

Life of Christ

Gordon Franz

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Jesus Celebrated Purim

Purim is one of the most festive and joyous holidays on the Jewish calendar. The book of Esther commands that it be celebrated on the 14th and 15th days of Adar and was to be a time of “feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor” (Esther 9:22). This holiday commemorates the victory of the Jewish people over their enemies that tried to slaughter them as a result of the decree by the Persian Prime Minister, Haman, in the book of Esther. Today the Jewish people still celebrate this festival and remember the past anti-Semitic individuals who tried to exterminate them as well as the present ones.

The Celebration of Purim

On Purim, a Jewish person goes to the synagogue for the reading of the Megillah, the scroll of Esther (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 1a). The first year I studied in Israel, I had a class in Biblical Hebrew. In the spring semester we were translating the book of Esther. One of our class assignments was to visit a synagogue for the reading of the Megillah at Purim. What an experience that was! When the cantor came to the name Mordecai, the protagonist in the story, the people shouted, “Blessed be Mordecai.” When the name Haman, the antagonist, was read, everybody stomped their feet on the floor, made noise with their noisemakers called groggers, and shouted, “Cursed be Haman.”

I did not participate in another Purim custom. The rabbis say that a man should “mellow himself [with wine] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference

between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordecai’” (BT Megillah 7b). In other words, this was the only day they were permitted to get drunk!

Children, and even adults, get dressed up in costumes and have a Purim party or parade. Usually the costumes are of the Biblical characters such as Esther, Mordecai, Ahasuerus or Haman. Today people will dress up or wear masks of modern day anti-Semitic people who would like to exterminate the Jewish people, such as Yasser Arafat, Osama bin Laden, or Saddam Huessin. This holiday is sort of like a Jewish Halloween and New Years all rolled into one, but without the occultic overtones.

Jesus and Purim

Most people are unaware of this, but Jesus celebrated the feast of Purim! In John 5, the Lord Jesus is up in Jerusalem for an unnamed feast. Scholars have debated whether the feast was Passover, Purim, Succoth or even Pentecost (Bowman 1971). Some have objected to Purim because it is a “minor” feast and not one of the three “major” pilgrimage festivals (Deut. 16:16). That argument is irrelevant because Jesus also celebrated another “minor” holiday, Hanukkah (John 10:22; Franz 1998:25,26). Chronologically, the only feast that makes sense is Purim in AD 28. The feast of John 5 fell on a Sabbath (5:9). The only feast day to fall on a Sabbath between AD 25 and AD 35 was Purim of AD 28 (Faulstich 1986). The Spirit of God intentionally left out the name of the feast because the Lord’s name was deliberately left out of the Book of Esther. In John 5, Jesus healed a man who had an infirmity for 38 years near the Pools of Bethesda (John 5:1-9). It is also the

first time in His public ministry that He declared that “God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (5:18). He also said that He was the “Son of God” (5:25) and the “Son of Man” (5:27).

Did Jesus get dressed up in a Purim costume? Did He eat the “Haman’s ears”? Did He stomp His feet and say, “Blessed be Mordecai” or “Cursed be Haman” when their respective names were read? I do not know. Did Jesus get drunk? No, even though He was accused of being a “winebibber” (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). He did observe the commandment to give gifts to the poor. I’m sure He also attended the reading of the Scroll of Esther in one of the synagogues of Jerusalem and contemplated the message of the book of Esther. The theme of the book is this: “God’s preservation of His unbelieving people, and the celebration of that event in the feast of Purim” (Shepperson 1975:26).

The Theme of the Book of Esther

This theme is crucial for understanding the book of Esther and why John included this “sign” in his gospel. This theme explains why the Name of God is not mentioned in the book and why prayer is never mentioned. Also why Mordecai is still in Susa on the 13th of Nisan when he should have been back in Jerusalem for Passover on the 14th (Esther 3:12; Lev. 23:5; Deut. 16:16). It also addresses why there is a “lack of spiritual awareness in Esther and Mordecai, and the vengeful spirit so apparent at the end of the book” (Shepperson 1975:25).

Esther and Mordecai were out of the will of God and in unbelief. The expression of faith for an Israelite was for them to “Flee the Chaldeans” (Isa. 48:20,21; 52:7-12;

Deut. 28:64-67) and return to Zion when Cyrus made the decree for the people to return to Zion (Ezra 1:1-4). Yet a large number of Israelites and Judeans chose to remain outside the Land of Israel, in Babylon and Susa, rather than return to Zion. When a person is out of God's will, the last Person they want to talk about is the Lord. Thus the Name of God is not mentioned.

Sometimes a person in unbelief or out of the will of God will perform religious rituals, just as the Jewish people did in Susa. They fulfilled their religious ritual by fasting for three days, but they did not pray to Him who should have been the LORD their God (Esther 4:16,17; cf. Isa. 58:1-7). They were still part of God's covenant people, but they were in unbelief.

The Lord used Mordecai and Esther, outside the land of Israel in unbelief, in order to preserve the Messianic line that had already returned to Judah in faith during the First Return. The Messianic line returned in the person of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2; Matt. 1:12, 13 or Luke 3:27). Haman's decree to annihilate all the Jews affected the Jews living in the land of Judah (Esther 3:12, 13; 4:3; 8:5, 9, 13). This was God's hand of providence at work.

Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda

The Lord Jesus took advantage of the Feast of Purim to teach His disciples about Himself and to fulfill the commandment to give gifts to the poor.

John tells us that by the Sheep Pools is a place called Bethesda. The word "Bethesda" is made up of two Hebrew words, "beit" and "hesed", meaning "house of mercy." The two words give the distinct impression that there was a "house" or temple where merciful acts were carried out. Archaeological excavations in the area of

the St. Anne's Church north of the Temple Mount have demonstrated that there was a healing shrine to the Greek god of healing, Asclepius (Jeremias 1966; Franz 1989).

In the shadows of this shrine, there was a sick man who had been lying on his bed for thirty-eight years. The Lord Jesus approached him to offer him a Purim gift, i.e. good health. He said, "Do you want to be made well" (John 5:6)? The man responded in the affirmative but he added that he had nobody to place him into the pool when the water was stirred up (5:7). The Lord Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk" (5:8). The man accepted the gift and he was healed instantly.

The Significance of this "Sign"

John's two-fold purpose in writing this gospel is to present the deity of the Lord Jesus and the condition for salvation, faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ alone (John 20:30,31).

In the account in John 5, there is a confrontation between deities. Who really is God? Is it Asclepius or the Lord Jesus Christ? The Lord Jesus won this confrontation "hands down". He did not need a shrine to heal this man. He did not need an "angel" (probably a demonic being, Matt. 25:41; 2 Cor. 11:13-15; Rev. 19:20) or the superstition of the "stirring of the water" (John 5:4). All He did was speak the word and the man was healed.

This is significant for the Purim story because the Jews of Susa were probably worshipping different Babylonian and Persian deities (cf. Isa. 46:1-7; Deut. 28:64). In Isaiah 46:1, Bel is another name for the god Marduk!

Mordecai's name comes from the pagan deity Marduk. Esther, even though she had a Hebrew name - Hadassah, used her Persian name that is the same as the goddess Ishtar (Esther 2:7; Goodman 1980:6).

When Mordecai found out about Haman's decree to annihilate all the Jews (Esther 3:12,13; 4:3), he forced Esther to go into the courts of Ahasuerus to plea for her people. Up until this point in the story, Esther had not revealed to Ahasuerus that she was Jewish (Esther 7:3,4). Mordecai had instructed her to keep this a secret (Esther 2:10, 20). Mordecai blackmailed her by saying, "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esther 4:13,14)? What Mordecai is saying is this, "Esther, if you do not go in and plead with the king, I will rat on you and tell him you are Jewish. You would be included in Haman's decree. If you are silent, we will deliver ourselves some other way, perhaps by relying on some pagan deity or our own resources." Esther suggested a religious ritual, fasting for three days, and then gave her fatalistic statement, "If I perish, I perish" (4:16)! There is no expression of trust in the LORD in either Mordecai or Esther's statements.

The sick man that was lying at the "House of Mercy" was hoping for a cure from Asclepius, but not the LORD. Likewise, Mordecai and Esther were relying on other means for deliverance, but not the LORD.

The Significance of the “thirty-eight years”

The Lord Jesus selected this man because He was using him as an object lesson.

Several times in John’s gospel the Lord Jesus refers to events in the Wilderness Wanderings. He refers to the serpent in the Wilderness (3:14-16; cf. Num. 21:9), the manna in the Wilderness (6:31-40; cf. Ex. 16:15; Num. 11:7; 1 Cor. 10:3). At the end of His discussion with the religious leaders, the Lord Jesus said that Moses wrote of Him (John 5:45-47).

I would like to think that Jesus explained the significance of this miracle this fashion. The number thirty-eight is used only one other place, by implication, in the Scriptures. After the incident of the bad report by the ten spies, the children of Israel wandered for thirty-eight more years from Kadesh Barnea to the Promised Land because of unbelief. (Num. 12 and 13; 14:29-34). Hebrews 4:19 says that that generation did not enter into the Land because of unbelief!

In the account in John 5, the sick man was a picture of the nation of Israel. They had a decision to make. Would they trust the Lord Jesus as their Messiah, or reject Him? This man trusted the Lord Jesus and he was healed and his sins were forgiven (John 5:14). The religious leaders, on the other hand, rebuked the man for carrying his bed on the Sabbath (John 5:10). They were so caught up in the ritual of Sabbath keeping that they could not rejoice with this man when the Lord healed him. Remember Mordecai and Esther’s ritual of fasting?

The Lord Jesus pointed out to the man that he had the infirmity because of sin in his life, and warned him that a worst thing would come upon him if he continued in his

ways (5:14). Judah had gone into the Babylonian captivity because of sins (2 Chron. 36:14-21; Lev. 26:33-35).

In the conversation the Lord Jesus had with the religious leaders after He healed the infirmed man, He says “I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me” (5:43a). Mordecai and Esther did not receive the Father so they did not mention His name in the book of Esther. Like Mordecai and Esther, the religious leaders did not accept the Father’s name.

God’s Purim Gift to Us

On Purim, Jewish people are commanded to give gifts to the poor. The Lord Jesus gave this sick man the gift of physical health and presumably eternal life. What great Purim presents to receive!

Several months earlier, the Lord Jesus had a conversation with a Samaritan woman by a well near Sychar. In this conversation He describes the “gift of God” as “everlasting life” (John 4:10,14). The Lord Jesus offered the man at Bethesda healing shrine more than the gift of physical health; He also offered him eternal life.

Each individual who has ever lived, or will ever live, is a poor sinner before a Holy God. The Bible says that the “wages of sin in death [separation from God for all eternity in Hell], but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). The only thing a person has to do, in fact, the only thing a person can do is to trust the Lord Jesus Christ as the One who died for their sins and rose again from the dead. There is no righteous deeds, good works, or rituals that we can do

to please a Holy God, the only thing that does is faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus (Isa. 64:6; Hab. 2:4; Rom. 5:15-18; Eph. 2:8,9).

