to Timothy:

'I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom.'

2 Timothy 4:1

Paul clearly wanted Timothy to understand that, when Jesus returns, he will judge many people, some of whom will have been raised from the dead. Judgement, both for the world in general and for believers, is one of the features of his second coming. Some of the teachings of Jesus refer to this too. For example, consider the parable of the sheep and the goats:

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...'

Matthew 25:31-34

So Christ will not save everyone after all! Some people are going to be turned away; and only those who are

'dead in Christ' (1 Thessalonians 4:16) will be raised from the dead. That is something we need to think carefully about.

Salvation

The consequences of judgement are vitally important for those who will be judged. In this next passage we read of salvation, which is the destiny of those who pass to the right side of Christ's judgement seat.

'...Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for him he will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.'

Hebrews 9:28

Salvation is not universal; it is only for those who *'eagerly wait'* for Christ's return. If this is not a comfortable thought, remember that it is consistent with his teaching about the sheep and the goats.

The future Kingdom of God

The future work of Jesus is depicted very clearly in many Old Testament prophecies. When God created the world, it was His intention that it would give Him glory. It is not difficult to see that something went very seriously wrong, because this is far from the situation we see today. This does not mean God has given up. His plan, revealed by the Old Testament prophets, is still the same, and will be carried out at the appointed time (Acts 17:31). For

example, the prophecy of Daniel illustrates that one of the consequences of the second coming of Christ will be to destroy all that is wicked, and set up an everlasting kingdom which will glorify God:

‘And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.’

Daniel 2:44

In this passage Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon,

what would happen in the future. Daniel chapter two is a remarkable prophecy. It depicts a time when God will send Jesus to destroy the kingdoms of the world, and then to establish the world-wide Kingdom of God. Daniel was convinced about this, and we are too.

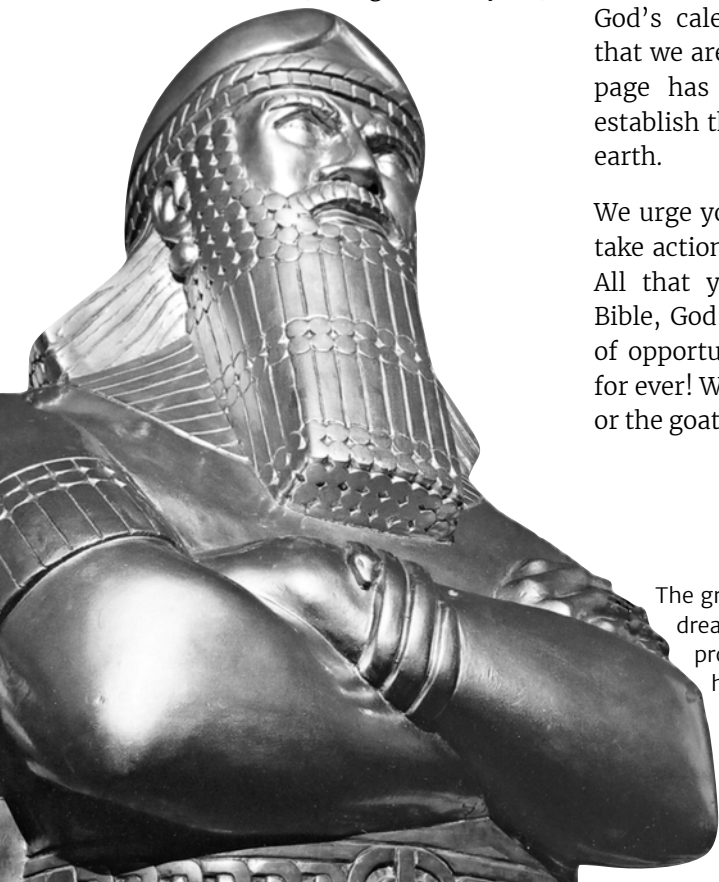
What about you?

The Apostle Peter wrote about people ‘*in the last days*’ who would scoff at the idea of Jesus returning to set up God’s Kingdom on earth (2 Peter 3:3-4). He describes them as ignorant. The reason he has not yet come is that it is not quite time in God’s calendar. All the evidence is that we are on the last page, but that page has not yet been turned to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth.

We urge you to think about this, and take action while you still have time. All that you need is found in the Bible, God’s Word of truth. The door of opportunity will not remain open for ever! Will you be among the sheep or the goats when Jesus returns?

Malcolm Skinner
Ontario, Canada

The great metal statue in the dream of Daniel chapter 2, a prophecy that one day all human government would be replaced by the kingdom of God (see Light Special Issue on Prophecy).



FROM THE EDITOR



In the last editorial we referred to the latest 'space race' between three nations to send a mission to Mars, one of which was the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a small but wealthy Arab state in the Middle East. This headline has almost faded into insignificance with the astounding events that have become headline news in the last couple of months.

On 15 September 2020, President Trump hosted the signing of the **'Abraham Accords'**, a groundbreaking Middle East peace treaty effectively normalising relations between Israel and the UAE. In signing the treaty, this Arab State joined Egypt and Jordan as the only Arab nations to make peace treaties with Israel. Fellow Persian Gulf nations Bahrain and Oman signalled their support, while Saudi Arabia did not oppose it.

In June 1967, the 'six-day war' between Israel and its Arab neighbours resulted in a state of animosity in the Middle East which was marked by another Arab League declaration described as 'the three no's' – 'no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with Israel'. The history of the region since that time has been one of war, terrorism and continual hatred, led by Iran and

its proxies, in seeking to overthrow the State of Israel (see 'Signs of the Times' article page 27).

What an amazing change has suddenly taken place!

The image of an El Al plane from Israel decorated with the word 'peace' in Arabic, English and Hebrew (see above) landing in Abu Dhabi and being greeted by UAE delegates, seems almost too incredible to be true. And yet it didn't stop there. Events have moved so fast that two more nations, Bahrain and Sudan have made peace agreements with Israel after more than 50 years of continuous animosity. The 'Abraham Accords' declaration states:

'We, the undersigned, recognize the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East and around the world based on mutual understanding and co-existence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom...we pursue a vision of peace, security, and prosperity in the Middle East and around the world. In this spirit we warmly welcome and are encouraged by the progress already made in establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and its neighbours in

the region under the principles of the Abraham Accords’.

Many people may have never heard of Abraham, but his importance to Bible students cannot be overstated. Abraham was the ancestor of both Jews and Arabs as we are told in the book of Genesis and his name recognises this – it means ‘father of a multitude’. The ‘Abraham Accords’ then, recognises the historic ties between these peoples.

However, Abraham’s place in God’s plan is focused on just one of his descendants, as we read in Genesis chapter 17:21: *‘But my covenant I will establish with Isaac’*. This covenant or agreement contained a number of far-reaching promises, and it was repeated to Isaac’s son Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. He is the ancestor of God’s chosen people the Jews. (See ‘Abraham’ article page 33).

