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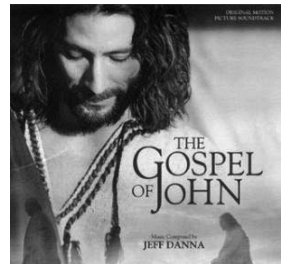
"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"

Understanding the Life of Jesus The Raising of Lazarus

(Robert Marsden, Wigan)

If the story of Jesus is 'The Greatest Story Ever Told', then surely the account of the raising from the dead of Lazarus, the friend of Jesus, is the greatest story within a story. Nothing encapsulates the status of Jesus, the purpose of his incarnation and mission and the reality of his promise of eternal life more than this witness to His almighty power. This event defies the natural physical order and in a glorious demonstration of the fact that Jesus has power over death, uses a physical example to show to the sceptical witnesses of this event that His claims to be 'the life' were true.

We have repeatedly noted throughout this series of incidents in the life of Jesus that there is a constant theme of Jesus' confronting the Jews with His claims about his true nature. This incident is set shortly after the time of the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. During that time Jesus had been present in Jerusalem and once again the Jews had confronted him: **"If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."** Effectively Jesus responds by saying that whatever he was to reveal to them they simply would not believe his claims: **"..but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."** Jesus then goes on to speak once again of his relationship with the Father, ending with the claim that was anathema to the Jews, **"I and the Father are one."** They fully understood the importance of that statement and knew that Jesus was once again laying claim to His deity as is confirmed by their next actions. They took up stones to



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stone him and when Jesus asks them to explain for which of his good works they were about to stone him, he receives the reply, **"It is not for a good work that we stone you but for blasphemy; because you being a man, make yourself God."** Even now, as the end of Jesus' earthly ministry approached, His Jewish opponents simply couldn't come to terms with these claims even though Jesus appealed to their witness to His actions asking them at least to believe what they had seen. But even here there is a sting in the tail as Jesus states that this will help them understand that, **"the Father is in me, and I am in the Father."**

A Defining Act Approaches

It is no coincidence at all that Jesus appeals to His works as defining His nature and status immediately before He completes the ultimate defining act. It is also no coincidence either that after hearing that Lazarus was ill, Jesus stayed two days 'beyond the Jordan' before going back over to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, a place just 2 miles from Jerusalem, and back into the vicinity of the city where only a few days previously the Jews were ready to stone Him and arrest Him. Thomas bravely suggests to the other disciples that they go with Jesus "that we may die with Him", no doubt expecting the Jewish desire to stone Jesus to be taken up again.

By this time Lazarus' illness had, as Jesus announced to His disciples, resulted in His death, a fact that Jesus welcomed, as the forthcoming events would help them to believe all that Jesus had told them about Himself. Did Jesus deliberately wait until Lazarus was dead before making the journey? I believe that He did, because when He first heard of it, Jesus had said of the illness: **"it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it."** There was another important result as well. Lazarus was an evidently popular and well-known man and as the news of his death spread, **"many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother."** It was therefore the fourth day after the death of Lazarus that Jesus arrived on the scene. There is a possibility that this would be especially important for some Jews present. There is later evidence of a rabbinic belief that the spirit hovered over a dead body for 3 days, hoping to be able to return to the body, before departing. If this belief was as old as the 1st century (though we have no decisive proof of that) then the four days could have significance in that, in the Jew's terms, Lazarus was well and truly dead – physically decomposed and spiritless. Don't forget that not many days before, Jesus had invited them, the Jews, to believe His works even if they couldn't believe Jesus' claims about Himself; now some of them had come out to grieve with Martha and Mary and they were about to be witnesses to a singularly remarkable act and to hear some of the most profound words that Jesus ever spoke about Himself.

Yes, Lord, I believe...

The evidence is that Martha was a very devout woman. Despite being a friend of Jesus, and part of a family that Jesus clearly had a great affection for, Martha still refers to Jesus as 'Lord' signifying at least a partial understanding of the nature of Jesus. She seems to imply her belief that Jesus could have prevented the death of Lazarus had He been on hand to bring about some cure for his illness, though there is no apparent bitterness in her words. Later, Mary also expresses the same thought.

Now, even though Lazarus is dead, and in response to the statement of Jesus that **"Your brother will rise again"**, Martha expresses her belief in his resurrection "at the last day". She seems resigned to the reality of Lazarus' death. For the Christian of any age, the next statement of Jesus contains words that rank as high in importance as any others that Jesus spoke. The event that took place over the next few minutes was to be His last sign before his entry into Jerusalem. It was to be a sign to strengthen his disciples; a sign to convict the eye-witness Jews and those who subsequently heard of this sign of his true nature; a sign to show his authority over physical death; a sign to point the way to His promise of eternal life for all who believed in Him. **"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"** I've read those words time and again and they never fail to send a tingle through my spine. Christian reader – go on believing these words for they are the essence of the gospel and our salvation. Unsaved reader – savour the words and respond to them because they are the gateway to eternal life. Gloriously, then, Martha expressed her own belief in Jesus: **"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, He who is coming into the world."** I believe that this was a crucial profession of belief and faith by Martha, without which, I believe, this event would not have happened.