God, in love, sent His Son to die on the Cross to pay for all our sins and offers us His righteousness, by faith in His Son, so we can stand before a Holy God forgiven of all our sins (John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-8; Phil. 3:9; 2 Cor. 8:9; 9:15). Have you accepted God's Purim gift to you, His Beloved Son? It is the most important decision you will ever make. Trust Him today.

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Greatest Fish Stories Ever Told

As the calm waters reflected the slowly rising sun over the Sea of Galilee, a lonely figure walked from Capernaum along a path near the rocky shore of the lake. On this spring day, He noticed the flowers, with their hue of diverse and plentiful colors, in full blossom along the shore and delighted in the birds flying overhead, singing their melodious songs. Yet His heart was still heavy. A few weeks before His family and friends rejected Him in His hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). Since then He had spent the last several Shabbats teaching in the synagogue of Capernaum, the largest Jewish city along the northern shore of the lake (Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:31). Later that day, as the sun would set over the mountains of Lower Galilee, another Shabbat would begin. Yet before this day was over, the vocation of four Galilean fishermen would be changed forever.

“Follow Me, I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20)

The Seven Springs (today called Heptapegon, or Tabgha) are approximately 2 ½ kilometers to the west of Capernaum. Warm water flowed from these springs, loaded with organic matter that attracted fish during the winter and spring months. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, called the largest spring at this location the “well of Capernaum” (

Wars 3:519; LCL 2:723). It was here that the lonely Man spotted several Capernaum fishermen. Simon, later called Peter, and Andrew were wading in the shallow waters using their cast nets. This circular net, usually 6

to 8 meters in circumference with small stones attached to the edge, was carefully folded so that when the fisherman cast it forth it would open like a parachute and fall over the shoal of fish. The fisherman would dive down, gather the small stones on the edge of the net in order to entrap the fish inside the net, and drag the net to shore to sort out their catch.

The lonely Man called out from the shore, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." This was not the first time these fishermen had encountered the Lord Jesus. More than a year and a half prior, Andrew, a follower of John the baptizer, heard his mentor proclaim with excitement: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." In the process of leaving the Baptizer, Andrew found his brother Simon and told him: "We have found the Messiah" and brought him to Jesus and both followed Him (John 1:29-42).

Three days later, Jesus and His new found followers were attending a wedding, probably a relative of Nathanael's (John 1:45; 21:2), in Cana of Galilee. It was here that the Lord Jesus performed His first miraculous sign by turning water into wine, thus revealing His glory. His disciples (students) put their trust in Him for their eternal salvation (John 2:1-11; cf. 20:30, 31). On several occasions they journeyed to Jerusalem with Jesus and other pilgrims for the various festivals. On the Passover of the next year the Lord Jesus shared with Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, his need to be born from above by the Spirit of God, as well as God's tremendous love for the world in sending His Son to provide salvation to all who put their trust in Him (John 3:1-21). On another occasion the following winter, while returning to Galilee, the Lord Jesus stopped with his disciples at a well near

Sychar in Samaria. Here He offered a sinful Samaritan woman living water, eternal life. He then challenged His disciples to "... look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:1-42). A month later, following up on this challenge, Jesus said, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Simon and Andrew left their nets to follow this lonely Man (Matt. 4:19, 20; Mark 1:17, 18).

Further along the shore, the Lord Jesus spotted two brothers, James and John, mending their trammel nets in their father's large boat which was moored in the harbor near the Seven Springs. He called them as well and they left their father, Zebedee, and his servants and followed Him (Matt. 4:21, 22; Mark 1:19, 20).

That evening, Jesus and His new found "fishers of men", returned to Capernaum for Shabbat. Jesus began training His new followers in the art of "fishing for men" by casting a demon out of a man in the synagogue and healing Simon's mother-in-law. These demonstrations of power provided two powerful lessons; "fishing for men" included meeting both the spiritual, as well as the physical needs of people (Mark 1:21-35). Early on the morning after Shabbat, Jesus slipped out of town to a quiet place to pray. Later, Simon searched for, found, and informed Him that everybody was looking for Him. He continued His lessons of fishing for men by taking His disciples along as He preached in the synagogues throughout Galilee (Mark 1:35-39).

"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:1-11)

Discipling people is not an easy task. It takes time and effort because those being disciplined do not grasp the

lessons being taught or the seriousness of their decision to follow the Lord Jesus. Jesus must have been frustrated with Peter at times, yet He was ever so patient with him.

After several months of following Jesus around and listening to Him preach in the synagogues of Galilee, Peter decided to go back fishing. This decision had an adverse effect on the other disciples because several of them went back as well. Jesus needed to get them to understand who He was and that He could be trusted to provide their daily needs.

Peter and his fishing partners had fished all night and caught nothing. They had moored their fishing boat in the harbor of the Seven Springs and were washing their nets in the small waterfall near the shore. Jesus borrowed Peter's boat and used it as a floating pulpit to preach to the multitudes which were gathered to hear the words of the famous Teacher. When He had finished teaching, He again turned His attention to His wayward disciples. Instructing Peter, He said: "Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." Peter protested for a minute because he and his partners had fished all night and caught nothing. Something else was in the back of Peter's mind, the trammel net which he was instructed to let down was used only at night and close to shore! Jesus was asking him to do the absurd.

The trammel net was 200-250 meters long (656-820 feet) and consisted of three layers of net, a fine meshed net sandwiched between two large meshed outer nets. The fish swim through one of the large meshed outer nets and into the fine meshed middle net and through the other outer net. When the fish tried to escape, it gets

hopelessly entangled in the nets. These nets are used only at night because the fish can see the nets in daylight. Peter must have questioned Jesus' thinking in giving these instructions and was probably secretly daring Jesus to do something, yet he obeyed His words. Much to Peter's amazement, there was a miraculous catch of fish and the nets began to break. He called for assistance from his partners on the shore. When they came to help, they filled the boats and began to sink. Peter fell down before Jesus and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"

Peter realized that he failed to learn the lesson that Jesus taught the day before while preaching on the mountain (Matt. 5-7). The sermon, addressed primarily to those who already trusted the Lord Jesus for their salvation and decided to follow Him, touched on the issue of the disciples daily provision for food, drink and clothing. The Lord Jesus promised He would take care of these daily needs if they sought first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. If they did, all these things would be provided (Matt. 6:25-34). Peter failed miserably at this point. Rather than seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and trusting the Lord for his daily needs, he went back fishing to provide for himself and his family. The goodness of God led him to repentance (Rom. 2:4) when he realized he was being disciplined by the Lord of all Creation whom he could trust for his daily needs. Jesus reassured Peter that he was forgiven for not learning the lesson taught the day before with the words, "Do not be afraid" (5:10). When Peter came to a realization that Jesus was the Lord of Creation and that He was personally interested in him and could love and forgive him, in spite of his lack of attention the day

before, he left everything and followed the Lord Jesus. This act was no small decision for Peter because he had a house, a boat and a very profitable fishing business (5:11). Yet this is what Jesus wanted of His disciples.

“Does your Teacher not pay the Temple Tax?” (Matt. 17:24-27)

One subtle danger that faces a disciple is spiritual pride. For more than a year now, Jesus had taught and trained these twelve men to be fishers of men. Three had seen Him transfigured before them just a few days before. As they left Mount Hermon and wandered back to the Sea of Galilee a heated theological discussion developed. The issue at stake was: Who would be the greatest in the Kingdom? Their concept of the Messiah was of one of a military warrior overthrowing the oppressive Roman authorities and establishing His Kingdom on earth. Yet on two prior occasions, Jesus predicted He would suffer and die in Jerusalem, and be raised from the dead three days later (Matt. 16:21; Matt. 17:22).

In response to the discussion on greatness, Jesus demonstrated humility, true Biblical greatness, before He addressed the issue. Jesus, God manifest in human flesh (I Tim. 3:16) and greater than the Temple (Matt. 12:6), did not have to pay the Temple tax. After all, it was His Temple!

In order not to offend others, He instructed Peter to go to the harbor of Capernaum and let down his fishing line. The first fish that he caught, a barbell fish, would have a Tyrian shekel in its mouth. This would be sufficient to pay the Temple tax for both of them. Jesus exemplified the words which the Apostle Paul would pen years later: “Let nothing be done through selfish

ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3, 4).

For a more complete discussion of this passage, see Franz 1997: 81-87.

Word Pictures from Fishing Life

Good teachers use word pictures or illustrations with which the student is well familiar to convey truth. Jesus, the Master Teacher, used fishing illustrations on several occasions to teach His disciples spiritual lessons. When Jesus wanted to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, He used the analogy of the dragnet. This net was usually 400 meters long (1,312 feet) and had a fine mesh. The top of the net floated on the surface by means of corks while the bottom hung down with lead weights. The net was laid out in a large semicircle by a crew of fishermen in a boat while another crew held the other end on the shore. After this was done, the net was pulled to shore and the fish were sorted, the good fish from the bad fish. The observant Jewish fishermen would throw the non-kosher catfish away. This scavenger fish had fins, but no scales (Lev. 11:9-12). By analogy, when the end of the age came, the angels would separate the wicked from the righteous (Matt. 13:47-50).

On another occasion, Jesus was approached by a rich young ruler inquiring what he had to do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17-31). Jesus, using the Mosaic Law lawfully, sought to point out to this man that he was a sinner by listing some of the Ten Commandments. Yet He deliberately left out one, "Thou shall not covet." In order for this man to see he had not kept the Law

perfectly, Jesus instructs him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. This self-righteous religious person went away sad. Jesus pointed out to his disciples that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man trusting his riches to enter the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:22-24). The fishermen-disciples would immediately remember the needles which they used to mend their sails and they realized the impossibility for a rich man trusting his riches to be saved, yet it was possible with God because the Spirit of God would convict wealthy individuals of their unbelief and need for a Savior (John 16:5-11).

“Children, Did You Catch Any Fish?” (John 21:1-14)

A historian once said, “History repeats itself, yet we never learn the lessons of history!” This axiom holds true even in the spiritual realm.

After the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, He told His disciples He was going before them to Galilee and would see them there (Matt. 28:7; Mark 16:7). They went back to Capernaum and waited ... and waited ... and waited. Finally Peter, not noted for his patience, declared, “I’m going back fishing! Who is coming with me?” Six other disciples, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John and two unnamed disciples, decided to go with him. They went back to their favorite fishing spot near the Seven Springs and experienced a fruitless night of fishing. As the sun slowly rose over the Lake, a lone figure on the shore asked if they had caught any fish. The reply was negative. He instructed them to throw their net on the right side of the boat. Heeding this advice, the net produced a large catch of musht fish. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, said that the figure on the shore must

be Jesus. Peter jumped into the Lake and swam for shore.

Jesus had breakfast prepared for them, yet even this was used to reinforce a lesson. On the coals of fire were sardines (“small fish”) and bread, a meal which was served by the Lord Jesus twice before. The first time was the spring before when He fed the 5,000 men plus women and children, mostly Jewish (Matt. 14:13-21 // Mark 6:30-44 // Luke 9:10-17 // John 6:1-14), and the second time was the previous summer when He fed 4,000 Gentiles in the Decapolis region (Matt. 15:32-39 // Mark 8:1-10). These two feedings demonstrated to the disciples that He alone was sufficient for their provisions and He had the power to provide for their daily needs (John 6:22-59). It also showed that the Kingdom included both Jews and Gentiles (Mark 8:13-21; Matt. 16:5-12).

