



Volume 98 No. 4

AUSTRALIA

October—December 2015

THE BABE OF BETHLEHEM

“And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not” (Luke 3:15)

There are several features of Jesus’ first advent that confirm His coming was in accord with the Father’s plan, as Paul declared: *“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law”* (Gal. 4:4).

One feature is that it was *“the people (who) were in expectation”*; not the rulers or the prophets. The people believed there were prophets in their day—for example Agabus (Acts 21:10)—however the definition of the Greek word from which the word *“people”* in Luke 3:15 is translated confirms that it was the people in general who were in expectation of His coming. (Prophets were the successors of “seers” who could “see” or perceive future events that others could not “see”. 1 Samuel 9:9 equates the two: *“Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God, thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer: for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer”*).

The “foreknowledge” of the “seers” was not revealed only to their contemporaries but was recorded in the written prophecies for the benefit of later generations: *“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel”* (Matt. 2:1-6). The prophet to whom the priests and scribes referred was Micah (Micah 5:2), which means that, although the people were in expectation of Him, Herod did not know of the prophecy. Such selective

revelation shows that God reveals His plan only to those whom He wishes to enable them to carry out what He had planned for that time.

Consistent with God revealing His plans only to some, later Jesus’ identity was concealed from the general people: *“When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven”* (Matt. 16:13-17). Thus at that time the Israelites did not realize who He was: *“He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not”* (John 1:10-11). Thus the disciples’ realization that Jesus was the Messiah was given to them specifically by God in order to fulfill His purpose—as Jesus said: *“blessed are thou Simon Barjona for flesh and blood has not revealed it into thee”*.

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Ahaz

Another feature of Jesus' birth was that God gave the prophecy that He would be born of a virgin through an unrighteous king, Ahaz: *"In the seventeenth year of Pekah the son of Remaliah Ahaz the son of Jotham king of Judah began to reign... and reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem, and did not that which was right in the sight of the LORD his God, like David his father. But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, yea, and made his son to pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the heathen, whom the LORD cast out from before the children of Israel"* (2 Kings 16:1-3). 2 Chron. 28:19 gives further testimony that Ahaz was unrighteous: *"the LORD brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Israel; for he made Judah naked, and transgressed sore against the LORD"*. Thus it was to an unrighteous king that the Lord revealed that Jesus' mother would be a virgin: *"... the LORD spake again unto Ahaz, saying... the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"* (Isa. 7:10-14).

Jesus also confirmed God reveals His plan only to those whom He wishes: *"In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight"* (Luke 10:21).

Abraham

In view of Jesus' first advent being somewhat shrouded in mystery it is remarkable that when Mary became aware of her role in bringing the Saviour into the world, she immediately attributed it to being a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, a prophesy given centuries previously that *"In thee and in thy Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed"* (Gen. 12:1-3). Mary said: *"He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever"* (Luke 1:54-55).

Zacharias

Likewise Zacharias, in his declaration at the birth of John the Baptist, was given the realization that the time of the Saviour's birth was imminent and that John would herald the One by whom the Lord would redeem Israel, in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham: *"And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David; As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began... To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his*

holy covenant; The oath which he sware to our father Abraham, That he would grant unto us, that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins" (Luke 1:67-77). Zacharias' inclusion of *"remission of their sins"* in his declaration implies Zacharias was given insight into Jesus' mission—that He was the Saviour of mankind from the curse of death.

John the Baptist

Although Zacharias declared John the Baptist's mission and understood the relationship between John and Jesus, the scribes were not given such knowledge, even though they were aware of the prophecy of Elias: *"And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead. And his disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist"* (Matt. 17:9-13).

Pentecost

The mystery of Jesus' redemptive mission was not fully understood even by His disciples, not even when He was crucified, in spite of Him having been with them for more than three years: *"And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad? And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days? And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done"* (Luke 24:15-21).

Their uncertainty persisted after His resurrection until they received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost:

“When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:6-8).

Hence the significance of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost is brought into focus, a synopsis of which follows: *“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance... But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words... this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh... Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it*

was not possible that he should be holden of it... Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear... Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:1-36).