Jesus weeps at the effect of sin

It is an undoubtedly emotional scene that is played out over the next few minutes as Martha runs back to the house and brings Mary to the point, still outside the village of Bethany, where she had first gone to greet Jesus. The Jews in and around the house who were mourning with Mary followed her believing she was going to the tomb. There is no doubt that some of these Jews had latterly been present in Jerusalem and were opponents of Jesus because they quickly refer to the miracle of Jesus restoring sight to the blind man and question why he had not prevented the death of Lazarus. For others, though their grief over the loss of Lazarus was uppermost, and as Mary and many of the Jews wept openly, so Jesus too ultimately gave public vent to His own sorrow and indignation and wept with them. Perhaps they now saw a different side to Jesus as they were moved to say: "See how much he loved him!" We don't really know why Jesus wept and John doesn't presume to tell us. Maybe we shouldn't speculate either but there could be numerous reasons. Perhaps it was simply an expression of sheer love and grief (maybe unlikely as Jesus knew He was about to raise him); perhaps it was the knowledge that despite what he was about to perform, many would still not believe Him; perhaps He had thoughts about His own impending sacrifice.

However the best translations of v33, which refers to Jesus being 'deeply moved in spirit and troubled', suggest that the indignation or even anger that Jesus showed was because He found Himself face to face with the ultimate manifestation of the effects of Satan in the world – that is, death. The word used for the weeping of Jesus in verses 33 and 38 is not the same as that used for the wailing and lamenting of the sisters of Lazarus and the Jews, but has the sense of quiet grief, and is thought to refer to His grief over the effects of sin, death and realm of Satan. As mentioned above, as He stood before the tomb, perhaps too He was acutely aware of His own impending death and burial and the burden of sin He would carry.

Lazarus, come out

So the stage had been set. The tomb appears to have been the typical chamber of those times with a stone in front of the chamber and Jesus requests, despite the protestations of Martha that by now the body would be decomposing and therefore giving off a powerful odour, that the stone be moved away. Jesus refers back to the belief of Martha and then offers a prayer of thanksgiving to God. Once again there is purpose in this. Jesus has constantly affirmed His unity with the Father as a means of establishing His nature and deity with the Jews and here again He prays to His Father, **"on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me."** Do you recall His words to them shortly before in Jerusalem for which the Jews sought to stone Him: **"I and the Father are one."** As he would tell his disciples a little later, **"I am in the Father and the Father is in me"**.

In the event the denouement is simplicity itself. Standing outside the tomb with the stone removed, Jesus simply calls out: **"Lazarus, come out."** To a lifeless, spiritless, decomposing corpse of a friend, Jesus says 'come out'. Even in an age of magic and miracles, the sight of Lazarus emerging from the tomb, still wrapped from head to toe in his burial bandages, must have been truly astonishing. And the response of Jesus to this act that glorifies the Son of God? High fives all round? Screaming affirmation of his greatness? Smug satisfaction in the faces of the Jews? No, none of these. Jesus was content to let actions speak louder than words. He just uttered the simple practical words: **"Unbind him, and let him go."** Lazarus is raised from the dead and in a wonderful physical manifestation of His power Jesus has given a preliminary demonstration of what is about to become spiritually and universally available to all mankind. **"The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgement."**

We are not allowed an insight into the immediate reaction of the family and witnesses at the house in Bethany, expect to know that some of the Jews believed in Jesus as a result. We are however told of the almost inevitable political and religious manoeuvring that started as soon as news of the miracle reached the Jewish authorities. They feared losing control and the consequent Roman reaction until the high priest, Caiaphas, under inspiration, prophesied the death of Jesus as a political expediency to save the political nation of Israel from a Roman crackdown. So they took counsel to kill Jesus. And whilst Caiaphas had correctly identified that Jesus was to die to save Israel, there is no doubt that he did not for one moment conceive that the salvation that Jesus would bring to Israel would be an eternal, spiritual salvation rather than a short-term, political one. Nor that Jesus' salvation would be universally available.