Bible prophecy has much to say about the descendants of Abraham and what would happen to them right down to our present day and beyond. Several Bible prophecies refer to ongoing hostilities between Israel and its enemies. Read Ezekiel chapter 38 which refers to a group of nations to the North of Israel who will be opposed by another group to the South. There is no mistaking when the events predicted here will occur. It will be *‘in the latter years you will come into the land of those brought*

back from the sword and gathered from many people on the mountains of Israel...’ (Ezekiel 38:8). In this chapter the prophet also predicted a time of peace and security for Israel which will not last.

The nations of the Middle East are being prepared for the events foretold in that chapter, which will result in God intervening to bring an end to this great conflict in the Middle East, as we read in the last verse *‘Thus I will magnify myself, and I will be known in the eyes of many nations’* (Ezekiel 38:23). Only then will there be a real ‘Abraham Accord,’ for the promises made to Abraham nearly 4,000 years ago will be fulfilled. His illustrious descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ, will return to bring true and lasting peace in the Middle East and to the whole world. Psalm 72 give us an amazing prophetic word picture of those great changes that will take place when Christ returns:

‘He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before him, and his enemies will lick the dust ...all kings will fall down before him ...all nations shall serve him ...His name shall continue as long as the sun. And men shall be blessed in him; all nations shall call him blessed’.

Psalm 72:8,9,11,17

Jacob's Well

We read in John's Gospel that Jesus went into the territory of Samaria (John 4:3-4). Centuries before, Samaria was the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel. After the dispersion by Assyria, foreigners were brought in to re-populate that part of Israel and became known as Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24). They were taught a corrupted form of Judaism, not according to the strict Law of Moses. For this reason, Samaritans were despised by the Jews, who would have nothing to do with them.

Jesus, however, went to Samaria for a very good reason; to demonstrate that God shows no partiality on account of nationality (see Acts 10:34-35). He only regards a person's faith and related behaviour as the important factors. Jesus, on another

occasion, told the parable of 'the good Samaritan' to demonstrate this (Luke 10:25-37).

On coming to a village called Sychar, near Shechem, he was in the heartland of Samaria (see map on left). He was at the head of a valley between two mountains, Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim, where Joshua, centuries before, had made the people take an oath to obey the commands of God. Jesus was exhausted and rested near Jacob's Well. This area is very significant in Scripture, as many important events in Israel's history took place here.

Jacob, the ancestor of the nation of Israel, some 1,700 years before, had purchased a plot of land near to Shechem from the Hittites. We read in the book of Genesis: *'Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money'* (Genesis 33:18-19).

How astonishing it is to know that detail from so long ago! Clearly pitching camp requires a good water supply, and it seems likely that either the plot already had a well, or Jacob's servants dug it, as they were very skilled in that respect. Numerous references are made to well-digging,





David Roberts painted the well in in 1839

as water was vital for survival of both people and their animals. Jewish and Samaritan traditions both associate Jacob with this well, and the reference in the Gospel of John simply says: *'Now Jacob's well was there...'* (John 4:6).

The well is still there today, although it is in the crypt of a recently built Greek Orthodox church! This site, like many others in Israel, became a place of veneration by a corrupt Christian church. Various churches were built over the site from the fourth to the eighth centuries AD. The earliest definitive account dates from the Crusades (AD 1100-1270), when the Pope gave his blessing to European kings and princes, to raise armies to win back Jerusalem and the holy sites, by war against the Islamic rulers.

In the twelfth century AD, there is a record of a church built at Jacob's well, written by a man called Theoderic: 'The well ...is a half a mile distant from the city Nablus: it lies in

front of the altar in the church built over it, in which nuns devote themselves to the service of God. This well is called 'The Fountain of Jacob'. Note the name Nablus in this quote – now a Palestinian city in the area known as the West Bank, which is the modern name given to Shechem. The Romans built a new city nearby, re-naming it Flavia Neapolis, which has been changed over the centuries to become Nablus.

In 1697, Henry Maundrell measured the depth of water in the well at 15 feet (4.6 metres). Edward Robinson, a Biblical scholar, visited the site in the mid-19th century, and described the ruins of an ancient church.

In 1866 a Major Anderson undertook a survey and stated that the well has 'a narrow opening, just wide enough to allow the body of a man to pass through with arms uplifted, and this narrow neck, which is about 4 ft. long, opens into the well itself, which is cylindrically shaped, and opens about 7 ft. 6 in. in diameter. The well and upper part of the well are built of masonry, and the well appears to have been sunk through a mixture of alluvial soil and limestone fragments, till a compact bed of mountain limestone was reached, having horizontal strata which could be easily worked; and the interior of the well presents the appearance of having been lined throughout with rough masonry'.



The mouth of the well as it is today

Another survey from 1935, revealed that the total depth was 135 feet (41 metres). The Greek Orthodox Church, who own the site today, have completed a major reconstruction of a crusader style church which houses the ancient well in the crypt.

Jesus meets a Samaritan woman

Jesus' dealings with the Samaritan woman are very instructive. He asked her for a drink, which completely surprised the woman, who recognised him as a Jew. John's comment is: *'Jews have no dealings with Samaritans'* (John 4:9).

The conversation then proceeded like this (John 4:10-14):

Jesus: *'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.'*

The woman: *'Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?'*

Jesus: *'Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.'*

The water of life

The water from Jacob's well could only quench thirst for a while. But the water of life that Jesus offers stands



for the gospel message that he taught. This gospel message gives life – it can be ‘*a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life*’. But how? John chapter four tells us that the woman believed Jesus was the Messiah (as opposed to many of the Jews who did not). Not only that, but she convinced many in her home town who also believed, and Jesus was persuaded to stay two more days with them.

God’s promises to Abraham stated that in Abraham’s seed (descendant) all nations would be blessed – even the despised Samaritans would be given the opportunity. Here was a strong indication that it was beginning to happen, based on faith in the work of Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, not on adherence to the Law of Moses. The ‘*everlasting life*’ that Jesus spoke of is not something we have immediately, but by baptism in water into the hope of life, we can be related to it now. The eternal life promised will be given to believers after he returns a second time and sits on his throne (see the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25:31–46).

Further interesting historical and geographical details can be noted from Jesus’ conversation with the woman at Jacob’s well. Mount Gerizim nearby, was the site of a Samaritan temple and was still used as a centre of Samaritan worship.

Jews, however, insisted that it was not a place of acceptable worship, which was exclusively the temple in Jerusalem.