The culmination

The ‘mystery’ of the babe who was born in Bethlehem is still a mystery to the world of mankind at large, being understood only by those to whom God has revealed Him: *“But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:7-10).*■

OUR REASONABLE SERVICE

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom 12:1 KJV).

Romans 12:1 contains only a few words, but the verse addresses several important aspects of the Christian’s walk.

Beseech

The first aspect arises from the word “beseech”. In the English language “beseech” means to “implore earnestly”, or to “beg eagerly” (Australian Macquarie Dictionary), and several of the 108 occurrences of the Greek word from which “beseech” is translated reflect that meaning, not denying the fact that the Greek is translated into several different English words, some of which are not normally understood to have the same degree of passion or urgency. Two instances are:

- *“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye*

be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10). Paul always urged the Christians—implored them—to live together in unity (as in Ephesians 4:3);

- *“We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation)” (2 Cor. 6:1-2).* Paul urged the believers to recognise that the invitation that had been given to them was unique and must not be passed up nonchalantly: *“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called... But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:26-30).*

Therefore

The word “therefore” implies Paul’s exhortation is the logical conclusion the Romans should have reached when they considered their privileged position: that is, being grafted in to the olive tree as explained in chapter 11: *“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in (Rom. 11:25); “For as ye in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief”(Rom. 11:30).*

The nation of Israel as a whole had failed to appreciate their opportunity as explained in chapter 11—*“Israel had not obtained that which he seeketh for, but the election hath obtained it” (Rom. 11:7).* Paul urged the believers to realize that it was *“because of unbelief that they (the natural branches—Israelites) were broken off” (Rom. 11:20),* and which allowed them (Gentiles) to be *“grafted in” (Rom. 11:19)* and thus they were the *“election”*. Further they were to realize that the breaking off of the Israelites was in accordance with God’s plan and their (Gentiles) standing was not a cause for pride: *“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob” (Rom. 11:25-26).*

Brethren

Paul’s exhortation (or beseeching) was not an appeal for mankind in general to come to repentance but was a call for the consecrated believers in Christ to be a living sacrifice—those whom he called *“brethren”*.

The expression “brethren” has special import: the Greek root contains the thought of closeness, as those who have come from the same womb, and in several instances the word applies specifically to siblings: *“And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them” (Matt. 4:21).* James and John were “blood brothers”—natural brethren.

Jesus regarded the relationship between Himself and His disciples as equally intimate: *“While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and*

said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matt. 12:46-50).

The term “brethren” is also used by the Apostle Paul to express his emotional closeness to Philemon: *“Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?” (Philemon 16).* Paul regarded Philemon more dearly than a servant—indeed as a brother.

The spirit of brotherhood extended beyond the Jews, embracing Gentile believers: *“And they wrote letters by them after this manner: The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia” (Acts 15:23).* Thus Paul’s exhortation to the Romans when he called them “brethren” had the full force of an intimate spiritual relationship.

The mercies of God

Mercy is extended when one who has superior resources extends favour and compassion to one who is indebted to them. Paul exhorted the Colossians to exercise mercy towards each other: *“... there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col. 3:11-13).* They were exhorted to practise mercy and forgiveness towards all, Greek and Jew alike.

God is merciful. It is because of His mercy that He sent Jesus to earth to redeem mankind from death and it is His mercy that He has called some to present their bodies as a living sacrifice.

A living sacrifice

A sacrifice is something that is surrendered to another. The nation of Israel was required under their Law Covenant with God to offer animals as sacrifices. This required the slaughter of the animals—the giving up of its life as a symbol of their subserviency and consecration to God.

Likewise Jesus gave up His life as a sacrifice to God: *“And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour” (Eph. 5:2).*

Hitherto the sacrifices offered by the Israelites because of their obligations under the Law Covenant,

and Jesus' sacrifice, required the physical (literal) death of the sacrifice. However the exhortation in Romans 12:1 is for the brethren to present their bodies as a "living sacrifice" that is while they remained alive.