Yes, Jesus was die. Not at the whim of the Jewish Sanhedrin but as part of God's plan for the fullness of time. But the events in that small village of Bethany, amongst a loving family, held a resonance for the world that still inspires and gives comfort to Christians today. **"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."**

STUDIES IN GENESIS 5

~ ABRAHAM

(Ian S Davidson, Motherwell)



Abraham was a man of great faith. He is one of the outstanding characters of the Bible and still much admired by Jews, Christians and Muslims throughout the world. He was once known as Abram. In Hebrew, *Ab* is "father" and *ram* is "chief". Eventually, his name was changed to *Abraham*, which means "father of a multitude".

Abraham was a descendant of Shem and a son of Terah. Terah was an idol worshipper, whose father, Nahor, had also served other gods (Joshua 24:2). Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldees, a city with a long history and excavated between 1922 and 1934 by the joint British Museum and University, Philadelphia, expedition under Sir C. L. Woolley. Amongst many other things, thousands of inscribed tablets were discovered, which help trace the history and economy of the famous city. Woolley's *Excavations at Ur* is a great read.

Abram was instructed by the Almighty to leave his country and his father's house. He went willingly in obedience to God. We read: "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing where he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city, which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10). Stephen had at one time endorsed these facts in his defence before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:1-8). But why did God call Abram? As one writer has said: "It appears that Abram, of all men on earth in his day, possessed that one quality which commended him to the Lord as progenitor of a covenant people, whose relationship would be established upon the basis of faith."

A COVENANT-MAKING GOD

Our God is a covenant-making God. He had made a covenant with Noah in the antediluvian world and He made another covenant, after the flood, with Abram. Actually, God made two covenants with Abram. One was fleshly and temporal; the other was spiritual and lasting and better all round. We read: "...and I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless you and curse him that curses you: and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12: 2-3). Both covenants were to be realised through the seed of Abraham.

Genesis chapter 17 is an important chapter in reference to Abraham. For in this chapter we see that his name is changed; that circumcision, the sign of the "fleshly" covenant, is introduced; and that the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah (name changed from Sarai) is made by Jehovah Himself. The child's name would be Isaac "and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him" (17:19b). From this covenant, Ishmael, Hagar's son, was excluded. But God was not about to forget him, his descendants or the rest of the world. The new covenant would see to that.

ABRAHAM'S FAITH SHOULD BE OUR FAITH

Abraham never doubted that God could and would do as he promised. Paul later wrote: "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in

faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed unto him for righteousness" (Romans 4: 20-22). Romans chapter 4 is a marvellous chapter. Paul holds up Abraham as the supreme example of a man of faith. The faith of Abraham should be our faith. W. Carl Ketcherside has written: "My faith is that of Abraham. The promise is different but the nature of the faith is not. I do not intend to be shaken in it nor shaken loose from it, by the wisdom of this passing age. There are not enough pseudo-scientists, pettifogging professors or perverted philosophers in this world to make me lose my faith in my God. I am sold out to Him, lock, stock and barrel. I have crossed the Great Divide and I am not turning back. I have bound myself to the mast of faith so that the siren voices of infidelity cannot lure me to set foot on the shifting sands of the island of unbelief. There is nothing left with which to speculate. 'I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name' ".

FAITH TESTED

Faith, to be worth anything, has to stand up to the various tests that come one's way. Abraham faith was tested – and how! He was told by God one day to take a journey with his son Isaac, "whom you love, and get into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I will tell you" (Genesis 22: 2). So Abraham went without a quibble. I believe that Abraham would have killed Isaac on that occasion. There is no doubt about it. But all was not lost because he was of the conviction that God could have raised Isaac from dead. The Hebrew writer later said: "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall your seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead: from whence also he received him in a figure" (11:17-19). Abraham passed the test! How many since have failed tests a lot less rigorous than this one? Please note that God does not *tempt* us. Satan does that. But God *tries* us – and rightly so! An untested or untried faith is really pretty useless.

FAITH AT WORK

What saves us is not faith alone or works alone. But we are saved by faith at work. The greatest writer on faith the world has ever seen saw no conflict between faith and works. At the conclusion of his epistle to the Romans, Paul wrote thus: "Now to Him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: to God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen" (16: 25-27). I have the phrase, "the obedience of faith", underlined in my Bible. James later wrote: "But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? See how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. You see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only...For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (2: 20- 26).

CONCLUSION

We cannot help but being uplifted by the study of Abraham's life. I conclude these brief remarks by quoting the words of Alexander Campbell on Abraham: "Because of his unprecedented faith in God's promises and exalted piety, he was constituted the *father of all believers*; and his whole life is made a model for all the children of God, as far as walking by faith in God's promises is an ornament to human character."



QUESTION:
Is it right to sing hymns or pray to
the Holy Spirit?