To reinforce the miracle which just occurred, Jesus purposely asked Peter for some of the sardines that were just caught. After dragging the net to land, Peter sheepishly admits that there were 153 large musht fish, not sardines! Peter’s mind must have gone back to the events after his Master preached on the mountain and realized he failed to “seek first the Kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33; Luke 5:1-11). Then, as now, the Lord Jesus used the goodness of God to bring Peter to repentance.

Breakfast was by a “fire of coals” (John 21:9). Interestingly, that word is used only one other place in the gospels. In John 18:18, Peter denies the Lord Jesus three times by the “fire of coals!” An attentive reader would make the connection between these two events.

After breakfast, Jesus probably pointed to the fish, nets, boats, and disciples and said, “Peter, do you love me more than these?” Three times the Lord asked Peter if he loved Him, three times Peter answers in the affirmative and three times the Lord Jesus charged Peter to feed His lambs and sheep. The Lord Jesus in love and grace showed Peter that He had forgiven him for the three-fold denial by the fire of coals. Peter, as well as the other fishermen, never went back fishing for musht, sardines or barbell fish, but rather went fishing for the souls of men and women. The Lord Jesus used them to teach their own world and beyond with the gospel.

Postscript

Peter never forgot his former occupation of fishing even while he was preaching the gospel. When he penned his first epistle, he used three word-pictures from his former trade. The first, he wrote to “gird up the loins” of your mind (1 Peter 1:13 NKJV). The second, was “all deceit”

(1 Peter 2:1) used of a fish hook with bait that deceived the fish. And finally, after writing about the believers suffering for the glory of God, he penned a benediction, “But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you” (1 Peter 5:10). The word “perfect” is the same word used for mending nets in Mark 1:19. Even though believers were suffering persecution, God was mending them, just like the fisherman mends his nets.

I trust believers in the Lord Jesus will be encouraged as we fish with the Lord Jesus for the souls of human beings.

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Jesus in the Region of Tyre and Sidon

JESUS IN THE REGION OF TYRE AND SIDON

Gordon Franz

Introduction

During the summer of 2005, while standing on top of the dump of Area A-5, I had a conversation with the director of the Hazor excavation, Dr. Amnon Ben Tor. He asked me why most Christian pilgrims and tourists visit Megiddo, but not Hazor. I responded that there were two reasons. The first reason is logistics. The pilgrim / tourist lands at Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv and spend the first night in either Tel Aviv or Natanya. The next day they head for Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee. Megiddo is just off the road on the way to Nazareth, so they stop there. The second reason is its Biblical connection. Megiddo is mentioned in Revelation 16:16 as Armageddon. With that, Amnon said, "Find me a New Testament connection for Hazor!" I replied that I thought the Lord Jesus walked past the site on several occasions with His disciples. He said emphatically, "Write me an article!"

As I contemplated and researched this assignment, I came to the conclusion that Jesus walked past the ruins of Hazor with His disciples on their way to the region of Tyre and Sidon. But I wondered, "Why did Jesus take His disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon?" There might have been a handful of Jewish people living in this predominately Gentile area that was outside the territory of Galilee. In fact, Josephus, the First Century Jewish historian comments that "among the Phoenicians

the Tyrians, are notoriously our bitterest enemies" (Against Apion 1:70, 71; LCL 1:191). That does not sound like a nice neighborhood to visit!

The accounts of this visit to Gentile territory can be found in Matt. 15:21-28 and Mark 7:24-30.

Theme

The Syro-Phoenician woman is used by the Lord Jesus as a test case to expose prejudice in the lives of the Twelve and then teach them a very valuable lesson concerning prejudice. The lesson is this: an exclusive mentality caused by pride; one that says we're better than you, economically, ethnically, physically, religiously, can result in prejudice and could lead to partiality and discrimination.

Just prior to Jesus's departure from the Sea of Galilee, He addressed the issue of defilement. His disciples asked Him about His comments. He answered them, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within and defile a man" (Mark 7:20-23). Jesus then gave a vivid lesson to His disciples about pride that came to fruition as prejudice.

Matthew and Mark are the only gospel writers that record this event. Mark, hearing this account from Peter, would have recorded it because this was a lesson Peter had to learn the hard way. Even though he was an apostle to the circumcision, Peter came to realize that salvation was for all, both Jews and Gentiles. Mark was also writing to a Jewish audience in Rome. Both record

this event because they may have included this event in order to provoke their Jewish audience to jealousy when they realize Gentiles can be part of the Kingdom of God as well (Rom. 11:11, 12).

The Geographical and Historical Setting

Matthew and Mark both record that Jesus and the Twelve departed to the “region of Tyre and Sidon” (Matt. 15:21; Mark 7:24, 31). Commentators are divided as to whether Jesus and His disciples actually visited these Phoenician cities or they just stepped out of Galilee into the region of Tyre. If it’s the latter, they could have gone up the Hulah Valley, just past the ancient city of Hazor and headed up the hill toward Kedesh of Naphtali. Josephus says that Kedesh, or Kedasa, as it was known in the First century, was “a Tyrian village” (Wars 2:459; LCL 2: 503). The fact that Sidon is mentioned by the gospel writers seems to indicate that they went deeper into Tyrian territory than just stepping outside of Galilee.

I assume that Jesus either visited the city of Tyre, or He and His disciples were very close to it. Strabo, a Greek geographer, wrote a description of the city of Tyre sometime at the beginning of the First Century AD stating: “Tyre is wholly an island, being built up nearly in the same way as Aradus; and it is connected with the mainland by a mole, which was constructed by Alexander when he was besieging it; and it has two harbours, one that can be closed and the other, called ‘Aegyptian’ harbour, open. The houses here, it is said, have many stories, even more than the houses at Rome, and on this account, when an earthquake took place, it lacked but little of utterly wiping out the city. The city

was also unfortunate when it was taken by siege by Alexander; but it overcame such misfortunes and restored itself both by means of the seamanship of its people, in which the Phoenicians in general have been superior to all peoples of all times, and by means of their dye-houses for purple; for the Tyrian purple has proved itself by far the most beautiful of all; and the shell-fish are caught near the coast; and the other things requisite for dyeing are easily got; and although the great number of dye-works makes the city unpleasant to live in, yet it makes the city rich through the superior skill of its inhabitants. The Tyrians were adjudged autonomous, not only by the kings, but also, at small expense to them, by the Romans, when the Romans confirmed the decree of the kings. Heracles is paid extravagant honours by them. The number and size of their colonial cities is an evidence of their power in maritime affairs. Such, then, are the Tyrians" (Geography 16.2.23; LCL 7: 267, 269).

Pliny the Elder, writing later in the First Century AD, describes Tyre in these terms: "Next Tyre, once an island separated from the mainland by a very deep sea-channel 700 yards wide, but now joined to it by works constructed by Alexander when besieging the place, and formerly famous as the mother-city from which sprang the cities of Leptis, Utica and the great rival of Rome's empire in coveting world-sovereignty, Carthage, and also Cadiz, which she founded outside the confines of the world; but the entire renown of Tyre now consists in a shell-fish and a purple dye! The circumference of the city, including Old Tyre on the coast, measures 19 miles, the actual covering 2 ½ miles" (Natural History 5:76; LCL 2:279). For a history of Roman Tyre, see also Fleming 1915:70-73 and Bikai 1992:61-68.

Strabo briefly mentions Alexander the Great building a causeway from the mainland to the island of Tyre. The full history is very interesting. Alexander the Great thought himself to be Heracles. The oracle of Delphi instructed him to offer a sacrifice in the temple of Heracles in Tyre. When he approached Tyre on his way down the Phoenician coast in July, 332 BC, he asked to sacrifice at Tyre. The people of Tyre refused him entrance. [Memo to people of Tyre: When Heracles comes knocking at your door and wants to sacrifice to himself, you let him in ... or else!]. Alexander built the causeway to the island in order to conquer the city, thus fulfilling Ezekiel's prophecy made several hundred years before. "They will plunder your riches and pillage your merchandise; they will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses; they will lay your stones, your timbers, and your soil in the midst of the water (26:12)."

The Greek god Heracles, known as Melkarth to the Phoenicians, was the main deity of Tyre. Yet he was not the only god worshipped in this city. An inscription was discovered in the necropolis of Tyre that dated the dedication of a temple to the god Apollo to around AD 28/29 (Rey-Coquais 1977:1-3, Plate 50; Bikai, Fulco, and Marchand 1996). This event took place around the time of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman.

From the accounts of Strabo and Pliny the Elder, we learn that the people of First Century AD Tyre excelled in two areas. First, they were master seamen. They were the best mariners in the Mediterranean world, plying their ships and trading as far as Spain, if not beyond. Second, they were skilled dye workers that manufactured a famous red-purple dye that was given

the name Tyrian purple. This dye was extracted from a certain gland of the spiny dye-murex (Ziderman 1990). This product brought great wealth to the city.

The extraction of the dye from live snails and discarding them to rot, as well as the whole dyeing process did not leave the best fragrance in the city. For some young men of Tyre, a career choice might have been a difficult decision to make. “Do I stay in the polluted city of Tyre and make a lot of money, or do I sail on the Mediterranean and enjoy the fresh sea breeze?!”

The Theological / Chronological Setting

The journey to Tyre and Sidon took place around the time of Passover, AD 29. In order to understand the significance of this journey, a brief review of key events in the ministry of Jesus to the disciples must be recounted.

In the spring of AD 28, sometime after Passover, Jesus is at the height of His popularity. The crowds are following Him, listening to His messages, seeing people being healed and demons being cast out of people. The gospel writers state that the people were from Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Perea and Tyre and Sidon (Mark 3:6-12; Luke 6:17-19). This raises the possibility that this Syro-Phoenician woman had already heard Jesus and seen Him heal the sick and cast out demons in Galilee before He came to Tyre. Or, she had heard about Jesus’ mighty works from family or friends that had gone to Galilee. Most likely the former is the case because the woman expressed her faith in the Lord Jesus and had a correct theological understanding as to who He was (Rom. 10:9-17).

Later in the spring, Jesus healed a woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years (Matt. 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). According to Eusebius, a 4th century Church Father, this woman was a Gentile from Caesarea Philippi (Ecclesiastical History 7.18; LCL 2:175,177).

In the fall of that year, the religious leaders accused Jesus of doing miracles by the power of Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15). At this point in time, Jesus made a major shift in the focus of His ministry. He decided to take His disciples over to the “other side” to the Decapolis city of Gadara, a pagan / Gentile city where they ate non-kosher food and worshiped pagan deities. One could go into a deli at Gadara and purchase a ham and cheese sandwich, or go to the fish restaurant at the harbor of Gadara on the Sea of Galilee and have a meal of catfish and chips!

One of the disciples baulks at this venture and makes the excuse, “Let me first go and (re)bury my father.” Jesus rebukes him with the words, “Follow Me. Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:18-22; Franz 1992:54-58). This was the first recorded time in Jesus’ public ministry that He goes to Gentile territory.