The concept of being a living sacrifice is explained in Hebrews 13:12-16: "*Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach... By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased*". The "sacrifice of praise" is to be offered during one's present lifetime on earth: "*the fruit of our lips*" is not limited to the words one speaks but includes one's whole life style. It may be summarized as practising love to all and fulfills the requirements of the Law, including the sacrifices required under it: "*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law... let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof*" (Rom. 13:10-14). As Hebrews 13:16 states, such a life style is pleasing to God.

Further, "*casting off the works of darkness*" requires a change from one's previous life style and hence brings criticism and ridicule from one's previous associates: "*For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you*" (1 Pet. 4:3-4). Suffering such disdain from previous associates is part of the Christian's "sacrifice of praise".

Holy, acceptable to God

One of the secrets of God's plan is that He deems those who are striving to live in accord with the instructions in His Word as being holy or righteous and thus their sacrifices are deemed "holy": "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love*" (Eph. 1:3-4). One should not imagine they are actually holy, but that they are "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:6), that is, God attributes the

righteousness of His Son to them. In a word, God regards them as justified—and therefore righteous.

Our reasonable service

In view of God's grace in deeming anyone as being righteous, it is **reasonable** the Christian should respond by presenting themselves to God as a sacrifice, that is, forgoing their personal preferences so they can serve God.

Serving God in one's daily life may be regarded as the least one can and should do in recognition of God's grace. However there is another concept that may be attached to the word "service". In general terms one worships another when they seek to please them, and hence serving God by conduct that is in accord with His wishes may be regarded as a form of worshipping Him.

Strong's Concordance confirms that the Greek word translated "service" embraces the idea of "worship": "G2999 *latreia*; *ministration* of God, that is, *worship*". The Greek word occurs five times: John 16:2, Romans 9:4, 12:1, Hebrews 9:1 and verse 6. Hebrews 9:6 reads: "*Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God*".

In view of the grace that God has extended to believers offering one's life as a sacrifice is a reasonable request. The Greek for "reasonable" (Strong's G3050: *logikos*) occurs only twice: Romans 12:1 where it is translated "service", and 1 Peter 2:2 where it is translated "*of the word*": "*Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious*". Peter's use of the word "logikos" admits wide interpretation of its meaning, hence it is not possible to be definitive regarding the meaning of "reasonable" in Romans 12:1. However the idea of compliance with the code of conduct that God requires of those who wish to worship Him may be regarded as sensible and not beyond the bounds of what any human being may regard as fair.

Indeed it is by the mercies of God that any human being is invited to present their body as a living sacrifice which God regards as holy.■

e-PP

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FAITH, VIRTUE AND KNOWLEDGE

"... giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge" (2 Peter 1:5).

The Apostle Peter's words quoted above imply the Christian's walk is progressive: they must *"add to their faith"*. Further, there is a sequence to be followed: firstly virtue is to be added to faith followed by knowledge to be added to virtue. However, before any additions can be made, there must be faith, which means faith is the cornerstone of the Christian's *"life and godliness"* (2 Pet. 1:3).

Faith

The first requirement is faith: *"Without faith it is impossible to please Him for he that cometh to God must believe that He is and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him"* (Heb. 11:6).

Faith is a gift from God: *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them"* (Eph. 2:8-10). The Apostle's logic is sound—if faith were a result of one's own efforts it would be grounds for boasting.

It is necessary also to realise that the Christian's faith is not a vague mysterious concept but a positive conviction: *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* (Heb. 11:1). Faith requires there be a *"substance"*, that is, something definite for which one hopes—in 2 Peter 1:3 the Christian's hope is defined as for *"glory and virtue"*.

Evidence

Hebrews 11:1 also defines faith as *"the evidence of things not seen"*. In secular law proceedings evidence is the basis or information upon which a decision is made whether the accused is guilty, that is convicted of the alleged offence. And it is likewise with the Christian's faith—not only must there be substance to the faith—what they believe—but also they must be convicted their hope is real (supported by the promises in God's word).