Let me begin by asking you to think about the following questions:

1. Suppose a very dear friend, for whom you have great respect, and whose judgment you could unhesitatingly trust, were to say to you, "I know that you are having a difficult time and therefore I am sending someone to you who will help you with the problems you are facing. He will stay with you and always be on hand to advise and encourage you. And I want you to receive him as you would receive me."

Would you be prepared to receive this special visitor, or would you prefer not to entertain him? And, if you *did* choose to receive him, would you be willing to talk to him? Or would keep him at arm's length and even avoid speaking to him?

2. Again, suppose you were accused of committing a serious offence and you were offered the services of the finest advocate available - someone who could represent you effectively because he understands you - would you accept the offer and be willing to talk to him about your case? Or would you decide that, after all, you could manage without his help?
3. And yet again. Suppose you learned that someone has genuine concern for your welfare and wished to be your friend. Would you agree that it would be - to say the least - evidence of deep ingratitude, if you were to ignore this individual and treat him as though he did not exist?

Why do ask these questions? I ask them because if you will think about them and answer them for yourself, you will have the answer to the question I have been requested to consider in "The Question Box".

The Question is; **"Is it right to sing hymns, or pray, to the Holy Spirit?"**

Now, for me, the matter does not constitute a problem, because I accept all that the New Testament scriptures teaches me concerning the Holy Spirit.

I have learned that the Holy Spirit is an intelligent, emotional being who possess all the qualities and characteristics that indicate personality. I know that the Lord Jesus promised to send Him to be 'another Comforter' to believers; that is, to be a '*parakletos*' = '*one called alongside to help*'. In other words, to be a helper.

And, since the Holy Spirit came to '*abide for ever*', He is here *now*, and He will remain here until the Lord returns.

He is capable of affection.

Rom. 15:30 speaks of '*the love of the Spirit*'. This refers to the love that *He* has for *us*, and when, in our prayers, we find it difficult to find the words with which to express ourselves clearly, the love He has for us moves Him to take up our faltering petitions and present them on our behalf to the Father, '*with sighs too deep for words*' as He makes intercession for us (Rom. 16: 26-27).

Why, then, should we hesitate to speak to, or sing about, such a wonderful Friend? I can think of two possible reasons why some Christians find it something of a problem.

1st. There are not very many hymns in our hymnbook that relate to the Holy Spirit, or that speak about Him, because the sad fact is that the majority of such hymns have been written by people of the Pentecostal persuasion, and the hymns and songs they have produced inevitably contain 'Pentecostal' errors concerning the nature and work of the Spirit. They plead for a *Pentecostal descent of the Spirit*, or a '*baptism of the Spirit*', or a bestowal of the charismata – the '*gifts of the Spirit*'. So we are naturally reluctant to use them in their original form.

As a matter of fact, I must admit have serious doubts about some of the hymns that are found in our own hymnbooks. "*Breathe on me Breath of God*" has a lovely melody, but its sentiments are certainly questionable.

Another one? What about "*Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me*"? We cannot sing this hymn scripturally, and it is imperative that we take care that what we sing is in harmony with the Word.

2nd But probably our major difficulty arises from the fact that the Holy Spirit is the least known member of the Godhead. He is described in the Oxford Dictionary as '*the third person in the Godhead*', and sadly, that is the place to which he is erroneously assigned in the thinking of many Christians. He is Number Three!

But the only sense in which it is possible to describe Him as the Third Person is Chronologically. By this I mean in the sense that that the Holy Spirit is the third Person to be revealed to us.

- The First Person to be revealed was God Himself, the Father.
- Then, the Second Person, to be revealed '*in the fullness of time*', was the Word, Who '*became flesh and dwelt among us*', and of Whom God said, "*Thou art My Son...*".
- Finally, the Third and last Person in the Godhead to be revealed was the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit – when, on the Day of Pentecost, after the Lord's ascension, He came into the world to commence His own ministry; a ministry which Jesus described as being '*to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment*'.

We have no difficulty speaking to the Father, or to the Saviour in prayer and we find it easy to address them in song. If we knew our Comforter better and felt more comfortable speaking *about Him*, we should find it easier to speak *to Him*, and singing about Him, would come easier to us.

If the Spirit were to speak to the Church today, I think He would say; "*Believe in Me! Trust Me! Use Me!*"

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Prophets and Prophecy

The Nature of Prophecy

(Stephen Woodcock, Wigan)

In this article we shall be dealing with the predictive nature of prophecy. The prophets revealed God's communication with mankind and so the people of Israel regarded their words as the words of God. Many of the prophecies begin with a phrase such as, "The word of the Lord came to..." Peter wrote: **"For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," (2 Peter 1:21).** So if the prophets claimed that God made predictions through them about what would happen in the future, then we should be able to test the truthfulness of such predictions. In Science a theory is tested by the predictions that can be made on the basis of it. For example, Newton's theories on gravitation predicted that a force of attraction exists between two physical objects. So if you throw a ball up in to the air, we would predict that the Earth's stronger gravitational force, due to the Earth being much bigger than the ball, would pull it back down to the ground. This is exactly what happens. The Bible claims that prophecy can be tested and in that sense the Bible is being scientific, just as every scientific theory is subject to testing.