Upon returning to Galilee, Jesus is rejected a second time by His family and the people of Nazareth (Matt. 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6). In the winter he sends out His disciples, two-by-two, with instructions: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritan. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons” (Matt. 10:5-8).

Just before Passover of AD 29, the disciples returned from their preaching tour and met Jesus at Capernaum for a debriefing time. He wanted to hear how their tours went so He took them to a “desert place” near Bethsaida. The crowds, however, followed Him. Jesus took this opportunity to use the crowd as a “test” for the disciples. Would they be able to demonstrate the power the Lord Jesus gave them at the beginning of their preaching tour and feed the multitudes? The disciples passed up the opportunity to feed the multitudes and let Jesus feed the 5,000 men plus women and children (Matt. 14:15-33; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). When the leftover food was picked up, there were twelve full baskets. Each disciple held a circular basket and realized that the score of their “final exam” was just like the edge of the basket ... a big fat zero! They flunked the exam.

The day after the feeding of the multitudes, the Lord Jesus gave a discourse in the synagogue of Capernaum on the Bread of Life (John 6:22-39). Many of His disciples thought that some of what He said was a “hard saying” and they “walked with Him no more” (John 6:60-66). Jesus asked the Twelve if they were going to leave as well. Peter responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:68, 69).

After these events, the Lord Jesus took His disciples to Tyre and Sidon. Why does He do this? I think it is safe to say, they were not going for the Grand Opening and dedication of the new Temple to Apollo! However, there are at least three reasons for this trip. First, the Lord Jesus knew He had one year to instruct His disciples in

sound doctrine and how to reach the world with the gospel before He returned to Heaven. The focus of His ministry now is no longer the multitudes, but rather, His disciples. He wanted to spend quality time instructing them in the word of God. Second, He wanted to avoid Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. After Jesus fed the multitudes, they wanted to make Him king (John 6:15). Antipas would have seen this as an insurrection and a threat to his throne, and wanted Jesus arrested. The third reason is Jesus is now going to initiate another test for His disciples and teach them a valuable lesson about prejudice after exposing this sin in their lives.

The Test to Reveal the Disciples' Prejudice Against Gentiles The Lord Jesus departed from the area of the Sea of Galilee and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:21; Mark 7:24). Most Bible geographers trace the route of this journey via Safat and Gush Halav (Jish) in Upper Galilee and then down through Lebanon to Tyre. For example, see the Carta Bible Atlas, map 234. That road, at points, is very steep and reaches a high elevation. An easier, more convenient route was up through the Hulah Valley past Hazor and then up into the hills past Kedasa and continues north to meet the east-west Roman road. This road went from Paneas (Banyas) to Tyre (Aviam 2004: 133-135) and was called the "Way of the Sea" by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 9:1; Rainey 1981; 1989). It was a little bit longer, but had a more gradual incline and was not as high in elevation as the road over Upper Galilee.

Mark adds the detail that He entered a house. Were they in Tyre? If so, were they trying to get away from the rotten stench of the city? The text says He did not want

anybody to know He was in town. Yet He could not be hidden (Mark 7:24). Apparently some of the Phoenicians who heard him in Galilee recognized Him as He came into town.

A woman (Matthew identifies her as a Canaanite, cf. Gen. 10:6, 15; Mark says a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth) came to Jesus in the house and cried out to Him, "Have mercy on me, O Lord (kurie), Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed" (Matt. 15:22; Mark 7:25, 26). She apparently heard from others that Jesus was in town and knew that He had cast out demons in Galilee. She may have thought, "This is the Man that could take care of my daughter's problem."

Notice in her cry to Jesus how much she knew of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. She cried for mercy because as a Canaanite, she was not part of the covenant community, yet she knew that Jesus was the God and King of the nation of Israel. She calls Him Lord (Kurios) and Son of David. This is the first time in her conversation that she will call Him Lord and could be using it in the sense that Paul wrote about in Romans 10:9-13. This was her confession of the Jesus as Lord (Yahweh): "For 'whoever calls on the name of the LORD (Jesus as Yahweh) shall be saved'" (10:13).

Jesus seemingly does not answer her plea. He is silent. Some have accused Jesus of being rude by ignoring this woman. But in His omniscience, He knew of her faith in Him and He wanted her to express that faith so that His disciples could see it. This was a test for the disciples in order to see if they were prejudice. Unfortunately the disciples failed this test as well. They misinterpret His silence as a rejection of her. Their nationalistic pride led

to a prejudice against this woman, so they discriminated against her by saying to Jesus, "Get rid of her! She is harassing us as well."

Jesus answered the disciples (implied in the context): "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). "[The] 'Lost sheep of Israel' does not mean the lost sheep among Israel, as though some were lost and others not. The expression indicates the lost sheep who are Israel" (Wilkins 2004: 539).

The phrase "lost sheep of the house of Israel" should have caused the disciples to recall the instructions that Jesus gave when He sent them out on their preaching tour a few months earlier. When He instructed them about the "lost sheep", He also said not to go in the "way of the Gentiles". In essence, He was saying, do not walk on the Roman roads. What had they just done? They walked down the Paneas - Tyre Roman Road to this city! They were now in Gentile territory and should have realized that the instructions Jesus had given the disciples before were not valid at this point.

The Canaanite woman, on the other hand, probably caught the irony, absurdity, and maybe even the humor of the statement. She said to herself: "What are you doing here? This is Phoenicia! You are outside the Land of Israel. It's Gentile territory! There are very few lost sheep of the House of Israel here anyway." She came to the realization that Jesus was on her side, so she fell at His feet (Mark 7:25), worshipped Him (Matt. 15:25) and said, "Lord, help me!" This is the second time this woman calls Jesus Lord (kurie).

Jesus responds to the woman, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs (puppy dogs)" (Mark 7:27).

Some people may not like dogs, but everybody loves puppy dogs. The Jewish people considered dogs unclean animals and most likely would not keep them as pets. On the other hand, however, in the Roman world they were good pets. Children enjoyed playing with puppy dogs. There is a marble funerary altar on display in the newly reopened Greek and Roman wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The altar has a little boy on the side in high relief with his pet dog wagging his tail at his feet. The provenience is unknown, but it dates to the first half of the first century AD. It was dedicated to a deceased child named Anthus, and called "sweetest son" by his father Lucius Iulius Gamus.

In His statement, the Lord Jesus points out the priority of the gospel. The little children (the lost sheep of the House of Israel) are filled first (cf. Rom. 1:16; 2:11-16, 26-29; 3:9; 16:26; Isa. 42: 5-7). While it may not be proper manners to feed pets under the table, it is hard to stop the little children from dropping crumbs to the puppy dogs under the table.

In her response, the woman acknowledges the priority of the gospel to the Jewish people first. She said, "True Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:27). This is the third time she calls Jesus Lord. In essence she is saying, "Gentiles may not be part of the covenant community, yet there were some dogs at the Master's table, i.e. part of the family. People may look upon her as a puppy dog,

yet she was under the table, a Gentile who had believed in the Lord Jesus.”

Jesus successfully got her to express her faith in Him. He says, “Oh woman, great is your faith!” (Matt. 15:28). As a result of her faith, her daughter was healed of the demon possession. Interestingly, there was one other person commended for his great faith in the Lord Jesus and that was the Gentile centurion in Capernaum (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9).

The disciples had flunked the prejudice test, yet Jesus turns this into a teaching opportunity. He reinforces what He has been saying all along: Gentiles are included in God’s program of salvation. Jesus knows that if His disciples can begin to grasp this lesson with one Gentile, they will be able to handle 4,000 of them when they get to the Decapolis in a few weeks (Matt. 15:29-39; Mark 7:31-8:9).

Personal Application

If we are honest with ourselves, we are all prejudice to one degree or another. This prejudice leads to partiality and discrimination (James 2:1-9). It is sin and must be confessed to the Lord and forsaken (James 2:9; I John 1:9).

The believer in the Lord Jesus must see this world from God’s perspective. He is not a respecter of persons and shows no partiality towards individuals (Acts 10:34, 35; Deut. 10:17; Rom. 2:11, cf. Rom. 3:29-30; 10:12-13). The believer’s attitude should be based on John 3:16. If God loves the world (and He does) and the Lord Jesus Christ died for all our sins (and He did), then I must view the world from that perspective. Each individual, whatever their ethnic or economic background, however they

look, whatever may be their faults, is a person who God loves and the Lord Jesus paid for all their sins of the Cross and rose again from the dead three days later and offers the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God (Eph. 2:8, 9; Phil. 3:9).

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Jesus Celebrated Hanukkah

Two friends of mine, Gentile believers in the Lord Jesus living in Israel, shared the excitement of the impending birth of their firstborn. I inquired as to the due date of the child. The proud father-to-be replied, "The doctor said the child is due December 25." I lamented, "The poor child will only receive one set of gifts for Christmas and his or her birthday." Yisrael, half-jokingly responded, "That's no problem; we'll celebrate Hanukkah instead!" We had a good laugh, but I thought to myself, "The Lord Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, celebrated the festival of Hanukkah, yet there is no record in the Gospels of Him celebrating Christmas!"

The Origin Of Hanukkah

Hanukkah is a festival which commemorates the purification and rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus on Kislev 25, 165 bc (usually in December). Three years prior, Antiochus IV, the Seleucid (Syrian) king, defiled the Temple by erecting an idol to Baal Shamen (Zeus), sacrificing a pig on the altar, and proclaiming himself to be a god. Some of the coins he minted had his features on the face of Zeus along with the words "Epiphanes" meaning "the god manifest." He also decreed that Torah (the Law of God) could not be studied under penalty of death, circumcision was forbidden, and the Sabbath was not to be kept. This brought an internal struggle within Judaism out in the open. On the one hand there were the observant Jews who wanted to keep Torah, and on the other, the Hellenized Jews who wanted to assimilate into the Greek culture around them and become "born again" Greeks.

Antiochus sent troops from village to village with a statue of himself, ordering people to bow down to it. One day they arrived in the village of Modi'im. An elderly man stepped forward to comply with the order, but an observant priest, Mattathias of the Hasmonean family, thrust him through with a spear and also killed one of the Seleucid soldiers. Thus began the Maccabean revolt. Mattathias, his five sons and others fled into the Gophna Hills and conducted a guerrilla war against the Seleucids for three years. Eventually Jerusalem was liberated, yet the Temple was defiled. The history of this revolt is found in First Maccabees 1 and 4 and Second Maccabees 6 and 10. While these books are not inspired, they record important historical information.

The Rabbis recount the miracle of Hanukkah in these terms, "On Kislev 25 begin the Hanukkah days, eight of them...When the Greeks entered the Temple Sanctuary, they contaminated all the oil. When the Hasmoneans defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil bearing the High Priest's seal. The cruse had enough oil for only one day's burning, but a miracle came to pass and it lasted eight days. The following year, these days were declared a holiday to be celebrated with the saying of Hallel and thanksgiving prayers" (Megillat Taanit).

The centerpiece of the celebration is a nine-branch candelabrum. The first candle is called the "servant" candle and is used to light one additional candle each night to commemorate the eight days of the miracle.