Hence a mere profession of faith is not enough—it must be demonstrated by *"works"*: *"What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?... faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone"* (Jas. 2:14-17). It is only when one is convicted that what they believe is the truth, and to the extent that they are prepared to act in accordance with their conviction regardless of the

consequences, that their faith is complete—that is, testified by works.

Only those to whom God has given His Holy Spirit are able to have faith in God's word: *"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Spirit teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Cor. 2:12-14). Thus a person to whom God has not given the Holy Spirit is unable to have faith in God's promises because they cannot know the things that are revealed only to those who have the Spirit—the things that are the substance of faith.

Paul also explains that God's selection is not based on one's standing in the world: *"For you see your calling, brethren, not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called"* (1 Cor. 1:26), which is in accord with Jesus' words: *"And it came to pass, that, as Jesus sat at meat in his house, many publicans and sinners sat also together with Jesus and his disciples: for there were many, and they followed him. And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance"* (Mark 2:15-17). The Christian must be acutely aware of the privilege God has given them of understanding His purposes and plans.

Fullness of time

A Christian's conviction of the hope given to them should be strengthened not only by knowing God has given them their faith as a gift, but also by their knowledge of the privileged time in which they live. The opportunity to hope for the Christian's reward and of being adopted as a son of God was not available before Jesus' first advent: *"But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son... that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father"* (Gal. 4:4-6). The giving of the Holy Spirit

after Jesus' death and resurrection marked the beginning of a new era in God's plan: "... *David... being a prophet... spake of the resurrection of Christ... Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear*" (Act 2:29-33). Thus Paul wrote: "*Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit...*" (Eph 3:1-6). As Jesus said to His disciples: "*But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men (who lived in previous times) have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them*" (Matt. 13:16-17).

All their needs

In spite of the called ones being of lowly human estate, God has provided all they need to overcome the world: "*According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue*": *Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust*" (2 Pet. 1:3-4). Peter implies knowledge of the promises of God is essential for the Christian to overcome the corruption in the world.

Virtue

While faith—knowledge and conviction of things hoped for—is essential for the Christian to overcome the world, it is not sufficient on its own: the Apostle Peter states that the Christian must add virtue to their faith: "*And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue...*" (2 Pet. 1:5).

The term "virtue" is not frequently used in common communication today. The Greek word occurs only five times in Scripture and is rendered "virtue" in four of them, the exception being 1 Peter 2:9 where it is translated "praises": "*But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy*".

Strong's Concordance defines the Greek word (#703) as 'manliness or valour, excellence'. Young's Concordance defines the Greek word as "force, strength (of mind or body)". Thus virtue means strength—either the strength of God as in 1 Peter 2:9—or the strength of character God has given to

man that enables them to demonstrate their faith—their conviction—by their works. Just as faith without works is dead, so also faith without virtue will fail because of a lack of strength to carry out the "works".

Knowledge

Once one has a conviction of the truths of God's word—that they have been called (given a special privilege to understand the basics of God's work in them), and having developed the strength to exhibit their belief by their life style (virtue)—they are ready to gain more knowledge regarding the advanced truths of God's plan, termed "meat" in Hebrews 5:13-14: "*For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*".

A gradual leading into the truths of God's word exemplifies His wisdom. As it is in the secular world so it is in the spiritual—knowledge tends to puff up: "... *Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know*" (1 Cor. 8:1-2). Initially God reveals only the milk of the Word to those whom He has called, providing the sustenance they need to grow until they are ready to appreciate that a knowledge of God's word is a privilege and must be accepted in a spirit of humility. In other words, they must grow until they have come to the realization expressed by Paul that a knowledge of God's plan is beyond price: "*Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things... that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness... but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith*" (Phil. 3:8-9).

Peter summed it up in his closing exhortation: "*Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever*" (2 Pet. 3:14-18). Growth in grace—the grace (or favour) of God in having given them of His Spirit—and knowledge of His purposes in the giving of His Son Jesus Christ that they may be called the Sons of God (1 John 3:1)—are essential to the Christian for them to attain unto "*life and godliness*".