The Test

God, through Moses, laid down the test. He wrote, **"And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?' – when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken," (Deuteronomy 18:21 – 22).** If we reverse the passage then we can come to the conclusion that if a prophecy does come to pass or come true then that is a word that the Lord has spoken. So the Bible stands or falls on the basis of its claim that God has spoken through the prophets. Ultimately our salvation rests on this claim because Jesus told His disciples that the prophets spoke about Him. He said, **"These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the PROPHETS and the Psalms must be FULFILLED," (Luke 24:44).** Therefore the study of prophecy is very important because if we can show that prophecy was fulfilled then we have evidence that supports the truthfulness of the Scriptures and the existence of God as well as Jesus being the only one through whom we can be saved (**John 14:6; Acts 4:12**).

Applying the Test

Often things are much more easily said than done and this is true when it comes to examining prophecy and its fulfilment. This is because we must first try to interpret what the prophet was saying in the type of language they used.

- Some prophets used clear and direct terms when they spoke their prophecies. An example of this is Elijah's prophecy to Ahab, **"As the Lord the God of Israel**

lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word," (1 Kings 17:1). That is exactly what happened.

- However the prophets also used figurative language and that makes the study of prophecy more problematic. Here is a prophecy that is interpreted in different ways and it was made by Isaiah. He wrote, **"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; and the young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like an ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea," (Isaiah 11:6 – 9).** If we interpreted that prophecy literally, then we would come to the conclusion that it has not been fulfilled because we don't see these conditions existing in the animal kingdom. Indeed, there are some groups who do interpret it literally and so believe that it has yet to be fulfilled in the animal kingdom on a reconstituted Earth. However if we look at the prophecy in a completely different way and accept that the prophet was using figurative language then we have the added difficulty of interpreting the language. Then once we have come to an interpretation of the prophecy, we then have to work out whether it has been fulfilled or not.
- Then there is **APOCALYPTIC** language. This is an extreme form of figurative language that uses symbols, imageries of strange beasts, mysterious numbers, and terrible cataclysmic events. An example of apocalyptic language is found in **Isaiah 13:10** which reads: **"For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light."** Here Isaiah uses a picture of a cosmic catastrophe to describe God's judgement on Babylon. The book of **Daniel** contains prophecies couched in apocalyptic language, especially **chapters 2 and 7 – 12**. In the New Testament Jesus Himself used apocalyptic language in **Matthew 24** and of course the **Book of Revelation** is full of apocalyptic language from beginning to end. Therefore we have the added difficulty of interpreting the symbolic language used in a prophecy before we can come to any conclusion about its fulfilment. That is why books such as Daniel and Revelation have become the focus of attention of religious groups who preach Premillennial Dispensationalism which contains ideas such as the Rapture, Armageddon and Christ returning to Earth to set up His throne in Jerusalem before reigning for a thousand years, hence the term Premillennialism. Hal Lindsey wrote 'The Late Great Planet Earth' which became an international best seller and it popularised Premillennialism.
- So the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of biblical prophecy has led religious groups to espouse false teachings such as Premillennialism and that is why we have to be careful in interpreting prophecy. You may ask: "How can we interpret prophecy correctly?" Here are some general rules:
 - (1) Find out the **historical background** to a prophecy. Basic information is often supplied at the beginning of a book (**e.g. Ezekiel 1:1 – 3**).