Jesus Celebrates Hanukkah

The Lord Jesus observed the celebration of Hanukkah in the Temple during the winter of ad 29 (Jn. 10:22-39).

Just prior to this account, two “illustrations” (10:6) of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (10:1-5 and 10:7-10) were given, and then Jesus’ interpretation of these parables (10:11-18). The Jewish reader would immediately pick up the messianic connotation of this discourse. The Davidic Messiah would be a Shepherd (Ezek. 34).

As He walked through Solomon’s porch on the east side of the Temple enclosure, some Jews approached Him and asked Him point blank, “Are you the Messiah?” (10:24). Jesus had to be careful how He answered that question. During the festival, throngs of Jews caught up in the nationalistic fever, were visiting Jerusalem. The word “Messiah” might spark off riots because of its heavy nationalistic and political overtones.

Roman intelligence, headquartered in the Antonia’s Fortress to the northwest of the Temple, was aware of a popular song entitled “A Psalm of Solomon, with Song, to the King.” In this song, composed during the mid-first century bc by a Pharisee, the Lord was acknowledged as King and a Davidic ruler would reign forever. He describes how the latter Hasmonean rulers led the people away from Torah and the Romans under the leadership of Pompey punished the people. The Pharisee prays that the Lord will raise up a king, the Son of David, to rule over Israel. In so doing, this king would “destroy the unrighteous rulers,” “purge Jerusalem from Gentiles,” “drive out the sinners,” “smash the arrogance of sinners,” and “destroy the unlawful nations!” Their king, the Lord Messiah, would do all this! (Psalm of Solomon 17). If Jesus answered the question “yes,” the Roman authorities could have arrested Him on the spot for insurrection.

Jesus does, however, answer the question in the affirmative, but not directly. When He answers, He is careful not to use the contemporary term and understanding. After pointing out the security which a believer in the Lord Jesus has because of faith in Him, He says, "I and My Father are one!" (10:30). That statement had heavy religious overtones for the festival which they were presently celebrating. Those gathered on the Temple Mount recalled the events nearly 200 years before on the very mount where, Antiochus IV, a mere man, proclaimed himself to be god. Jesus, God manifest in human flesh, made the same claim but His claim was true. The Jews picked up stones to stone Him for blasphemy because, in their thinking, He was a man who made Himself God (10:31-33). Jesus declared that He was the fulfillment of Hanukkah by saying the Father "sanctified" the Son of God and sent Him into the world (10:34-36). The Father was in Him and He in the Father (10:38). If the Greek word "sanctified" were translated into Hebrew, it would be "dedication" or Hanukkah!

A Biblical Perspective

John writes his Gospel primarily to a Jewish and Samaritan audience. One of the unique things about John's Gospel is his emphasis on the Jewish and Samaritan festivals and his indication that Jesus was the fulfillment of these holidays. Hanukkah was the rededication of a defiled Temple. At the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then the Jews said, It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days? But He was speaking of the temple of His body" (2:19-21). A wicked and corrupt priesthood had defiled Herod's Temple. The sinless Lord

Jesus was “sanctified” by His death, burial, and resurrection. He is the New Temple.

The Apostle John selected “signs” (miracles) and events, when he penned his Gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to convey two purposes (20:30-31). The first was to present the deity of the Lord Jesus. John skillfully selects the Hanukkah event because of the festival impact on the crowd. In contrast to the arrogant and blasphemous statement by Antiochus IV, Jesus truly is God manifest in human flesh. The second purpose was to challenge people to put their trust (believe) in the Lord Jesus Christ as the One who died for their sins and rose again from the dead. When they trust Him, God gives them the gift of eternal life, forgiveness of sins, and a home in Heaven. There seems to be a marked contrast between the response of the Jews on the Temple Mount (10:37-39) and those “beyond the Jordan” who believed on Him (10:40-42). What is your response? Have you trusted the One who is the fulfillment of Hanukkah?

Temple Tax

“Does Your Teacher Not Pay the [Temple] Tax?

”

(Mt 17:24-27)

Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “... in this world nothing is certain but death and taxes.” What was said in 1789 is still true today. Franklin, however, was not the first to address these issues. The Lord Jesus spoke of the certainty of death (Luke 12:20; cf. Heb. 9:27; James 4:14, 15) as well as the certainty of taxes. He addressed the issue of the civil tax to the Roman government (Matt. 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26) as well as the religious tax, called the Shekalim, paid to the Temple in Jerusalem (Matt. 17:24-27).

Matthew, the tax collector (Matt. 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32), was employed by the Roman government to collect civil taxes. He is the only gospel writer to record the incident of the Temple tax.

This paper will explore several aspects of this saying. First, the saying will be put in its chronological setting. Second, the shekel will be examined in light of First Century Jewish use for the Temple tax. Third, fishhooks from the area of the Sea of Galilee will be analyzed. The kind of fish caught by Peter will be the next subject. Finally the purpose of this saying will round out our search.

The Chronological Setting

The Temple tax incident took place in Capernaum soon after the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus on Mount

Hermon. This event occurred in September of AD 29, right before Succoth (the Feast of Tabernacles). As the disciples walked back to Capernaum with the Lord Jesus, they engaged in a heated theological discussion among themselves, "Who is the greatest?" (Mark 9:33, 34). Before the Lord Jesus addressed that question, He demonstrated Biblical greatness by paying the Temple tax for Himself and Peter.

The Shekel (Stater)

During the Second Temple period, the Temple institution collected a half- shekel tax annually. This tax was designated for the daily and Shabbat (festival) sacrifices, their libations, the omer, the two loaves of bread, the show bread, the communal sacrifices and other needs of the Temple (

Mishnah Shekalim 4:1-4). The rabbis linked the annual half- shekel tax to the half- shekel offering in the Pentateuch (Liver 1963: 184).

This half- shekel was mentioned in Exodus 30:11-16. There seems to be a hint in the Bible that this tax became a permanent institution during the First Temple Period (Je(ho)ash - II Kings 12:4, 16 // II Chron. 24:4-13; Josiah - II Kings 22:3-7 // II Chron. 34:8-14). The one-third shekel seems to be the Persian equivalent of the half- shekel (Nehemiah 10:33, 34). Josephus, the First Century AD Jewish historian, likewise understood the Temple tax to be the same as the one decreed by Moses in the wilderness (

Antiquities 3:193-196; LCL 4:409-411; 18:312-314; LCL 9:181).

A warning was given on the first day of Adar (around the month of March) that the half-shekel was due (

Mishnah Shekalim 1:1). On the 15th of the month, the tables were set up in the provinces in order to collect the tax.

One might assume, since Capernaum was a major Jewish center in Galilee that one of the tables was in that city. By the 25th of Adar, the tables were set up in the Temple (

Mishnah Shekalim 1:3). If one chose to pay the tax in the Temple, there were 13 shofar-chests in the Temple court which were used to collect different offerings (

Mishnah Shekalim 6:5). One was inscribed “New Shekel dues: which was for that year. Another was inscribed “Old [shekel dues]” in order to collect the tax from the previous year if it had not been paid.

Every Jewish male, 20 years old and up, voluntarily paid this tax once a year. He was to pay the tax either in his province or in the Temple in Jerusalem (

Mishnah Shekalim 1:3). The tax was always paid in the Tyrian coinage (

Mishnah Bekhoroth 8:7;

Babylonian Talmud Kiddushim 11b). These coins average 14.2 grams in weight and were minted with near pure silver.

Leo Kadman describes an important discovery relating to these Tyrian shekels. He reports: “In the spring of 1960, a hoard of about 4,500 ancient coins was discovered near Isfiya on Mount Carmel; 3,400 of the coins were Tyrian Shekels, about 1,000 Half-shekels,

and 160 Roman Dinarii of Augustus. The Shekels and Half-shekels are dated from 40 B.C.E. to 52/53 C.E. ... the bulk of them from 20-53 C.E. ... In the middle of the first century C.E., there was only one purpose for which the exclusive use of Tyrian Shekels was prescribed: the Temple-Dues of half a Shekel, which every male Jew of 20 years of age and above had to pay yearly to the Temple in Jerusalem. ... The disproportion between the 3,400 Shekels and the 1,000 Half-Shekels is to be understood from the prescription of the Mishnah that each payment of a Half-Shekel for one person was liable to an agio¹ of 4-8%, while the payment of a Full-Shekel for two persons was exempt from the agio. ... The 160 Dinarii exactly represents the agio of 8% on the 1,000 Half-Shekel found in the hoard (1962:9, 10).

This hoard of coins was probably from a community of 30,000 Jews living in Phoenicia. The coins were most likely hidden on Mount Carmel when the caravans realized they could not make it to Jerusalem in May AD 67, because the Romans controlled the road from Megiddo to Jerusalem (Kadman 1962:11).

Those in authority approached Peter in September of AD 29 to inquire if he and Jesus were going to pay their Temple tax for that year. Apparently, Jesus did not pay the Temple tax the previous spring because the only time He was in Capernaum before Passover was on Shabbat (John 6:4, 59). As an observant Jew, He would not have handled money on that day. The Temple tax from Mesopotamia was due in September for Succoth (Kadman 1962:11). Those who received the Temple tax in Capernaum probably wanted to send what they collected since Passover along with the caravans going up to Jerusalem for Succoth that year.

The Fishhook

Only a few fishhooks have been discovered in archaeological excavations in the region of the Sea of Galilee. Two were found in the traditional “St. Peter’s House” in Capernaum (Corbo 1972:73, 74, fig. 26; 1975:83, photo 32). These fishhooks come from the destruction level of the fourth century structure and not the floor of the first century house. Most likely the hooks were placed there by pilgrims wanting to commemorate the event from the life of Peter (Taylor 1993: 278).

Another fishhook, made of iron and measuring 2.5 inches long, was found at the site of et-Tell, identified by the excavators as Bethsaida (Kuhn and Arav 1991:102, 105, plate 1:13). The hook is most likely first century or earlier. However, in the first volume of the excavation report, there is no mention of this fishhook (Arav and Freund 1995:27, 28, Fig. 17, 244, 245).

The Fish

A tourist visiting Israel usually has an obligatory fish dinner at one of the fish restaurants around the Sea of Galilee. The fish usually served, head and all, is called the “St. Peter’s” fish, known as the Musht (or “comb” in Arabic, for its long dorsal fin) fish. Sometimes a modern shekel coin is found in the mouth by someone in the tour group, usually one of the children. Of course, the waiter put it in the mouth!

Early Christian tradition says that the musht fish was the one caught with the hook by Peter (Sapir and Neeman 1967:7). One of its characteristics is that the mother fish carries the fertilized eggs in her mouth for three weeks until they hatch. For several days thereafter, the young fry swim near the mouth. Any sign

of danger, the mother opens her mouth and the fry swim back inside the mouth for protection (Nun 1989:6, 7). This fish, the reasoning goes, has a big enough mouth to hold a shekel coin. The problem with this tradition is that the musht fish is a plankton eater and caught with a net and not a hook and line. The most likely reason this fish got the name “St. Peter’s” was because the local eating establishments, catering to the pilgrims to the Holy Land, found the name very marketable and good for tourism! (Nun 1989:46-48).