Only those to whom God has given His Holy Spirit, who develop strength (virtue) and who progress in their knowledge of God's word will attain their goal of "*life and godliness*".■

THREE HOLY CITIES

The following article is an extract from a video presented by *Israel Video Network* on 6 June 2015. It provides some insight into the current Israeli psyche regarding the sanctity of their land.

* * *

If Israel is the “Holy Land”, there are some cities in Israel that have been deemed the “holy of holies”. These are cities with special historical and spiritual significance to the Jewish People. The three cities mentioned below have very different histories and qualities, and together they provide a blend of old and new, and an aura of spirituality of holiness to the Holy Land. And, although there are several other cities one can claim should have made the high-holy list, these three are those who have endured and maintained their special status throughout the centuries. The list includes Hebron, Jerusalem and Tiberias.

Hebron

Hebron, a truly ancient city, is mentioned repeatedly in the bible. The very beginnings of the People of Israel lie in this very city. Abraham and Sarah settled in Hebron after living in Shechem (Nablus). It was there that Sarah died and Abraham purchased a burial place for her, the Cave of Machpelah: *“And Sarah died in Kiriat Arba--the same is Hebron--in the land of Canaan; and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her”* (Gen. 24:2). *“And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant... And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre--the same is Hebron--in the land of Canaan.”* (Gen. 24:16,19). It was in this very burial place in Hebron that all of the matriarchs and patriarchs were buried (with the exception of Rachel who was buried in Bethlehem), and Jewish sources say that Adam and Eve were buried there as well. Hebron houses not only the roots of the Jewish nation, but those of all mankind.

Hebron is located in the mountains, one of the highest cities in Israel. It is also one of the oldest cities in Israel and in the entire world. This was the capital of King David’s empire until he moved it northwards to Jerusalem, which is the capital of the State of Israel today 3000 years after.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem was not yet a city during the time of Abraham and yet, according to tradition, was the site of the offering of Isaac: *“And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: ‘Abraham’; and he said: ‘Here am I.’ And He*

said: ‘Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of’” (Gen. 22: 1-2).

The land of Moriah, also known as Mount Moriah, was another name for the Temple Mount and thus, thousands of years later, it is that mountain that King David purchases and his son, King Solomon, builds the holy temple. There is so much tradition and Jewish history focused and concentrated in that one city, Jerusalem, the capital of King David’s kingdom and the kingdom of Judah, the home of the holy Temple. Jerusalem is a city that has experienced thousands of years of political intrigue, wars, peace, religious devotion, exiles, rebuilding, destruction and again rebuilding. For thousands of years of exile the Jewish people prayed for their return to the land of Israel and the rebuilding of their homeland and the holy Temple while facing Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.

Another name for Jerusalem is Zion: *“Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion; the same is the city of David”* (2 Sam. 5:7). *“Do good in Thy favor unto Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem”* (Psa. 51:20). The name Zion in turn became the word which most strongly symbolized the longing of the Jewish People to return to their land and the holy city of Jerusalem. Thus the Zionist movement chose this as its name. From the day that King David moved his capital to Jerusalem, it has remained the heart and the soul of the Jewish People.

Tiberias

Yet there were dark times for the Jewish nation. One of these dark periods took place under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Romans wanted to weaken the Jewish People and persecuted and oppressed them and their spiritual leadership. The hub of the Jewish spiritual leadership was the Sanhedrin, the high court of the People of Israel, which consisted of 71 scholars of Jewish law, of high moral and spiritual stature, who sat in a hall called the Chamber of Hewn Stone adjacent to the Holy Temple. As the Romans began to persecute the members of the Sanhedrin, and consequently destroyed the Temple, it was necessary for the Sanhedrin to relocate again and again. Thus the Sanhedrin began a long journey, wandering from place to place until it came to its final residence in Tiberias, on the banks of the Sea of Galilee.

The Jerusalem Talmud was written and sealed in Tiberias and thus was considered to offer a refuge to the spiritual leadership and Torah scholars and so may be added to the list of the “holy cities”.■

KINGS OR A KINGDOM?