- (2) Find out the **intended audience** the prophet was speaking or writing to. An example of this is **Jeremiah 22:1**: **“Thus says the Lord, “Go down to the house of the king of Judah and speak there this word...”**”
- (3) Make sure that you understand the **CONTEXT** in which a prophecy is recorded. I wrote previously in this article that **Isaiah 13:10** was a part of a prophecy about God’s judgement on Babylon. How did I know? I know because **13:1** says, **“The oracle concerning BABYLON which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.”** That oracle doesn’t end until **14:23**. You cannot apply **13:10** to any other cataclysmic event, as some are tempted to do, **unless another biblical writer applies it for that purpose.**
- (4) Interpret the language of a prophecy **LITERALLY FIRST** and then interpret it FIGURATIVELY if it becomes clear that a literal interpretation makes no sense (**see Isaiah 11:6 – 9 above**). I shall be dealing with that prophecy in a future article.
- (5) **USE THE BIBLE FIRST** to find out if a particular prophecy was fulfilled during biblical times. If it was, then we cannot apply it to any other time period. In my last article I cited the example of Jeremiah’s prophecy that the Jews would return to their homeland after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, (**see 2 Chron 36:17 -23; Jeremiah 25:12 – 13; 29:10; 33:10 – 11, 14**). That is what happened during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. So we cannot apply those and similar prophecies to the return of the Jews to Palestine in 1948 as the Premillennialists do. If the Bible does not provide the information that shows that a prophecy was fulfilled, then try to consult secular history. This is particularly relevant to some of the prophecies that Daniel recorded because they were fulfilled during the Inter-testamental Period. Such history is not found in the Bible, so we have to rely on the records of historians such as Josephus.
- (6) Let us also not forget that the prophets themselves didn’t always understand their own prophecies and the revelations they had from God. So we are in good company if we don’t fully understand them either. Peter wrote: **“Concerning this salvation, the PROPHETS who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours SEARCHED and INQUIRED carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories,” (1 Peter 1:10 – 11).** Read also **Daniel 8:27** where Daniel didn’t understand a vision.

Conclusion

You may not agree with everything I have written in this article, but I hope that you agree with me that prophecy is a complex area of study and it is not without its problems. I had to write this article in order to set the scene for my future ones. So in my forthcoming articles we will be examining various prophecies in order to see how they were fulfilled.

Contact me at: stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk if you wish to discuss anything you have read in this article or in my previous ones about prophecy.

INFLUENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(John H Diggle (Nottingham))

STUDY 4 – THE Diaspora

“Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia who are chosen...” 1 Peter 1:1

“James... to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.” James 1:1

THE DIASPORA

When Peter and James wrote about scattering or dispersal it was the word ‘Diaspora’ that they used. Literally it is a compound word referring to the sowing of seed; think about the word ‘spores’ and you will get the idea.

So far as its New Testament connections are concerned, it had come to be used almost as a technical term to describe not only those who were physical descendants of the ones originally scattered, but those who shared their religious views and convictions.

When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC, some, like Jeremiah, had been taken to Egypt, others to Babylon itself. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah make it clear that not all of those dispersed at the time of the Babylonian captivity returned to Jerusalem when they were free to do so.

It was those who had settled in Egypt who came to establish a large and influential community there, first at Elephantine Island in the middle of the Nile, where they built another temple, and later at Alexandria, named after Alexander the Great who was generally rather sympathetic in his views and treatment of Jews. Smaller communities grew up elsewhere as both James and Peter indicate but in effect it was Alexandria that became the capital city of Diaspora Judaism. Although geographically situated in Egypt, Alexandria soon became a place renowned for its scholarship and academic excellence, somewhat like Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard. It attracted scholars and housed one of the greatest libraries in the world.

As we have seen in the previous article, Greek thinking and philosophy increasingly dominated the world at that time, and the Jewish community there was quickly and profoundly affected by that. The name of Philo, an historian and geographer as well as a philosopher, is, to this day, widely known and respected.

At first there was great despondency amongst those who had been exiled from Jerusalem and Judea, but as time passed they showed great determination “to make a go of it”. Once that process had begun, Judaism continued along what were, in effect, two separate strands.

Having lost contact with Jerusalem, those of the Diaspora were regarded as liberal to the point of heresy by their ‘holier than thou’ brethren who had settled back into Judaism’s homeland. Some of this sneering may have been justified, but far from entirely so, particularly as the Jerusalem community was guilty of a considerable amount of ‘tarring with the same brush’.

SYNAGOGUES AND THE SEPTUAGINT

The temple at Elephantine Island was viewed in somewhat the same illegitimate light as those shrines set up by the first defectors at the time of the division of Solomon’s kingdom, at Dan and Bethel. Then, in a quest for local places of assembly, the concept of synagogue

establishment appeared on the scene. This too was an innovation viewed with a frown by the 'old school' Jews and it cannot have helped that the term itself was a Greek one, which constantly rubbed salt into wounds as far as its origins were concerned.

That may sound surprising, but the language in which God was worshipped and His scriptures recorded was a big issue so far as orthodox Judaism was concerned. They saw Hebrew as almost a divinely appointed language and considered no other language was appropriate to carry the message of God. Surrounded by Greek language and culture, that increasingly became the preferred language of the Diasporic Jews and there was both need and desire for Scriptures in a form that they were familiar and comfortable with.

There are numerous variations on the account of how the Septuagint came about, many of them almost certainly apocryphal. Certainly it was produced by a group of scholars, around seventy in number at Alexandria. Geisler and Nix, in their "General Introduction to the Bible", offer, with some scepticism, the explanation that the scholars concerned were six taken from representatives of each of the twelve tribes, making 72 scholars in all, of course. Be that as it may, the LXX was a name that stuck.