Only two other fish are possible, the catfish and the barbell fish. The catfish, a scavenger, is possible because it feeds off the bottom of the Lake, and thus could pick up the coin. It can also be seen along the rocky shore near ancient Capernaum. If it was the catfish, the reason Jesus instructed Peter to open the mouth of the fish (Matt. 17:17) was because it was non-kosher (it has no scales, Lev. 11:9-12) and would have been thrown back by the fisherman without even looking inside (Matt. 13:48).

Most likely, however, the fish caught by Peter was the Barbel fish. This fish, in the carp family, has barbs at the corner of its mouth, thus its name. It is a predator and “bottom feeder” and would go for a baited hook (Nun 1989:86). It is usually caught along the shore during the autumn (Dalman 1935:134), the chronological setting of this event.

The Purpose of This Incident

A lesson is most effectively taught if the teacher demonstrates the idea in a practical way. The Lord Jesus, the Master Teacher, demonstrated Biblical

greatness before He answered the question put to Him by His disciples.

In His omniscience, Jesus knew of the conversation between Peter and the individuals who received the Temple tax. They asked if Jesus paid the tax or not. Peter answered in the affirmative. When Peter entered the house, Jesus put the question to Peter whether the sons of the kings or strangers paid taxes to kings of the earth. Peter correctly responded that the strangers did. Jesus reinforced this fact by stating that the sons were free. Not wanting to offend the tax collectors though, Jesus instructed Peter to cast a hook in the lake and take a shekel that would be found in the mouth of the fish and pay the Temple tax for Him and Peter. Why did He do this?

Jesus was demonstrating humility and servant hood, the true characteristic of Biblical greatness, to Peter and his fellow disciples (Mark 10:42-45). Jesus, following up on Peter's great confession made at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:15-17), was God manifest in human flesh (I Tim. 3:16 NKJV). He did not have to pay the Temple tax because in the analogy that He made to Peter, He was the king's son. The Temple was His Father's House and He was greater than that Temple (Matt. 12:6; Matt. 21:12, 13; Mark 11:17), yet He voluntarily, and in humility, paid the tax. What a lesson in humility!

Jesus demonstrated another principle of humility when He paid for Peter as well. He did not have to do this either, but He did. I suspect, but can not prove, that Jesus singled out Peter because he was full of pride after having seen the Transfiguration. I wonder if Peter was not the one who first raised the question, "Who is the

greatest?" It is quite possible that this is the incident that the Apostle Paul had in mind when he described the humble "mind of Christ" when he wrote: "In lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 3:3, 4).

Jesus exemplified humility when He paid Peter's tax as well. These words were penned in the context of the Lord Jesus humbling Himself by His death on the cross of Calvary (Phil. 2:1-11).

This event records the first time the disciples asked the question, "Who is the greatest?", but it was not the last. On the way to Jerusalem for Passover in AD 30, they raised the question in Jericho (Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45). Later, just before Passover, Jesus addressed the scribes and Pharisees on this issue (Matt. 23:11, 12). The disciples, however, still did not understand the answer to the question. At the Last Supper they were still arguing the question (Luke 22:24-30). Jesus again gave a practical demonstration of humility by washing the feet of His disciples (John 13:1-20).

These examples of humility finally broke through to Peter. Years later, as he reflected on them, he admonished his fellow elders to ... "shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, ... [not] being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (I Pet. 5:2, 3).

Peter finally learned the lesson: God gives grace to the humble, but He will exalt the humble in due time (I Pet. 5:5, 6; cf. Prov. 3:34; 15:33).

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1 An agio is a fee paid for exchanging money. One might call it a commission.

The Feedings of the Multitudes - When, Where and Why?

All four gospels record the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:11-17; John 6:1-13), but only Matthew (15:29-39) and Mark (8:1-10) record the feeding of the 4,000. Are these feedings actually the same event as some critical scholars suggest, or are they two separate events? When did they take place and why does the Lord Jesus perform the same miracle twice? Who are the recipients of Jesus' miracles? What actually took place on the hillside of Galilee and elsewhere?

The early pilgrims to the Holy Land commemorated both feedings (they assumed there were two feedings) at the site of Heptapegon (Greek for "seven springs"). A pilgrim, tourist or student of the Bible Lands visiting Israel today would recognize the corrupted Arabic form of the name Tabgha where the Benedictine monastery and church are situated. Is this tradition accurate? The visitor to the site will enjoy the Benedictine hospitality as well as view the lovely mosaic floor from the Byzantine church that depicts a basket containing four loaves marked with crosses and two fish on each side.

Ironically, the artisan who made this mosaic floor did not read his Bible or eat in any of the local fish restaurants while he was employed at the church. First, the Bible says there were five loaves of bread, not four. Second, the fish depicted on the floor has two dorsal fins. These are not indigenous to the Sea of Galilee! The "musht" fish (Arabic for "comb"), better known as the "Saint Peter's Fish", has only one dorsal fin. Does this site

square with the information given to us in the Bible? If not, how and why did the tradition move there? Is it possible to identify the site where Jesus performed both miracles?

THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000

When did this event take place?

This is probably the easiest question to answer because the Scriptures are quite clear on the matter. John 6:4 says, "Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near." I will assume an AD 30 crucifixion and resurrection for the Lord Jesus. Thus the event took place in the Spring of AD 29, right before Passover. Another time indicator in the gospel accounts has to do with the grass.

Matthew states that Jesus commands the multitudes to "sit down on the grass" (14:19). Mark says the grass is green (6:39) and John informs us there "was much grass in the place" (6:10). There is always lush vegetation in Galilee during the springtime, especially right before Passover. However, soon after Passover, the "hamsin" winds from the Arabian desert blow and kill off all the flowers and grass (cf. Ps. 103:15, 16; Isa. 40:6-8). If the Synoptic gospels are in chronological order at this point, and I believe they are, then the feeding of the 5,000 follows immediately after Jesus is informed of the beheading of John the Baptizer (Matt. 14:22). It also took place after the Twelve who had been sent out two-by-two to the "lost sheep of the House of Israel" returned for their "debriefing". Jesus wanted to spend time along with His disciples.

Where did this event take place?

This is the most difficult question to answer and scholars have had a field day trying to answer it. The gospel records give several clues that need to be reconciled. First, the Synoptic gospel writers say it was a “deserted place” (Matt. 14:13, 15; Mark 6:31, 32, 35; Luke 9:10, 12). Luke adds that this deserted place belonged to the city of Bethsaida (9:10). Second, John informs us that it was up on a mountain (6:3) and after the feeding of the multitudes, the disciples “went down to the sea” (6:16). Third, Jesus and His disciples went out by boat to this place (Matt. 14:13; Mark 6:32) and after feeding of the multitude, Jesus immediately made His disciples get into their boat and head for the “other side” (Matt. 14:22; Mark 6:45; John 6:16, 17).

Mendel Nun, a retired fisherman from Kibbutz Ein Gev, has done an extensive survey of the ancient harbors and anchorages around the Sea of Galilee. Due to abnormally low water levels at times, he went out and located and documented 16 ancient harbors and anchorages. It would make sense that Jesus and His fisherman-disciples would anchor their boat in one of these harbors. Fourth, the multitudes came from the surrounding cities on foot. It would be impossible for such a large number of people to cross the Jordan River in such a short time, especially during the spring flood stage. Thus the multitudes would have to be either from the east side of the Jordan River or the west. Fifth, after the disciples got into the boat to head for Bethsaida and the “other side” (Mark 6:45), a strong east wind that was “contrary”, or “against them” (Matt. 14:24; Mark 6:48), blew them off course to the Land of the Gennesaret and Capernaum (Matt. 14:34; Mark 6:53; John 6:17, 21). This eastern wind storm, called a

“Sharkia”, suddenly blew off the Golan Heights. This storm could not have been the westerly winter storm that brought rain because the fisherman-disciples were well aware of how to interpret the appearance of the sky (Matt. 16:1-3). “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening’.” The fisherman-disciples would not have ventured out on the lake if they knew a westerly or northerly (cf. Prov. 25: 23) rain storm was coming. However, the easterly windstorms arise suddenly, unexpectedly, when the sky is clear. This is the storm the fisherman of the lake fear most. These are the Biblical requirements for the location of the feeding of the 5,000.

Gustaf Dalman, in his *Sacred Sites and Ways* (p. 173), places the miraculous feeding at Mika’ ‘Edlo, between Kursi and Ein Gev, on the east side of the lake. The late Father Bargil Pixner, a Biblical geographer who lived at Tabgha, follows the traditional identification of this event and places it at Tabgha.

One of the earliest pilgrim’s accounts for this event is Aetheria (AD 390). He states, “Not far from there (Capernaum) one can see the stone steps on which our Lord stood. Just there, above the Lake, there is a plain rich in vegetation, which has plenty of grass and palm trees. Next to them are seven fountains, each of which pours forth much water. In this field our Lord fed the people with five loaves and two fishes. Moreover, the stone on which the Lord placed the bread has been made into an altar. Visitors take away small pieces of this stone for their welfare, and all find it salutary. The public road where the Apostle Matthew had his seat of custom passed close to the walls of this church. From

there towards the mountains which stand nearby, is the raised piece of ground where, after climbing up to it, the Savior delivered the Beatitudes. Not far from here, however, is a synagogue which our lord cursed." There are three geographical features that are known today. The "stone steps" are clearly visible today on the lake side of the Church of the Primacy. The "seven fountains" is a clear reference to Heptapegon. The "stone" is the altar area of the Church of the Multiplication of the Fish and the Loaves. Aetheria points out that the "seat of custom" was next to the church. However, geographically Matthew would have had his custom house either in Capernaum, or east of Capernaum toward Gaulanitis. The Sermon on the Mount is localized here as well. Even as early as the 4th century, several events from the gospels were localized in one area. More than likely, this was for the convenience of the pilgrims. The site was chosen because it was near the main highway, the seven springs would draw visitors because of its natural beauty and abundance of drinking water, and the area was sanctified by the memory of Christ and the Twelve. But was it the real site? The biggest draw back to this site, as well as Dalman's, is that it does not belong to the territory of Bethsaida.

A short digression should be made to discuss the identification of Bethsaida. Geographers of the Bible have hotly debated the identification of this site and whether there was one Bethsaida or two. Josephus describes Bethsaida Julias as the southern capital of Gaulanitis under the rule of Philip the Tetrarch (4 BC to AD 34). The Gospel of John states that Bethsaida, the meaning of which is "house of the fisherman", was the home (apo) of Philip, one of the Twelve, and the

birthplace (ek) of Andrew and Peter (1:44). He also states that Philip, the disciple, came from “Bethsaida in Galilee” (12:21). Is Bethsaida Julias the same city as Bethsaida in Galilee?

More than likely, Bethsaida Julias is located at the site of et-Tell, east of the Jordan River and about two and a half kilometers from the lake, or at el-Mesadiyye, just southeast of Tel el-Araj.. According to Josephus, the border between Galilee, to the west, and Gaulanitis to the east, is the Jordan River. Bethsaida in Galilee should be located at Khirbet el-‘Araj, named after a sacred zizyphus tree, and is also east of the present day Jordan River. Several scholars have suggested that the Jordan River ran east of the Khirbet el-‘Araj during the Second Temple period, thus putting the site in Galilee. If this is the case, it has far reaching implications for the identification of the location for the feeding of the 5,000. Luke places the event in a deserted place belonging to Bethsaida. Assuming Bethsaida in Galilee is being referred to, then the event took place on one of the hills west of the Jordan River, rather than on the Plains of Bethsaida east of the river. I would like to propose that the feeding of the 5,000 took place in the vicinity of present day Moshav Almagor.