“And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen”. (Rev. 1:6 KJV)

“And he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father; to him be the glory and the dominion for ever and ever, Amen” (Rev. 1:6 RV).

One of the requirements of the Christian’s walk is to grow so that, over time, they will be able to explain the Scriptures to others: *“For when by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God...”* (Heb. 5:12).

To that the Apostle Peter adds the requirement that one should be able to answer any question, and that the answer be supported by reason: *“be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason for the hope that is in you...”* (1 Peter 3:15).

Revelation 1:6 is one verse of Scripture that may be used to support an understanding of the reward that awaits the over-comers. However the conclusion that may be drawn from the verse varies with the translation used to reference it: the King James Version uses the word *“kings”*, whereas the Revised Version translates the Greek word as *“kingdom”*.

Changing the Greek from *“kings”* to *“kingdom”* might have at least two effects:

- Changing the status of *“us”* from rulers (*“kings”*) to being subjects—of a *“kingdom”*; and
- Changing the time period to which the status of the *“us”* class relates—if *“kings”* is retained the verse may be used to describe the reward of the saints in the Millennial Age, whereas if the word is changed to *“kingdom”* the verse may be interpreted to refer to the status and mission of the church during the Gospel Age (and maybe not excluding its reference to the status of the church during the Millennial Age).

And so the question is for which *“hope”* is it proper to use Revelation 1:6 as *“the reason”*?

Other translations

All of the following versions translate Revelation 1:6 to read *“kingdom”*;

- Revised Standard Version (RSV);
- American Standard Version (ASV);
- New International Version (NIV);
- Concordant Literal New Testament (CLNT);
- The New Scofield Reference Bible (Scofield);
- Emphatic Diaglott (Diag.); and
- Companion Bible (margin).

Original text

Translation of the Scriptures into English is

particularly difficult because the original documents are not available, hence translators have had to rely on copies which might have consciously or inadvertently used different English words to translate the original Greek text.

Interpolations

The task is further complicated by some comments in the margins of copies having been incorporated into the text of later versions upon which further revisions are based. One example is 1 John 5:7-8. In the KJV it reads: *“For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one”*.

However the RV reads: *“And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and the three agree in one”*—there is no mention of heaven, the Father, and that the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost are one.

The NIV does not mention the Spirit being truth, thus differing from the RV: *“For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement”*.

The difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of the original text is increased by the definitions given in the concordances being based on manuscripts which might contain such interpolations, and hence concordances cannot be used as the sole authority. Nevertheless it is worth noting what the concordances say about *“the Greek”* in Revelation 1:6.

Concordance analysis

Regarding Revelation 1:6 both Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance and Young’s Analytical Concordance agree that the Greek word is *“basileus”* and support its translation as *“kings”*:

- Strong’s Concordance defines *“kings”* as: “G935 βασιλεύς (basileus)—Probably from G939 (through the notion of a *foundation* of power); a *sovereign* (abstractly, relatively or figuratively)”. G935 is translated only as *“king”*. However the reference in Revelation 1:6 is prefixed with an asterisk to indicate that a different word is used in the Revised Version (Strong’s Concordance: page 4 “Directions and

Explanations” #1); and thus acknowledges the translation given in the RV;

- Young’s Concordance agrees the Greek translated “kings” or “kingdom” in Revelation 1:6 is “basileus”, and confirms the meaning is “king”. However it encloses its occurrence in brackets to indicate this occurrence is one of “Various Readings of the Greek New Testament” (Young’s Concordance page v).

Thus further analysis is required to ascertain why, in Revelation 1:6, several translations other than the KJV render “basileus” as “kingdom”.

The text for the Concordances

The next step is to investigate the manuscripts used by the Concordances.

Page 3 of Strong’s Concordance reads: *“This work, as the title page indicates, consists of... a verbal index to the Holy Scriptures, as they exist in the three most important forms now known to British and American readers and scholars, namely... the “Authorized” and “Revised” English Versions”*. Thus while the accuracy of Strong’s Concordance regarded the definition of each Greek word may be taken as beyond doubt, it is based on a “somewhat later” version of the original text and if there were errors in that later version the errors would be perpetuated in the Concordance. Nevertheless the consistency of the Revised Version and Strong’s Concordance is vindicated—the Revised Version was first published in 1884 and Strong’s Concordance was not published until 1894, ten years after the RV—Strong’s Concordance accurately reflects the text used for the RV.