The conversation continued (John 4:19–26):

The woman: ‘*Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain (Gerizim), and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.*’

Jesus: ‘*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him. God is a Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*’

The woman: ‘*I know that Messiah is coming*’ (who is called Christ). ‘*When he comes, he will tell us all things.*’

Jesus: ‘*I who speak to you am he.*’

Two temples

Solomon’s temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC but rebuilt after the Jews returned from captivity during the reign of Cyrus the Persian about 519 BC. The Gerizim temple was built around 450 BC during the Persian



The remains of the temple on Mt Gerizim

period (see picture top right). At that time Nehemiah was reforming the Jewish priesthood, and their Samaritan enemies were excluded from the work of rebuilding Jerusalem as recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Samaritan temple was destroyed by the Jewish Maccabees in 110 BC. They threw off their Greek overlords for a temporary period before the birth of Christ.

But the record in John chapter four clearly implies ongoing Samaritan worship there. Later Roman coins minted in Nablus AD 136-161 depict a temple complex, statues, and a substantial staircase leading up to a temple (see overleaf). This was a temple to Zeus dating from the time of the emperor Hadrian. A large Christian church was eventually built there in the fifth century AD after the Roman church had become the official state religion, and Samaritans were barred from worshipping there.

So Jesus' prophecies were accurately fulfilled. Neither the Jerusalem temple, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, nor Gerizim were to remain as places of worship. Jesus said to the woman '*Salvation is of the Jews*'. What did he mean? Salvation is offered to all men and women based on belief in the true Jewish hope – the hope that the Jews as a nation effectively rejected when Jesus was crucified.

The true temple of God

Physical places, glorious buildings and ecclesiastical traditions, institutions and ritual, are not important and have been an obstacle to the 'spirit and truth' of the gospel message over many centuries. The true temple is made up of humble believers in Jesus Christ, '*Abraham's seed*' (Galatians 3.29) who worship God '*in spirit and truth*'. God said through Isaiah:

'...“Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool.

Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of my rest? For all those things my hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the LORD. “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at my word”'

Isaiah 66:1-2



The great staircase to the Gerizim temple

The Apostle Paul wrote:

‘For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be my people”’

2 Corinthians 6:16

When Jesus used that phrase *‘in spirit and truth’* he used similar words as recorded in the last speech of Joshua. He addressed the tribes of Israel at that very same place in Shechem and exhorted them to *‘...fear the LORD, serve him in sincerity and in truth... Serve the LORD!’* (Joshua 24:14). No person will be excluded from God’s offer of salvation through Jesus if

they accept the gospel message and act on it in sincerity, having understood God’s Truth. They will be counted as *‘The Israel of God’* (Galatians 3:26-29).

Abraham was promised eternal life in the land of promise, to be inherited with his *‘seed’*, Jesus Christ, and those who become his seed by belief and baptism. Abraham will be raised from the dead to receive that promised reward, along with multitudes of believers who have died. Everlasting life is a future inheritance in the Kingdom of God to be established on this earth. The Apostle Paul calls the hope of true Christians *‘the Hope of Israel’* (Acts 28:20). That hope has been extended to all men and women of faith.

Jacob’s well teaches us so much.

Justin Giles
London, UK

Model of the Temple in Jerusalem that was still being built by Herod during Jesus’ lifetime



BIBLE SYMBOLS

Heavens and Earth

From the earliest days of human history, we have been interested in the heavens and the earth. The Babylonians plotted the passage of the stars and the planets through the sky. They produced remarkably accurate data about their movements, despite their lack of sophisticated equipment. With the information they obtained, they were able to establish calendars because they found that the movements were so regular and predictable.

Similarly our ancestors were interested in exploring planet earth. Across the world evidence is found of man's efforts in the field of exploration. In earlier times it was believed that the earth was flat. There was the fear that by travelling too far in one direction, it risked falling over the edge into a total unknown! Today most of the earth has been mapped in detail. We not only know that the earth is a sphere, but its weight and size have also been calculated. It is known that it rotates and the speed of rotation has also

been calculated. Yet the earth still contains many mysteries and unexplored areas.

Our exploration of the heavens has extended far beyond the abilities of the Babylonians or the Greeks. Yet the further we explore, the more there is still to explore – the edge of space remains a mystery. The exploration of our solar system presents further problems. Scientists worry about what will happen to the earth and postulate theories about how it was formed.

God the Creator

Yet, as one theory is explored so more questions are raised and a new theory is needed. However, the explanation is simple:

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' Genesis 1:1

These are the opening words of God's revelation to man – the Bible. They establish God in His position as the

The Antikythera mechanism, a complex bronze clockwork device used by Greek astronomers to predict astronomical positions and eclipses. Found in a shipwreck in 1901, it is believed to date from around 200–100 BC



Creator of all things. Throughout the Bible there are numerous reminders that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. There are also reminders that, because He created the heavens and the earth, they belong to Him. So we read in the book of Deuteronomy:

‘Indeed heaven and the highest heavens belong to the LORD your God, also the earth with all that is in it.’

Deuteronomy 10:14

There are a number of symbolic themes which are developed in the Bible, based on the heavens and the earth. These include the relative dwelling places of God and man and the longevity of the heavens and earth. Although God retains control of both heaven and earth, the Bible makes an important distinction between the two, as we learn from one of the Psalms:

‘The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD’s: but the earth he has given to the children of men.’

Psalms 115:16

The greatness of God

As we become more aware of the sheer scale of the universe, so we should be more aware of the greatness of God. Sadly, for the most part this does not happen. However, the Bible clearly illustrates that God is omnipresent – which means that He exists everywhere. He does not

dwelt in one place as we do but is present throughout the universe. This is a difficult concept for the human mind to comprehend, and so the Bible uses the heavens to signify the dwelling place of God.

The ‘heavens’ are that great area of mystery, vastness and remoteness. In contrast, the finite ‘earth’ is the dwelling place of humanity. It is of a scale that we can comprehend. The prophet Isaiah tells us how God regards the relative positions of heaven and earth: *‘Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool...”*’ (Isaiah 66:1). Throughout the Bible, heaven is described as the dwelling place of God, while our dwelling place is the earth, over which we have been given temporary control.

Our understanding of the universe is that it has existed for many millions of years. Scientists strive to find its age and to discover the different times at which the various parts have been formed. While some look back to the history of the universe, others look forward and try to predict what will happen many years ahead. They ponder whether the sun will lose its energy and, if so, what will happen to the earth and life upon it.

God is not bound by time

As the size of the universe should awaken us to the power of God, so the

immense age of the universe demonstrates the everlasting nature of God as we read in the Psalms:

‘Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.’ Psalm 90:2

‘For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night.’

Psalm 90:4

The permanence of God’s creation

Compared with the everlasting nature of God, the length of human life, and even the age of the earth, are insignificant. Another Psalm tells us that God created the heavens to last forever:

‘Praise him, you heavens of heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He has also established them for ever and ever; he has made a decree which shall not pass away.’ Psalm 148:4-6

God’s promises are always kept, so we know that the heavens will not ‘pass away’. He has spoken and His Word will be kept. In the New Testament, Jesus speaks about heaven and earth in this way:



‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away.’