HELLENISM

We have seen in previous sections of this study, how, in a variety of forms, Greek philosophy and culture spread almost like wild fire across the then known world, deeply imprinting itself even on Jewish and Roman society, both of which were refined and, in the case of Judaism, ancient. Hellas is the Greek name for Greece and Hellenism and Hellenisation are the appropriate terms by which to speak of this encroachment. Regardless of the Diaspora, Hellenism was in any case advancing rapidly in its effects across the Jewish world, and, along with improved communications (which we have seen to be associated with Rome's rise to power), mobility brought about its ever-speedier advance and ever-greater extension of its cross-cultural fertilisation.

By the time that we come to the period of its most direct relevance to the early Church, there were significant numbers of Hellenistic Jews amongst its first members. Take a look at Acts 2:9-11 and notice the correspondences between the origins of those listed there and those mentioned by Peter and James in Acts 6:1, which passage includes a direct mention of their Hellenistic nature, and which begins the account of the early tensions arising between these Hellenistic Jews and those referred to as Hebraistic Jews.

Though many had by now accommodated themselves to the idea of synagogue worship, and in any case the temple at Jerusalem was accessible to those who lived within the region of Judea, there were other much more substantial stumbling blocks to the acceptance of Hellenism and Hellenists so far as the orthodox Jews were concerned - and especially so those like the Pharisees. Like the term Christian, Hellenist was a term that was used, as often as not, as a slur and uttered in a sneering tone. In fact, as we are about to consider, since it was these Hellenists who proved to be the most ready willing converts to Christ, there may well have been little distinction between the opprobrium attracted on one account and the other.

Apart from the divisions over the language in which it was believed acceptable to take one's scriptures, a matter to which we shall return shortly, there were other considerations in Hellenistic Judaism that were found to be deeply offensive to the orthodox community, yet which at the same time, at least partially, account for their greater amenability to accepting Christ.

Notoriously so as far as the conservatives were concerned, the Hellenists had a good deal of antipathy towards circumcision. Not only did they question its necessity but also significant numbers actually began to refuse circumcision. While this outraged the orthodox Jews, Christianity's non-requirement of circumcision made it appear all the more attractive. Not unrelated to this was the fact that, generally speaking, the Hellenists were more evangelistic

than traditional Judaism, again a feature that was similar in Christianity and therefore proved more attractive to them.

Underlying both the history and the characteristic thinking of the Hellenist movement was something that we must not fail to be aware of, as it was a very significant element in their part in the development of the early Church. Orthodox, conservative and therefore acceptable to their traditionalist brethren (Jewish brethren that is) they may not have been, but they did generally show a burning desire to worship God. That for which they were heavily criticised in some instances represented their strenuous efforts to worship God often in unhelpful circumstances. The synagogues and Septuagint certainly fall within this category. When we come across the term 'God-fearers' in the New Testament, it is often these people who are meant and it is a term that is plainly expressive of what was one of their most significant characteristics.

It would be wrong however to give the impression that everything in the Hellenistic tendencies was admirable. A rather more lax attitude towards morals and a readiness to adapt to some of the more questionable Greek cultural practices of ethics, entertainment and commerce, and a similar disregard for those aspects of ceremonial law that had a bearing on hygiene (increasingly becoming less of a practical issue) left them wide open to the attentions of those with legitimate concerns as well as those of a legalistic disposition.

No doubt there might be some legitimate, reasonable concern about what might be the effects of their influence on the future of Judaism amongst those who sought to serve God for all the right reasons and with all the right motives. Yet it should serve as a lesson to us that the right way to go about the expression of such concerns, however legitimate they may be, is not fierce and un-Christlike intolerance, shunning or coldness – even when we are convinced that we are right and others are wrong. Godly correctness is ill served by ungodly harshness and brutality. After all, Jesus succeeded in winning the hearts of many thousands of these people when rigid, intolerant, legalistic Judaism failed to engage either their hearts or their minds with its emphasis on matters that were not about genuine spirituality but unspiritual pettiness.

AN ENDURING LEGACY

In the Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament scriptures, the Alexandrian community of Diasporic Jews proves to have left behind them an enduring legacy. When many of those New Testament passages that quote from, or refer to, Old Testament scripture appear in our current Bibles, they do so in the form of English translations of an LXX equivalent. In other words, and this is especially the case with the writer of the Hebrew letter, this was the version of choice. If you have ever looked up those references and compared them with the words the Hebrew writer uses, you will have noticed that they are not always exact matches. This is because our Old Testaments are translations directly taken from the Hebrew original, whereas when they are referred to in the New Testament they are commonly taken from an LXX original. This was so largely because it was the version that most were comfortable and familiar with, coinciding as it did with the KOINE Greek of common linguistic currency.