On the other hand Young’s Concordance was first published in 1879, five years before the RV, *“and is designed to lead the simplest reader to a more correct understanding of the common English Bible, by a reference to the original words in Hebrew and Greek, as explained by the most recent critics—Furst, Robinson &c”* (Young’s Concordance page v).

Hence the KJV—*“appointed by The Most High and Mighty Prince James”* in 1611 *“to be read in churches”*—was produced more than 250 years before either Strong’s or Young’s Concordances.

Related Greek words

Ascertaining the meaning of the original Greek text—and keeping in mind that copies were made by hand—is made more difficult by there being five Greek words that relate to the concept of kings and kingdoms. The meanings below are those given in Young’s Concordance (chosen because it was published before Strong’s Concordance):

- Basileia: kingdom (in phrases “kingdom of God”);

- Basileios: royal;
- Basileuo: king; reign;
- Basileus: king;
- Basilikos: royal, kings country, nobleman.

The small differences in the spelling of the various words illustrates the potential for copies to differ from the original text. Nevertheless why do several translations translate “basileus” as kingdom in Revelation 1:6 when the KJV renders it “kings” and both Concordances agree the meaning is “kings”?

One possibility is that the original text used by the later translators differed from the text used for the translation of the KJV, that is, that the later manuscripts read “Basileia” whereas the manuscript used for the KJV reads “Basileus”.

The text of the Companion Bible is that of the KJV. However the Companion Bible margin for Revelation 1:6 contains the note: “kings and priests = (to be) a kingdom (so all texts) and (to be) priests”. It has not been possible to identify the authority on which this comment is based—just what is referenced by “all texts”. However the margin comment “to be” raises the question to which time period does the text relate?

Revelation 5:10 and Revelation 20:6

In the KJV, Revelation 5:10 reads: *“And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth”*. However all of the other translations listed earlier have changed “kings” to “kingdom” (the Diaglott uses “king” in the interlinear but “kingdom” in the smooth reading). The Greek manuscript from which the KJV is translated reads “basileus”—kings.

In the KJV Revelation 20:6 reads: *“Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years”*. None of the translations listed earlier mention they will be “kings”—all state they will be priests. That point may be considered significant in trying to ascertain the meaning of the original text in Revelation 1:6. Indeed to add some weight to the significance of the omission of “kings”, the Companion Bible margin refers back to Revelation 1:6 where the margin states the proper meaning is “kingdom of priests”.

Basileios

The only verse where the Greek “basileios” occurs is 1 Peter 2:9 where it is translated “royal”: *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”*. All of the versions listed above agree that the “chosen

generation is a “royal priesthood”; there is no suggestion of them being “kings”.

The “royal priesthood” may be considered to be servants in a royal household, rather than be a ruling class. In previous times the nation of Israel was a “royal priesthood”: *“Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel”* (Exod. 19:5-6). The nation of Israel was not designated a kingly class but rather a serving class: *“And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul”* (Deut. 10:12).

Witness

The prophet Isaiah introduces the concept that, as well as being servants, Israel was God’s witness: *“Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen...”* (Isa. 43:10).

Likewise the present “chosen generation” is both a servant—whose task is to “show forth the praises of

Him who has called them out of darkness” (1 Pet. 2:9)—and also a witness: *“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts... Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation”* (1 Pet. 2:11-12). Perhaps unknowingly to the world of mankind in general, the conduct of the present “chosen generation” will contribute to their restitution and glorification of God in the future.

A glorious future

While the thrust of this article might seem to deny a glorious reward for the over comers, their reward will be one of great glory: *“The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God”* (Rom. 8:16-19). Hence *“... rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy”* (1 Pet. 4:13).■

EAGLES: A LESSON FROM NATURE

*F*or the LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. *“As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the LORD alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him”* (Deut. 32:9-12).