Matthew 24:35

Jesus is not telling us that heaven and earth will literally disappear. He is using the ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ as a symbol of the constancy of his words and of the Word of God. He is saying that those words are also of everlasting value even if something did happen to the heaven and the earth.

The symbolic heavens and earth

Earlier in the same chapter from Matthew, Jesus tells us that there will come a time when there will be major changes in the heavens and the earth:

‘Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.’

Matthew 24:29

Similarly, in the parallel record through Luke, Jesus says:

‘And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.’

Luke 21:25-26

Now these passages can be interpreted in two different ways – both of which may be applicable. One school of thought suggests that these will be literal events – that there will be major changes in the skies with the sun darkening and the stars moving from their normal positions.

The other school of thought is that these are symbolic descriptions of powers on earth, and that the heavens including the sun, moon and stars, are symbolic of the ruling powers – governments, monarchies and world leaders. The earth on the other hand is representative of the common people. There is strong Biblical backing for this interpretation. For example, the nation of Israel was described in this way (see Deuteronomy 32:1; Isaiah 1:2,10).

What then is the interpretation of the changes in the symbolic heavens and earth referred to by Jesus in the Mount Olivet prophecy in Luke chapter 21? Whether we take the literal or symbolic interpretation of the prophecy, the result will be the same. There will come a time of world-wide upheaval in which the politics and economics of the world will become unstable, and the powers of government (the heavens) across the world will fail. This will cause such chaos throughout the world that men and women (the earth) will tremble at the problems facing them.

The return of Jesus Christ

Whether these events are literal, figurative or both, it is quite clear that they herald an event which will certainly be a literal one. That event is the return to the earth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke's gospel record continues: *'Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory'* (Luke 21:27).

Many parts of the Bible speak of that time and indicate that it will be preceded by a time of trouble. The passages in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 both tell us about the signs that herald the return of Jesus. The message is to look out for those signs and to prepare ourselves for his return to the earth. The literal return of Jesus Christ to the earth is a fundamental doctrine of the Bible. Those who witnessed his ascension into heaven, shortly after his resurrection, were told:

'...This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.'

Acts 1:11

The Bible also tells us what will happen when Jesus returns. For centuries many have uttered the prayer which Jesus taught:

'...Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.'

Matthew 6:9,10

Jesus will return to provide the answer to that prayer. He will establish the Kingdom of God and rule the world from Jerusalem as its divinely appointed king. There will be significant changes in the earth that will transform it from its present state. Jesus will work to rid the earth of all that defiles it. The prophet Zechariah speaks of major physical changes that will take place around Jerusalem as a result of a massive earthquake (Zechariah 14:4-5). Other Bible passages also indicate the degree of change that must take place.

New heavens and earth

The effect of all this will be a renewed earth. When God originally created the earth, He made all things *'very good'* (Genesis 1:31). The garden of Eden was the paradise of God and this will be restored when Jesus returns (Revelation 2:7). The changes brought about by him will return the earth to the state that it was at that time, and 'Eden' will be re-created.

The prophet Isaiah tells us about these changes describing them both symbolically and literally as new heavens and earth (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). These last two chapters of Isaiah look forward to the time when the world will benefit from the wise rulership of God's appointed king. Life in the kingdom of God will be very different from today. The evils

of today will largely have gone, and the problems caused by misuse of the earth's resources, resulting in pollution and global warming will be past. Isaiah says that the former things will not even come to mind, and the portal population will live much longer and happier lives (Isaiah 65:17–20). Christ's reign will last for 1,000 years (the Millennium) and after this there will be a further great change.

The last two chapters of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, look beyond the Millennium to a time when even death itself will be removed, and all things will be made new (Revelation 21:5). Then the relationship between God and man will change. At the end of the Millennium, the inhabitants of the Kingdom will comprise those that have been found faithful, and the mortal population will no longer exist. God says that He will then dwell with them. The earth will cease to be the footstool of God and will become His dwelling place, as we read in the Book of Revelation:

'...Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall

be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'

Revelation 21:3–4

If you want to have a place in God's Kingdom, now is the time to prepare for it. You can only do that by reading and studying God's guidance contained in the Bible and acting upon it. God has put the word pictures of His Kingdom there as an encouragement to us, but He has also set out commandments which we must obey. If we fail to do so then the way into the Kingdom will be barred to us, in the same way that Adam and Eve were prevented from returning to the garden of Eden after they had sinned.

Do you wish to see a renewed heaven and earth and enjoy the benefits of the coming kingdom of God?

The choice is yours.

John Hitches
Norfolk, England

Editor's Note

If you would like to know more about the coming kingdom of God on earth, send for your copy of the Special Issue 'Light on a new world – the last great chapter of the human story'.

Your junk appendix

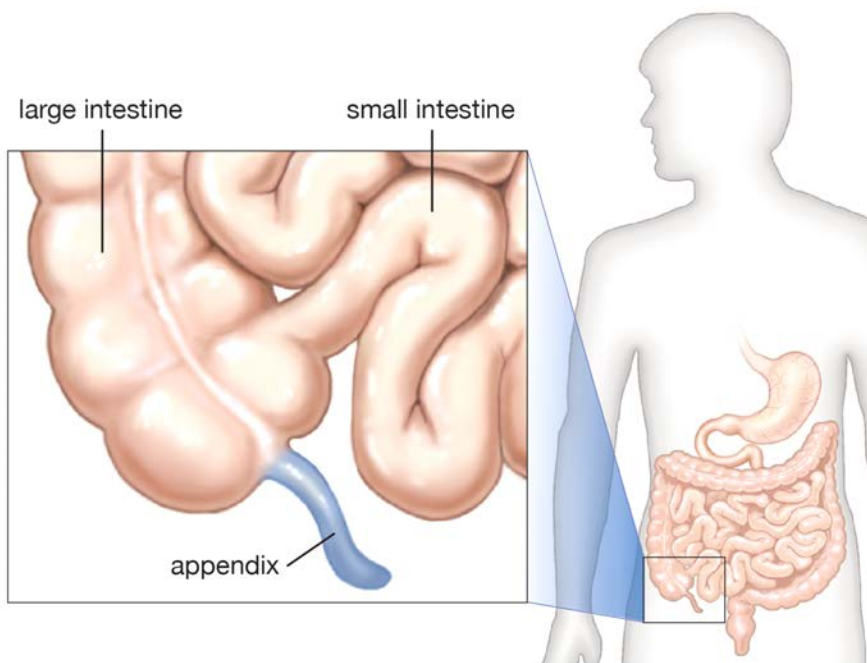
COMMENT

You are not alone.

Your travelling companions as you journey through life are forty million microbes, some on the skin, but most inside, particularly in your digestive tract. Most of them are 'good', beneficial bacteria which are in fact essential for life. But something less than 1% are bad and can make you very ill. When one of these gets out of control (like *streptococcus* or *clostridium*), the body has a strong and effective response. The intestines are flooded with water and the contents flushed out in what we experience as an unpleasant bout of diarrhoea. This is highly effective but also quite drastic – the 'good' bacteria are flushed away as well as the bad.