The three major Jewish cities on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee are Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida of Galilee. These are the three cities that the Lord Jesus pronounces woes against. A careful examination of a topographical map reveals some very interesting data to help understand these cities and the territories that is under their control. Between Capernaum and Bethsaida there are three wadis (dry river beds) that drain into the Sea of Galilee. Moving

from west to east is Wadi Korazeh that turns into Wadi el-Wabdah as it drains into the lake. The middle wadi is Wadi en-Nashef (Nahal Cah), and finally west of Bethsaida is Wadi Zukluk (Nahal Or). The fishing ground for Capernaum is Tabgha to the west of the city. The fishing grounds for Bethsaida of Galilee would be Kh. 'Oshsheh (Aish), to the west. Both sites have ancient anchorages. The territory controlled by Capernaum would be everything west of Wadi Korazeh to include Tabgha. Chorazin would probably control the land between Wadi Korazeh and Wadi en-Nashef. Bethsaida would control the land from Wadi en-Nashef to the Jordan River. The elevated location of Moshav Almagor would be within the control of Bethsaida in Galilee.

The Biblical accounts have Jesus going up a mountain and there feeding the multitudes. The site of Moshav Almagor has a commanding view of the entire area and a clear view down to Bethsaida in Galilee. An interesting side light, when Jesus saw the multitudes He turned to Philip and asked him where one could buy bread. Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, would have known where all the bakeries were just in the city just down the hill in which to buy bread. Jesus probably met His disciples in Capernaum in order to take them by boat to this deserted place. Wherever the deserted place was, they would have landed in one of the harbors or anchorages along the shore. The Kh. 'Oshsheh (Aish) anchorage would fit the topography well. One could visualize the disciples walking down the hill to get to their boat that was left in the anchorage and head across the lake in an eastward direction. Most of the people in the crowd that Jesus preached to, and fed, were Galilean Jews. For them to travel on foot to

Almagor would not have been that difficult. If the multitude had to cross the Jordan River at flood stage in order to get to the east side, this would have been more difficult. Dalman did not think this was a difficulty. He recalled, "On Oct. 10, 1921, I saw that it was almost possible to cross over the Jordan dry-shod, just where it enters the lake. An absolutely dry bar lay before the mouth." It should be pointed out that the river would be low in October because the former rains had not begun, thus causing the river to overflow its banks (cf. Matt. 7:27; Luke 6:48, 49). Finally, Jesus commanded His disciples to get in the boat and head for Bethsaida, possibly el-Mesadiyya, in an eastward direction and the "other side". The indication seems to be that they are headed in an eastward or southeastward direction toward the Decapolis area. This withdrawal would make good political sense. The crowd wanted to make Jesus king because of the miracle that He did (John 6:15). If word got back to Herod Antipas in Tiberias, he would send out a detachment of soldiers to arrest Jesus and His disciples for insurrection. Only a few weeks before, Herod had John the Baptizer beheaded because he did not like what he heard from him. The Lord Jesus, knowing His time was not yet come, wanted to avoid trouble and withdraw from Galilee. True, He was in Capernaum the next day, but soon after, He takes off for Tyre and Sidon. The disciples headed in an eastward direction but were met with a strong east winds off the Golan Heights. This wind blows them in the direction of the Land of Gennesaret, of which Capernaum is the easternmost part.

THE FEEDING OF THE 4,000

In order to answer the question “why” Jesus fed this multitude, the “when” and “where” of the feeding of the 4,000 should be addressed.

The focus of the ministry of the Lord Jesus toward His disciples changed somewhat after the feeding of the 5,000. He wanted to spend time alone with His disciples and to avoid the crowds. They traveled to Tyre and Sidon to escape the arm of Herod Antipas, but also to spend time together. After ministering to the Syro-Phoenician woman, they departed from the region and “came through the midst of the region of the Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee” (Mark 7:31). There, the Lord Jesus preformed a number of healing miracles for three days, primarily to a Gentile audience, and they “glorified the God of Israel” (Matt. 15:29-31; Mark 7:31-37). Toward the end of the third day the multitudes are fed with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. This event takes place on the east side of the lake, but where?

Father Bargil Pixner places it at Tel Hadar and has even put up a marker to commemorate the site. This site, however, is north of the area of the Decapolis. The border between the Decapolis and Gaulanitis apparently was the Wadi Samak. I would like to propose that the feeding of the 4,000 took place at the Kursi Church and in fact, that is the event that is being commemorated, rather than the casting of the demons into the swine.

There are several reasons for this suggestion. First, I have already suggested elsewhere that the demoniac event took place near the harbor of Gadara in the southeastern corner of the Sea of Galilee. The ancient harbor is located near Tel Samra on the property of

Kibbutz Ha'on. Second, there is no indication from the mosaics on the floor of the church that it commemorates the demoniac event. Third, the early church sources and pilgrim accounts just state that the demoniac event took place on the east side of the lake, but are not specific as to where it was. Fourth, the mosaics seem to hint that this is where Jesus fed the 4,000.

The mosaic floor is partially intact. Still visible are some of the plants and animals. Most of the animals were destroyed during an Islamic iconoclastic craze yet some can still be discerned. The fish that were partially destroyed interested me the most. Mendel Nun identified them as barbell fish, yet the gospel narrative states they were "small fish", most likely the sardines that Wadi Samak is noted for. The other thing that interested me was the baskets. They contained handles which were mentioned in the gospel narratives of the feeding of the 4,000 (Matt. 15:37; 16:10; Mark 8:8, 20). One basket is similar to the basket on the mosaic floor at Tabgha. Unfortunately this floor was vandalized a few years ago. If this proposal is accepted, then the church would commemorate the feeding of the 4,000 rather than the demoniac event.

To the southeast of the basilica, on the slopes of the Wadi Samak, is an ancient tower. According to the excavator, this is the "chapel of the miracle of the swine." Some have suggested this was built over the tombs that the demoniacs lived in. Nothing in the chapel indicates to whom or what it was dedicated to. If my suggestion is accepted, it could possibly be dedicated to the healing events that took place just prior to the feeding of the multitudes. The text states that Jesus "went up on the mountain and sat down there." For the

convenience of the pilgrims, this chapel was placed just above on the slopes of the mountain. Kursi, interestingly enough, means “armchair, chair,” a place for sitting down.

THE PURPOSE OF THE FEEDING OF THE 5,000

There are at least three reasons why Jesus performed this miracle. The primary reason was to teach the disciples a lesson in faith. Several months before this event, He had sent out His disciples on their own for the first time to preach the gospel to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel.” He gave them authority over unclean spirits, the power to heal diseases, and to raise the dead. Now they were returning from their preaching tour and Jesus wanted to hear what they did and the response they received to the gospel message. This time was sort of a “debriefing” session. As the Master Teacher, the Lord Jesus wanted to reinforce the lessons taught and learned. He challenged the disciples to continue using the power He gave them. Here was a teaching moment. The multitudes that were gathered needed to be fed. Yet it seems the disciples had a “laid back” attitude, i.e. “Well Lord, we’re with you now, we’ll let You do the miracles!” Jesus wanted them to get involved. After the supper, there were twelve baskets of leftover bread picked up, one basket by each disciple. I suspect that the Lord Jesus did this to “convict” each of the disciples of their lack of faith and to show them His power and provision.

The second reason was to provide a setting for the gospel to be preached the next day in the synagogue in Capernaum. John informs us that he wrote his gospel for

the specific purpose of setting forth seven (or eight, depending on how you count them) “signs” (miracles) to demonstrate that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing you might have life through His name” (20:30,31). The crowd wanted to make Jesus king because He provided a “welfare program” that provided for their physical needs. The next day in the Shabbat service at the synagogue in Capernaum He expounded the real meaning of the miracle. He was the “Bread of life.”

The final reason was to enhance the understanding of the disciples (Mark 8:21). Jesus appears to be trying to teach “kosher” disciples, who were always reluctant to have any association with Gentiles that salvation was for all, both Jews and Gentiles. Origen may have had a point when he allegorized the two accounts in this manner. [I must confess, I hate to admit he might be right!]. He suggested that the feeding of the 5,000 was to a Jewish audience, and the twelve baskets taken up represented the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Origen would be geographically correct if the feeding of the 5,000 took place at Moshav Almagor. The feeding of the 4,000 took place in the Decapolis area (assuming Kursi is the proper location). The seven baskets that were taken up would represent, according to Origen, the seven Gentile nations in the Land when Joshua entered it (Deut. 7:1; Acts 13:19).

If Origen is correct, the lesson is clear, the offer of salvation is for all, both Jews and Gentiles, and the disciples of the Lord Jesus should remove the prejudices they have toward those who are not like themselves and share the gospel with all. The gospel was then, and is now, the good news of salvation for any and all who put

their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior, because He was the One who died for all their sins and rose from the dead three days later to show sin had been paid for in full. God offers His righteousness to any and all who trust the Lord Jesus, and Him alone, and not their own works of righteousness (I Cor. 15:1-4; Phil. 3:9).

“Lord, He Stinkest”: Jewish Burial Practices, Mourning Customs and Rabbinic Theology on John 11.

As the Easter season approaches, Christians contemplate the two greatest events in human history: the death of the Lord Jesus in order to pay for our sins, as well as His victorious resurrection from the grave.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus was a watershed event in the history of the world. It was proof of His deity (Acts 2:32, 36; Rom. 1:4). It was proof that the payment for sin was complete and accepted by God (Rom. 4:25; 10:9; John 11:25). Finally, it was proof that the Word of God is true. It is the basis of the Christian message (Rom. 1:4; 3:24,25; 5:9,10), the fulfillment of Bible prophecy (Ps. 16:10, cf. Acts 2:22-32; 13:35-39), and the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

A careful examination of the Scriptures reveals that the entire Trinity was involved in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: the Father (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:24,27,30,31; 13:30; Rom. 6:4; Eph. 1:19,20), the Son (John 2:19-22; 10:17,18), and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11; 1 Pet. 3:18).

John the Baptizer sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He really was the coming Messiah (Matt. 11:2,3). The Lord Jesus responds by saying, “Go and tell John the things which you hear and see. The blind receive their sight and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me” (11:4-6).

At this point in Jesus' public ministry, there are two recorded accounts of individuals being raised from the dead. The first is Jairus' daughter (Matt. 9:23-26 // Mark 5:35-43 // Luke 8:49-56) and the second is the son of the widow woman from Naim (Luke 7:11-16). Both miracles took place in Galilee: the first in Capernaum and the second in Naim. How many unrecorded resurrections there were, we do not know. When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" He gave them power to raise people from the dead (Matt. 10:8).

In the first half of his gospel, the Apostle John records seven miracles, or signs, to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing on Him, one could have eternal life (John 20:30, 31). The culminating miracle was the resurrection of His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11).