I know that there have been a variety of strongly held views on the question of the suitability of various translations over the years and doubtless some of you will have noticed some parallels here. It may be worth bearing in mind that there would certainly have been those who held the early versions of the New Testament in poor regard for this reason. Yet it seems to have been the Holy Spirit's will to endorse the recording of God's word first of all in a medium that facilitated intelligibility. If the language that we use gets in the way of effective communication it is just possible that we need to take another look at the language that we use. God's words are no more and no less truly His words, so long as the original sense is respected, for being offered in the form that is most readily understood. Make no mistake about it; the LXX was originally very much motivated by evangelistic intent, which is surely to be applauded.

New and Information

Ghana Appeal

The Appeal continues to support medical care and the extension of the Lord's Church in Ghana.

A brother who has personally brought many to Christ is now suffering from cancer, and another case of hernia has been treated. Another elderly brother who has been travelling for years on a bicycle to teach the Gospel is now too frail to pedal such long distances. He has asked for a motorbike instead, but our funds are too limited to provide this.

A P.A. system, which has been used for many years in outdoor preaching, is in need of repair and a limited amount of money has been allocated for this.

When a farmer set fire to the growth on his land it spread to the neighbouring plot, which belongs to one of our brothers in Christ. As this resulted in the loss of all our brothers' crop and seed we have given him money to get started again.

Unfortunately children whose parents are unable to pay for their schooling are ill equipped for employment in later life and the poverty trap continues, but it is encouraging to see brethren cooperating together in Christian love. In a remote area the sisters in about fifteen congregations are cooperating together to generate money to help feed their families.

Those wishing to help please make cheques payable to Dennyloanhead Church of Christ Ghana Fund and send to treasurer: **Mrs. Janet Macdonald, 12 Charles Drive, Larbert, Falkirk, Stirlingshire. FK5 3HB Tel: 01324 562480**

Question Box

Once again readers are reminded that any questions that arise in discussion or from personal study can be forwarded to Bro. Frank Worgan for his consideration. At the moment the Question Box is empty and the feature will not appear in the SS until Frank has questions that he can usefully answer. Our policy is that only genuine readers' questions will be answered and that questions will not be fabricated just for the purpose of continuing this feature of the magazine. We are lucky to have the benefits of Frank's long experience and study at our disposal and I hope that through your questions we can get him back to work on your behalf as soon as possible. Please forward your questions directly to Frank by post to: Frank Worgan, 11, Stanier Road, Corby, Northants NN17 1XP or by email to: Frank@fworgan0.talktalk.co.uk

Coming Events

SATURDAY EVENING MEETINGS AT STRETFORD

To be held in the Green Hut, 538 Kings Road, Stretford, Manchester.

Each meeting will start at 7.00 pm and will consist of:

A Gospel Topic, followed by **Light refreshments**, concluding with **Open Discussion**.

Dates and speakers:
22nd September 2007
Mark Hill, Loughborough

20th October 2007
Ernest Makin, Wigan.

**EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN
WORKSHOP
LANCASTER UNIVERSITY**

**THURSDAY 30TH AUGUST –
SATURDAY 1ST SEPTEMBER, 2007.**

Speakers and Subjects:

Frank Worgan (England):

The State of the Church in the UK.

John Mooney (Scotland):

Leadership without Elders.

**Vince O'Donovan (England
/Ireland):**

Leadership with Elders.

Larry Sullivan (Germany):

Strong Hearts, Winning Hearts.

Terry Briley (USA):

The Book of Isaiah.

Jason Snethen (England/USA):

Successful Sunday Schools.

Alastair Ferrie (Scotland):

The New Testament Church.

For the Ladies:

Teri Briley (USA):

Spiritual Formation.

Linda Ferrie (Scotland):

Strong Marriages, Strong Families.

Contact:

Stephen Woodcock at:

stephen.woodcock@hotmail.co.uk

**Address: 11 West Mount, Orrell,
Wigan, WN5 8LX, UK.**

Telephone: (01942) 211 479.

**Fee: £105 for the whole workshop,
which includes meals and
accommodation.**

PETERHEAD, SCOTLAND

**Social Weekend, 29 & 30th
September 2007**

Saturday Meetings:

3.00 pm and 6.00 pm

Sunday services as normal.

All welcome.

Speakers: **Bert Ritchie (Coleraine)**
and

Graham McDonald (Cumbernauld)

**NEWTONGRANGE,
SCOTLAND**

**Annual Social, Saturday
13th October 2007**

Social will commence with a meal
at 1.00 pm

A warm welcome awaits all.

Speaker: **John Morgan (Hindley)**

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