This is where your much-maligned appendix comes into its own.

For generations we have been conditioned to believe that the appendix is completely useless, a piece of junk left behind by the process of evolution; just one of many organs which may have been useful to our ancestors at some stage but have since been abandoned. Today we know better. The appendix is attached to the digestive tract, a small cul-de-sac in a position where it can act as a reservoir for the good bacteria which are essential to digestion (see picture below). Flushing out the



system leaves the appendix untouched, and the bacteria it looks after can then be used to quickly repopulate the gut and restore the normal process of digestion. It is also rich in lymphatic tissue, which is fundamental to the immune system, and may be particularly active during the early years of development. It is most certainly not junk.

Darwin himself described these supposed relics of evolution as ‘residual’ organs, but they became better known as ‘vestigial’ organs; vestiges supposedly left behind after their function had long ceased. In 1895 Robert Wiedersheim listed over 100 such organs. One of his followers, Horatio Newman, upped the number to 180, ‘sufficient to make a man a veritable walking museum of antiquities’, he said! In 2010 the appendix was listed in the ‘top five’ vestigial organs, but science moves on. Research in 2012 and 2017 has shown it is not vestigial at all. It is obvious that ‘vestigial organs’ say nothing about evolution, but are simply a measure of our biological ignorance. The more we know, the shorter the list becomes. Today the list is down from 180 to a handful of oddities like wisdom teeth, male nipples, and body hair – not a great return on several billion years of evolution.

‘So the Darwinian argument that the appendix is a vestigial organ that supports evolutionary theory is itself vestigial, a leftover of nineteenth century Darwinian biology. We know better now’ (Marcos Eberlin, ‘Foresight’).

But evolutionary myths are not easily debunked. With the explosion of research on DNA at the end of the twentieth century, along came some more ‘junk’! As scientists explored the huge new field of genetics, opened up by the discovery of DNA, something rather strange became evident – it appeared that a large part of DNA was inactive. The genetic code was there, but it didn’t seem to be doing anything; a large part of the genome (the entire body of genetic information) was not coding for anything.

The answer from the evolutionists was not slow in coming. This was more junk – this time **‘JUNK DNA!’** Billions of years of evolution, and its myriad failed experiments, had left behind a lot of meaningless debris in every cell of our body. ‘It is a remarkable fact that the greater part (95% in the case of humans) of the genome might as well not be there,

for all the difference it makes' (Richard Dawkins, 'The Greatest Show on Earth' 2009).

In 2012 came the **ENCODE** project (Encyclopedia of DNA Elements).

Four hundred and fifty scientists across the world, working together to map the whole of the human genome for the first time, released thirty major papers simultaneously. In Nature magazine they noted that they were able to 'assign biochemical functions for 80% of the genome...'

'It's likely that 80% will go to 100%. We don't really have any large chunks of redundant DNA. This metaphor of junk is not that useful'.

Delicately put! What that really means is that the idea of 'junk DNA' is itself junk. Junk is junk, whichever way you look at it.

The front page of the New York Times announced: 'The human genome is packed with at least four million gene switches that reside in bits of DNA that once were dismissed as 'junk' but that turn out to play critical roles in controlling how cells, organs and tissues behave'. You do not need to know what a 'gene switch' is to get the message: bits of DNA previously thought to be junk turn out to be critical for life.

Take one particular organ as an example, not the appendix this time but the **liver**. The liver's function is well known in processing food and dealing with waste products. In 2013 it was found that the liver was controlled by one of these stretches of DNA that had previously been dismissed as junk; a series of 3,000 genetic switches outside the gene for the liver ('epigenetic', meaning 'outside the gene', is the word used) but crucial to the gene's function.

It is now obvious that the concept of the 'gene' as the only or main active component of DNA is a huge oversimplification, and the dismissal of other regions of DNA as rubbish is based on ignorance. If you think that sounds just like the argument for vestigial organs, I think you are right – so-called 'junk DNA' is just a measure of our ignorance about how DNA really works. If two supposed pillars of evolution, vestigial organs and junk DNA, have both been discredited, what does that say about evolution?

As we journey through life in the twenty-first century, we are assaulted by information, battered by a myriad of all kinds of influences. If we are not very careful, we can find our lives ruled by junk, by the superficial, the sensational, by ignorance and prejudice and misinformation of all kinds. I have been reading the Bible regularly ever since I was a teenager. It is not junk. It is sometimes difficult to understand, but it is never junk. If it ever appears junk, as some people claim, it is just a measure of our ignorance, and we need to concentrate and educate ourselves in God's way and reject the pressures to conform to the God-denying spirit of our age, which wrongly claims to be based on science.

'For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.'

Hebrews 4.12

"Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD. "These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word."

Isaiah 66.2 NIV

Roy Toms
Norfolk UK

A few of the three billion letters of the complete human genome, spelt out in the four letters of the DNA Code.

In 2009 we were told that over 95% of this information was rubbish. Not any more.



signs of the times

COVID-19

Last time I wrote that ‘the world-wide outbreak of the coronavirus is already the biggest event in my lifetime’. How much bigger it is as I write this. And by the time you read this what will the case be?

Here is a reminder of the verses I quoted last time about the virus. They also apply to many other aspects and continuing worries in our lives right now. *“Then he (Jesus) said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and **pestilences**; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven.”*” (Luke 21:10-11). I believe these words refer to our times, in which case the word I have highlighted has a special relevance. An online dictionary I consulted defines the word ‘pestilence’ as ‘a contagious or infectious epidemic disease that is virulent and devastating.’ Perhaps a synonym for ‘pestilence’ covers it better. It does for me, and that word is ‘plague’.

Mass graves for victims of the coronavirus in Manaus, Brazil

What a continuing resonance that has with COVID-19!

Where I live, in the State of Victoria in Australia, the virus is particularly affecting us as I write this article. It is early August, and our Government has just announced Stage 4 restrictions. The cost of all this, socially, economically and psychologically, is yet unknown but it will undoubtedly be enormous. And it assumes that the calculation will be made in a post virus situation. No one knows when, or indeed if, that post virus situation will happen. This brings to mind some words of Jesus:

‘And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.’

Luke 21:25-26

A bleak state of affairs that is very current, although these words were written nearly 2,000 years ago. But the very next verses go on to say: *'Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near'* (Luke 21:27-28). Jesus' return is definitely something to look forward to, especially in these difficult and strange times.

The Yom Kippur war

In October 1973, the State of Israel was invaded by a coalition led by Egypt and Syria. They were armed, trained and encouraged by the USSR. That collection of states has now been separated, but whose core was Russia, so much so, that the terms 'Russia' and 'USSR' were largely synonymous.