The Lord used the eagle to illustrate His care for Israel. The eagle is a remarkable creature. It can use high winds to soar to great heights. It has keen vision that can see a mouse from a mile high and can also look at the sun at noonday.

These verses speak of the eagle stirring up her nest. Because eagles are big birds, they use sticks to make their nest. When the eaglets become of age to leave the nest, the mother eagle will tear out all the grass and down from within the nest and suddenly that comfortable nest begins to poke and stick the eaglets. It is time to leave the nest.

As the eaglets spread their wings while learning to fly on their rocky ledges, the mother eagle flutters over

her young. When each eaglet takes its maiden voyage, the mother eagle will spread her wings under her eaglet and bear them up, bearing them on eagle wings until they have sufficient strength to fly alone.

The last thing the eaglets are taught is how to soar. Unless these young eagles learn how to set their wings and harness the opposing winds, the winds would exhaust them quickly. By setting the wings at the proper angle they can stay aloft using the high winds to give them lift just as a sailplane.

The lesson is very clear. The Lord does not leave His people in comfortable nests for long. The day must come in every Christian's life when the Lord will stir up the nest, turning them out into the elements, but all the while fluttering over them and quickly bearing them up on eagle wings when their weak wings falter. Then they must learn to soar on eagle wings, using the opposing forces of life to soar to higher heights, renewing their strength as the eagle. The eagle does not fight the opposing winds, but harnesses them while renewing its strength.

As He did for Jacob, He leads, instructs and watches over them that are His—those He “found”. ■

HIS NAME SHALL BE CALLED: WONDERFUL

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Elliot Rabin, in his treatise “Understanding The Hebrew Bible” writes: “Unlike the versions we read in translations the Hebrew text contained no punctuation, no commas, quotation marks, upper or lower case, no division between sentences, not even vowels”. Hence it is not surprising that the punctuation shown in current versions varies between translations. One example is Isaiah 9:6: the King James Version has a comma after the word “Wonderful”, whereas neither the Revised Standard Version nor the New International Version inserts a comma in that place.

The insertion of a comma separates the titles ascribed to The Child and so this article addresses the concept of Jesus being Wonderful.

The Hebrew word translated “wonderful” in Isaiah 9:6 means a miracle. The meaning of miracle is “something greater than or beyond human or natural powers” (Macquarie Dictionary; which is now the official Australian dictionary).

There are several aspects of Jesus’ role during the time to which Isaiah 9 relates, at which the world of mankind will marvel—wonder.

Firstly there is the phenomenon of Him being the agent by whom God created the universe: “*God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high*” (Heb. 1:1-3). Such a position was indeed one of great glory as He said before He returned to heaven: “*And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was*” (John 17:5).

His coming to Earth—being transformed from a spirit being that does “*not have flesh and bones*” (Luke 24:39) into a human being—represented a degree of humility about which mankind can only wonder.

The mechanism of His birth—born of a virgin—was also a miracle at that time, and indeed still would be were it not for Man’s intervention in the natural processes with which the Lord blessed mankind. But

maybe the main point in that procedure was that He did not come as a king but as a child, born in the same way as all human beings and learning the “mysteries” of the human race by asking questions of His elders: “*And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions*” (Luke 2:46).

In the light of His heritage it is remarkable that He was prepared to not only give His life for the welfare of others but to do so in the most despised way—crucifixion. Indeed, “*scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (Rom. 5:7-8). Certainly no greater sacrifice could have been given: “*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13).

While all these historic events are aspects about which one can wonder, the greatest source of amazement will be what He accomplishes when He takes control of the world: “*For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood... (but) Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever...*” (Isa. 9:4-7). “*Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*” (1 Cor. 15:24-28). When mankind understands these things they will call Him Wonderful!■

PEOPLES PAPER AND HERALD OF CHRIST’S KINGDOM

ABN 23 734 654 922

Reg. No. A0022186J

*Published by the Berean Bible Institute, Inc.
P.O. Box 402 Rosanna, Victoria, Australia, 3084*

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