At that time, the world had two opposing superpowers – the USA and the USSR. They were engaged in what was called the 'Cold War' where they continually challenged each other, mainly through proxies. And overhanging this constant state of tension was the threat of nuclear annihilation, the real possibility that even by accident, World War 3 would destroy our planet. Though this is now more the subject of thriller films and novels, it felt all too real at the time. Both superpowers had nuclear arsenals more than powerful enough to destroy all life on this planet.

Back to Israel. They were caught by surprise on the most sacred day of their religious year called 'Yom Kippur', the day of atonement. The war continued from 6 October through to 25 October. Egypt invaded from the south and, in a coordinated attack, Syria struck from the north.



Their initial attacks were highly successful.

Israel had very little warning for two main reasons. One was faulty intelligence, and the other was faulty interpretation of what intelligence they had. This was exacerbated by the Israelis having a sense of superiority, having won a war just six years earlier in a spectacularly convincing way, against these nations and more. They just did not believe that the Arab military could defeat them.

Israel was in dire trouble. Two days into the war they were looking at the real possibility of defeat. During the night of 8–9 October 1973, the Prime Minister of Israel, Golda Meir, was advised of this, and authorised the assembly of thirteen tactical nuclear weapons. They were to be used, if absolutely necessary, to prevent total defeat. However, the preparation was done in an easily detectable way, likely as a signal to the United States. Henry Kissinger, then US Secretary of State, learned of the nuclear alert on the morning of 9 October. That day, President Nixon ordered the commencement of ‘Operation Nickel Grass’, an American airlift to replace all of Israel’s material losses. This grew from a relatively small undertaking to a huge effort which continued until November 1973.

The tide of the war turned in favour of Israel, in no small part due to their

military supplies being replenished by ‘Operation Nickel Grass’. It was now, as Israel was winning, that the real threat of World War 3 became evident. Egypt requested assistance from the USSR. There had already been significant buildups of both US and USSR forces in the Middle East. But now the USSR prepared a number of airborne divisions and deployed further naval forces into the Mediterranean. The US responded by raising their military alert from ‘DEFCON 4’ to ‘DEFCON 3’.

This sent a clear warning to the USSR that the US would not tolerate them becoming militarily involved and would match such involvement with direct force. The warning was heeded, and the US and the USSR then brokered a finish to the war with the protagonists. The tide had turned so much in Israel’s favour, that it was threatening Cairo, Egypt’s capital

Israeli troops cross the Suez canal into Egypt in 1973



city. So, there was a strong incentive for Egypt to make peace. It was a very messy peace with many violations by both sides. Subsequently, after some years, Egypt became the only Arab country to make peace with Israel. Syria, with Damascus under threat, agreed to a halt in the war. They have never made peace with Israel. To this day Israel exists alone amongst many enemies (but see editor's note on page 32).

That's a lot to write about something that happened nearly 50 years ago isn't it! After all, although we came close to World War 3 then, there's only one superpower these days - the USA. But have you heard the saying 'history repeats itself'? I will add my own spin to it: 'history repeats itself but seldom in exactly the same way'.

A war between Israel and other Middle East nations, with the US backing Israel, and Russia backing the nations opposed to Israel. A looming threat of escalation well beyond the immediate protagonists. Very 1973; very 2020? Most probably without Egypt, especially as the driving force it was in 1973. Feasible? Definitely. Let us look at a Bible prophecy I have quoted in earlier articles; just one passage of many:

'Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to Gog, Thus says the Lord GOD: "On that day when my people Israel

dwell safely, will you not know it? Then you will come from your place out of the far north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great company and a mighty army. You will come up against my people Israel like a cloud, to cover the land. It will be in the latter days that I will bring you against my land, so that the nations may know me, when I am hallowed in you, O Gog, before their eyes." Thus says the Lord GOD: "Are you he of whom I have spoken in former days by my servants the prophets of Israel, who prophesied for years in those days that I would bring you against them?"' Ezekiel 38:14-17

There's a truly massive amount of material both online and in physical media, created over many years purporting to explain what is often called 'the end times', including the reference quoted above from Ezekiel and much more. The Bible is quite clear that Israel will be invaded and overwhelmed, but Jesus will return and save them and subsequently set up a world-wide kingdom of God. Much of the non-Biblical material is a whole series of opinions only, most well intentioned I'm sure, but nonetheless opinions, interpretations that may or may not be right.

In these truly extraordinary times, I wonder what is the point of relating contemporary events to forecasts in

the Bible, unless this is of practical benefit in our lives. If it doesn't, then it simply becomes an academic study. I look with such interest at world events, especially those relating to Israel, because it is a beacon of hope to me. And looking at history is a part of understanding the present.

Hence a consideration of 1973. How well those events prefigure what is still future to us. But not, I suspect, future for very much longer.

Democracy's 'Twilight'?

With all of this in mind, consider the weakening state of democracy and its accompaniment, capitalism. It is well recognised, though by no means universally so, that despite its flaws it is the best and most equitable way to run societies. That is not working out so well is it! In so many countries, despite severely challenging times, the rich are indeed getting richer etc. There is much that is broken.

Here is a quotation from a very interesting book entitled 'Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends' by Anne Applebaum. The author, who is a historian, highlights the almost universal drift to authoritarianism; the growing appeal of simplistic populism with its narrow outlook and lack of tolerance for different views. And most significantly the inward-looking nature of this drift, the focus

on the individual countries concerned at the expense of international relationships and cooperation. We have seen this most recently over the lack of coordination to control the coronavirus, a plague which knows no national or other boundaries. When was international co-operation more needed!

'The checks and balances of Western constitutional democracies never guaranteed stability... We always knew, or should have known, that history could once again reach into our private lives and rearrange them. We always knew, or should have known, that alternative visions of our nations would try to draw us in. But maybe, picking our way through the darkness, we will find that together we can resist them.'

Then again, the Bible indicates we will not!

We live in momentous times which seem more and more like a turning point in history. The coronavirus, and the response to it, has certainly highlighted this vividly. A turning point to what, though? My view is that the coronavirus is simply too big not to be part of God's plan. Is it the immediate precursor to Jesus' return or another part of the process? Time will tell and probably sooner rather than later!

One possible consequence of the weakening of democracy and an inward-looking attitude concerns Israel and the US. Consider what could happen if US support for Israel was curtailed in a time of great need. A repeat of 1973 but without an 'Operation Nickel Grass'. That may well be enough to seal Israel's fate as described in those verses quoted above from Ezekiel 38 and in other Bible prophecies.

Conclusion

Near the beginning of this article I referred to the words of Jesus in Luke chapter 21 about '*men's hearts failing them from fear*' and, more importantly, the promise of Jesus to his disciples that it will also be the time when their '*redemption draws near*'. In these uncertain and sometimes

bleak times it's the second part that I focus on.

One of my hopes is that it becomes your hope too!

May that time be soon!

David Gamble
Melbourne, Australia

Editor's Note

Since this article was written, the balance of power in the Middle East has changed significantly following the signing of a peace agreement between Israel and some of its former Arab enemies (see editorial page 9)

American C-5 and C-141 aircraft bringing 22,000 tons of supplies to Israel as part of Operation Nickel Grass. If Israel finds itself in a similar situation again, will it enjoy the same support from the USA?



BASIC BIBLE TEACHING

Abraham

In this series of articles, under the banner Basic Bible Teaching, we come now to a key character – Abraham. We have already seen that the purpose of God is ultimately to fill the earth with immortal beings who reflect His glory. God made promises to Abraham that have a vital bearing on this scheme of human salvation from sin and death.

When we considered ‘The Fall of Man’ in the Garden of Eden (see Volume 30.4), we noted that God made a promise that someone would be born into the world who would destroy sin and death and save mankind. After the flood of Noah’s time, God singled out one righteous man to develop His plan. We will see that Abraham was to be a key figure in the development of the divine plan.

A new name

Abraham’s original name was Abram which means ‘exalted father’. When making the promises to him the second time, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham which means ‘Father of a Multitude’ (Genesis 17:4-5). Abraham is called the friend of God and is an outstanding example of one who had complete faith in God’s Word.

Read Isaiah 41.8 and James 2:23.

For the remainder of this article we will use the name Abraham.

How was Abraham selected by God?

Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldees (now in Iraq) about 1,900 years before Christ. Genesis 11:27-31 tells us about this. Stephen, in recounting the history of God’s chosen people in the first century AD, confirms the Genesis account (Acts 7:2-4).

Genesis 12 :1-3 tells us that Abraham was instructed by God to leave Ur and travel to a land that God would show him. This was his first major act of faith. There is no record that he questioned God. He trusted in God and believed the promises that He made to him. He was led, with his household, to the land of Canaan, known today as Israel.

The promises to Abraham

Read Genesis 12: 4-5 and compare it with what the New Testament writers have to say about the same narrative in Hebrews 11:8 and Romans 4:20. The terms of the promises to Abraham were simple:

1. God would lead him to a land that he would inherit.
2. This land would be Abraham's inheritance forever together with his descendants. Think of the implications of this for the future, knowing that God does not lie or go back on His promises.

Read carefully Genesis 13:14-17.

3. Abraham's descendants ('seed' in the Bible) would develop into a great nation as numerous as the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16).
4. One of his descendants would have power over his enemies (Genesis 22:17 KJV).
5. Through his offspring ('seed') all nations would be blessed

Compare Genesis 22:18 with Galatians 3:8 and 3:16.

From these 5 points above it is important to note that:

- ❖ the gospel message, which so many only associate with the New Testament, finds its roots in the book of Genesis.
- ❖ Abraham believed the gospel. Galatians chapter 3 demonstrates this quite clearly.
- ❖ the 'land of promise' is a clearly defined part of the earth. It should be noted that neither the promises to Abraham, nor the gospel message, contain anything about going to heaven.

The promises were not fulfilled in Abraham's lifetime

The New Testament tells us that the promises to Abraham have not yet been fulfilled (Hebrews 11:13); even to the extent that Abraham had to buy a field in the promised land to bury his wife. Read: Genesis 23; Acts 7:16. But this did not mean these were hollow promises made to Abraham. They were repeated to Abraham's son Isaac and grandson Jacob (later renamed Israel).

Read: Genesis 26:1-6; 28:13-14; Hebrews 11:8-9.

The sacrifice of Isaac

There is clear evidence that Abraham looked well beyond his own immediate lifetime for the promises to be fulfilled. The major evidence of this is that Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his son. Yet Abraham's son Isaac was miraculously born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, when they were well past child-bearing. Also, God had told Abraham that the promises would be fulfilled through Isaac, and not through his other sons.

God gave Abraham a major test of faith by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, his heir. On the surface this seems to make no sense, until we recognise that Abraham believed in the resurrection and the fulfilment of the promises being, humanly speaking, a long-term plan. At the last moment, the angel of the Lord intervened, preventing the sacrifice and, in a sense, Abraham received his son back from the dead.

Read Genesis 22:1-14 and compare with Hebrews 11:17-19.

Some 1,900 years after the time of Abraham, Jesus Christ offered himself as a sacrifice and God raised him from the dead three days later.

The Nation of Israel

The people of Israel, the Jews, are descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. If we follow the Genesis narrative closely, we learn how Jacob's descendants (the children of Israel) became a nation. Several hundred years later, after a period of captivity in Egypt, this large nation, led by Joshua, entered the land promised to Abraham. The promise to Abraham was partly fulfilled (I Kings 4:20). But the people rebelled against God and they were eventually exiled from the land.

Compare Leviticus 26:33 with 2 Kings 25:8-11.

Whilst there is a Jewish state of Israel today, it is constrained by international politics and a lack of recognition by most that they are still God's people. They will be restored to their rightful status when Jesus Christ returns to the earth. The promises to Abraham will then be completely fulfilled.

Jesus was born and spent his life 2,000 years ago confirming the promises.

Read Luke 1:68-75.

But the promises are not yet fulfilled, even in 2020, some 3,900 years or so after they were made.

Read Hebrews 11:39–40.

Jesus Christ is the seed of Abraham

The word ‘seed’ in the Bible can be singular or plural but, in this context, refers to one particular descendant or offspring. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus was descended from Abraham (see for example Matthew 1:1). Here is a very important New Testament perspective written by the Apostle Paul: ‘Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds”, as of many, but as of one, “And to your seed”, who is Christ’ (Galatians 3:16). Abraham looked forward to the coming of Christ and, by the ‘eye of faith’, he ‘saw’ him (John 8:56).

We can now begin to see that the promises to Abraham in Genesis are the basis of the Christian hope.

Read Hebrews 6:13–20.

We can also see that the Gospel message in the Bible and the hope it offers, is in essence a Jewish hope.

Read John 4:22; Acts 26:6; 28:20.

The promise to Abraham is the basis of what the Bible terms ‘the new covenant’. The ‘old covenant’ was based on the ‘Law of Moses’ and, although this came into being after the covenant with Abraham, it has been taken away, making it the ‘old covenant’. The covenant with Abraham remains as ‘the new covenant’ which has been endorsed by Christ’s death and resurrection.

Read Matthew 26:28; Romans 15:8.

The conclusion of this section has a strong message for us. Those who believe in the Gospel contained in the ‘old and new covenants’ and follow the directions for individuals by being baptised ‘into Christ’, become, by adoption, the seed of Abraham and heirs of the promises.

*If you only look at one Bible reading suggested in this article,
you are strongly recommended to read Galatians chapter 3.*

This is a most important summary chapter that brings the old and new covenants together.

How will the promises to Abraham be fulfilled?

1. The Lord Jesus Christ will return to the Earth (Acts 1:11), see article page 3.

2. Jesus will destroy all human rule and authority and establish himself as king. God said to Abraham: *'Thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies'* (Genesis 22:17 KJV; Psalm 2).
3. The throne of this worldwide kingdom will be in Jerusalem, in the land of Israel and the kingdom will last for ever. God speaking to Abraham: *'...all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants (seed) for ever'* (Genesis 13:15; Luke 1:32; Isaiah 9: 6-7; Isaiah 2:1-4).
4. A great multitude of believers will be with Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, who will share rulership of the Kingdom. God speaking to Abraham: *'I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven'* (Genesis 22:17; Revelation 3:21; Revelation 5:9-11).
5. Most of these believers will have been raised from the dead and among them will be Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who will finally receive their eternal reward (Daniel 12:1-2, Matthew 8:11).
6. Christ's reign will result in peace and happiness for all mankind. God said to Abraham: *'In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed'*. This will be the Kingdom of God on earth (Genesis 22:18; Psalm 72; Isaiah 11).

Conclusion

The promises of God to Abraham are fundamental to the purpose of God with the earth. They provide conclusive evidence that God has a plan and purpose with mankind. The plan is centred on Abraham's descendants, the nation of Israel, and particularly on one man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said *'salvation is of the Jews'* (John 4:22).

Non-Jews (Gentiles) can share in this covenant by believing the Gospel message which was first preached to Abraham, and by obeying Christ's command to be baptised. By doing so they become adopted as part of Abraham's seed - 'spiritual Israel'. Paul wrote that Abraham is *'the father of all those that believe'* (Romans 4:11).

In just the same way that Abraham did, we need to have complete faith in God. We need to strive to follow Abraham's outstanding example of obedience to God. The call of the gospel is to *'come out from among them*

and be separate' (2 Corinthians 6:17). Abraham forsook the city he once dwelt in because *'he waited for the city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God'* (Hebrews 11:10). He became a stranger and a pilgrim in the earth because he had complete faith in the future fulfilment of God's promises (Hebrews 11:13).

As we grow in knowledge of God's purpose, so our confidence increases. This is how faith grows. As faith and understanding grow, so does humility. A demonstration of our faith and humility is to obey Christ's command to be baptised. Once baptised, our knowledge and our faith continue to grow, and we can look forward to the time when God's promises to Abraham and his descendants will become reality. Hebrews 11:39 says this:

'And all these (men and women listed earlier in the chapter), having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise'.

But they will when Christ returns to raise the dead and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. These are all topics which we will, God willing, be investigating as we move further through this series dealing with 'Basic Bible Teaching'.



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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.

We believe that over the centuries the original message of Christianity has been corrupted. Light is published to provide a better understanding of the true Christian hope.

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

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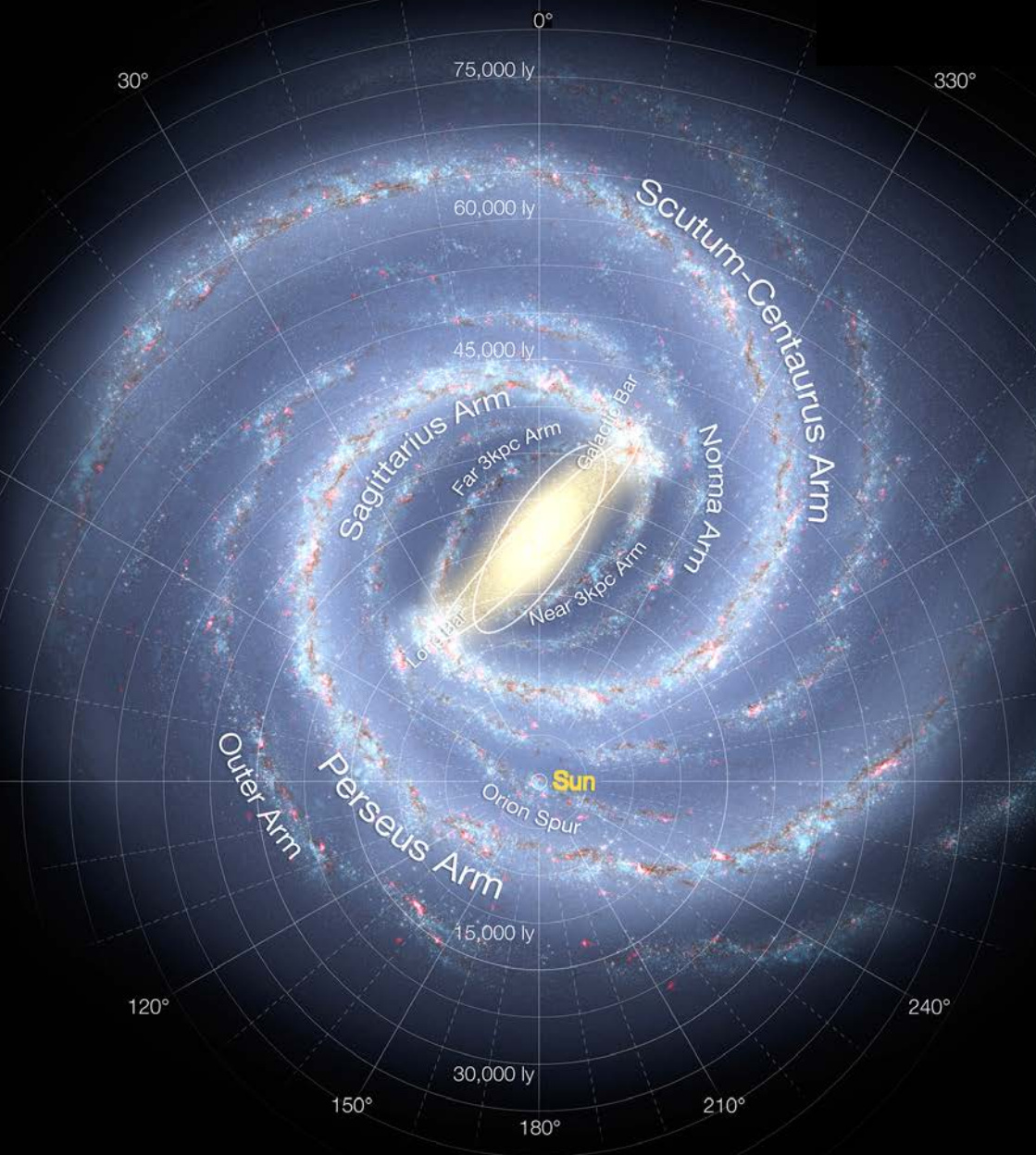
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An artist's impression of the Milky Way Galaxy, over 100,000 light years in diameter, with 100–400 billion stars.

One of those stars is our sun, shown here positioned on the Orion Spur, one of the spiral arms of the galaxy. It has been commented that our earth is ideally placed for observing the rest of the universe. That is no accident.

See article 'Heavens and Earth' on page 16.