When John wrote the gospel that bears his name, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, his mind went back more than 60 years to this monumental event that he had personally witnessed. He records five Jewish burial practices, mourning customs, or a point of rabbinic theology. A Jewish person reading this gospel at the end of the First century AD would catch the significance to these practices and customs right away.

The Lord Jesus deliberately did not rush to the aid of his dying friend because He wanted to show His disciples and the world, that He was Lord of Life and had power over death. He came to Bethany, on the backside of the Mount of Olives, on the fourth day after Lazarus died. As He approached the village, Martha, the sister of the

deceased, went out to meet Jesus. Her sister, Mary, the text says, “was sitting in the house” (11:20).

When a Jewish person died, the body was prepared for burial and it was placed in the grave soon after death. It was the custom to bury within 24 hours. After, the family would sit in their house and mourn, receiving the condolences of friends and neighbors for one week, this was called shiva. Mary and Martha were practicing this custom.

The second custom hinted at in this passage was visiting the tomb. Martha returned to the village and told her sister that Jesus wanted to see her. He arose from her house and went to see Jesus. The mourners in the house thought she was going to visit the tomb of her brother and weep (11:31). Tractate Semahot (“Mourning”) says: “One may go out to the cemetery for three days to inspect the dead for a sign of life, without fear that this smacks of heathen practice. For it happened that a man was inspected after three days, and he went on to live twenty-five years; still another went on to have five children and died later” (8:1).

The tomb of Lazarus was outside the village of Bethany. Jesus approaches it and commands the people to take away the stone (11:39). John recalled this event and described the tomb as a cave with a stone placed against it (11:38). It was a typical Jewish burial practice to have a tomb hewn out of bedrock. In fact, archaeologists have found hundreds of Jewish rock-hewn burial caves around Jerusalem, many of them on the Mount of Olives. When the Franciscans excavated Bethany in the 1950’s they found several Jewish rock-hewn burials outside the village. It was the practice to

place a stone, either round or square, in front of the entrance to the tomb. This stone was called a golal.

Rabbinic theology will help illustrate the fourth point. When Jesus commanded the people to remove the stone, Martha protested (I like the KJV rendering), "Lord he stinketh!" She points out that her brother had been dead four days and his body was beginning to rot (11:39). According to Rabbinic theology, the body began to decompose after the third day in order to expiate, or be punished for, the sins of the dead person. Jesus is about to demonstrate what He told the people in Jerusalem two years prior to this occasion. "Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves 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 the condemnation" (5:25-29 NKJV).

After the stone was removed, Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth" (11:43). The great evangelist of the 19th century, D. L. Moody said, "Jesus had to call Lazarus by name because if he did not, everybody in the grave would have come forth!"

Verse 44 describes the final burial practice. Lazarus is bound hand and foot with grave clothes and his face was wrapped with a cloth. The Jewish burial practice was to wash the body, anoint it with perfumes, then bind the hands and feet, as well as the jaw, in order to prevent

the extremities from flying all over the place when rigor mortis sets in.

The resurrection of Lazarus was a powerful testimony to the deity of the Lord Jesus and His ability to give eternal life to any and all who would put their trust in Him. In fact, John records that “many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him” (11:45), thus fulfilling the purpose of John’s gospel (20:30, 31). Have you trusted Him as your Savior?

"Divine Healer: Jesus vs. Eshmun"

Introduction

How well I remember the traumatic experience of composing my first book report in third grade. The teacher instructed us to list the title and author of the book, and then describe the main theme, or purpose of the book. I must confess my reading skills were not well-developed yet, so I struggled even with the help of my parents on that first book report. The most difficult part of the report was defining the theme. Why did the author write the book? What was the purpose? Since then, I have always appreciated an author who explains why the book was written!

The Apostle John, in the gospel which bears his name, does state the purpose for writing his book: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30, 31 NKJV). In keeping with his purpose, John selects seven signs to present the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God (His deity) and as a result of that, one can believe on (trust in) Him for eternal salvation.

This article addresses itself to the background of the third miracle or sign, the incident which took place at Bethesda (John 5). When did the event take place? Where did it take place? How do the archaeological discoveries shed light on this passage? And what are the practical and theological implications of this event?

The Textual Problems

There are several textual problems within the first four verses of the chapter. Without going into detail, a suggested translation of these verses is given below. The italic words indicate the variant readings that are followed in this article.

“1) After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2) Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep pool, a (place) which is called in the Hebrew tongue, Bethesda, having five porches. 3) In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. 4) For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had” (Hodges 1979:28-39).

When Did the Event Take Place?

Scholars have debated the identification of the feast mentioned in John 5. Almost every major and minor Jewish feast has been suggested. It should be kept in mind that John's, as well as Mark's Gospel, is arranged chronologically. Within the Gospel of John, we have some chronological indicator as to which feast was mentioned in John 5:1.

The encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4) took place during the Samaritan feast of Zimmuth Pesah (Preparation for Passover). This, in turn, takes place sixty days before the Samaritan Passover to commemorate Moses meeting Aaron, after the burning bush experience, to redeem the people of Israel from Egypt. John 4:35 states that there were four months before the grain harvest. The wheat harvest begins

around the time of Shavuot (Pentecost). John 6:4 states that the Passover was near at hand. The only feast of the Jews which falls between Zimmuth Pesah and the Jewish Passover is the feast of Purim, connected with the events recorded in the Book of Esther (Bowman 1971; 1975). In the year AD 28, the feast of Purim fell on Shabbat (Faulstich 1986; cf. John 5:9, 15, 18).

Verse 1 of John 5 says, “a feast”, thus it might have been one of the minor feasts. Some have objected to this identification. Would the Lord Jesus be going up to Jerusalem for a minor feast, when only the major ones are required (Deut. 16:16)? However, later in the gospel, He appears at the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah), another minor feast (Bowman 1971:43-56; 1975:111-132). In John’s Gospel, this is the first time that the Lord Jesus publicly declared Himself to be God (John 5:18). Earlier in the gospel, when He was in Jerusalem for the Passover (John 2:23 - 3:21), He did not publicly present Himself (John 2:23-25).

Where Did the Event Take Place?

Verse two states that there is “by the sheep pool, a (place) which is called in the Hebrew tongue, Bethesda.” The sheep pool has been identified by most Biblical and archaeological scholars as the twin pools in the area of St. Anne’s Church just north of the Temple Mount. These reservoirs are 13 meters (42 feet) deep and were constructed about 200 BC by the Hasmoneans to collect water for washing the sheep that were to be used for sacrifice.

But, it is probable that the incident of John 5 did not take place in these pools. When filled with water, one could drown if he entered them before being healed.

Furthermore, the evidence seems to indicate that the pools were not even in use during the time of Christ. Herod the Great built another pool to the south next to the Temple Mount, called the "Pool of Israel." This was more likely the pool in use for washing sheep during the time of Christ.

If the miracle did not take place in the pools at St. Anne's Church, where did it take place? The verse says it was in a place called "Bethesda." This word is made up of two Hebrew words, "beth" (house) and "hesed" (mercy). This means that "Bethesda," the "House of Mercy," was some building or structure near the Sheep Pool (Wilkinson 1978:95-97).

Can Archaeology Shed Light on This Passage?

Excavations have been conducted in the area of St. Anne's Church and the archaeologist's spade has shed light on the passage. In the area of the pools there was a large Byzantine Church built at the beginning of the 5th century AD. The church is east-oriented with the entrance from the west. Such an orientation is typical of almost all the churches built in the Holy Land during this period. The altar area, which is over the place being venerated, is at the east end of the church and not over the pools. This was the place being venerated in connection with John 5 by the early church. Under this area was found four occupation levels, two from the Jewish period (Hasmonean and Herodian, 2nd century BC to AD 70), and two from the Late Roman Period (2nd to 4th centuries AD).

It is known that there was a healing shrine in the area during the Late Roman period. This shrine, connected to the healing cult, was in rock hewn caves, with three or

four steps leading down to them. A clay votive foot, thanking the god for healing, and a stature of a human head with the body of a snake, probably Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, were discovered in the excavations. Other finds also indicate the existence of a healing shrine. The question then is: Was there a healing shrine in the area during the time of Christ? There seems to be evidence that there was. Caves with water in them were connected with the healing cult of Asclepius. How the water was used in the ritual is not certain. This seems to be the background to the events of John 5 (Benoit 1968:48-57; Jeremias 1968).

What was the identity of the healing god at the shrine? Archaeological data suggests that it was Asclepius during the Late Roman period (second century AD and onward). During the New Testament period, however, this deity may still have been called by the name of Eshmun, the Semitic healing god. If so, the Lord Jesus entered the healing shrine "Bethesda" (House of mercy) of the pagan Semitic healing god, Eshmun. He found a man who had an infirmity for 38 years and asked him, "Do you want to be made well?" The man responded that he had no one to help him into the pool (the small healing cubicles in the shrine) when it was stirred up by the angel. His answer makes much more sense if it occurred in a healing shrine of rock hewn caves having only three or four steps leading down to them than it does to think of putting him in the large and deep Sheep Pool.

Some might object to a pagan healing shrine being so close to the Temple of the Lord. It should be kept in mind, however, that this shrine was outside the city wall of the second Temple, or New Testament, Jerusalem.

Also, the pools for washing sheep for the Temple sacrifices were out of use at this time. Finally, it was also situated close to the Roman garrison stationed at Antonio's Fortress.

The Theological Implications

When the Lord Jesus walked into "Bethesda," He brought about a confrontation between Himself and the pagan healing deity. With just His words, the man took up his bed and walked away without even having to dip his little finger into the water, and without the angel of the pagan deity stirring up the water in the pool.

Jesus won the confrontation. He truly was and is the Great Physician, because He is the only true God. The others, be they Asclepius or Eshmun, are not gods at all (Isaiah 45:20-22; Isaiah 44:9). This event fulfilled the first part of the theme of John's gospel, to show that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God."

The second part was fulfilled in the man with the infirmity. He had a choice: stay on his bed and not be healed, or believe the command of the Lord Jesus, take up his bed and walk and thus receive "life." The man responded positively (John 5:9) and was made well. He then worshipped the Lord in the Temple (John 5:14).

The issue at stake in this showdown was: Who really is the Great Physician? And more important: Who really is God? The Lord Jesus did not depend on any shrine, or ritual, or even an angel.¹ He simply commanded the man to take up his bed and walk. This was something Eshmun or Asclepius could not do. The pagan deity's "healing power" issued forth at a "certain season," whereas the Lord Jesus was able to heal anytime,

anywhere. The man responded positively and was healed instantly.

The Practical Application

John basically wrote a gospel tract. He was and is seeking a positive response to the Lord Jesus and his message. What is your response? Do you believe that He is God? Only God manifest in human flesh could die and pay for all your sins. If you trust Him, the word of God promises eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God because of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8, 9; Tit. 3:4-7; 1 John 5:13). If you have not trusted Him, will you do so now?

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This article was first published in

Archaeology and Biblical Research 2/1 (1989) 24-28.

1 A few manuscripts read “Angel of the Lord” (5:4). In my opinion, the proper rendering of the text should be simply “angel.” That being the case, the angel would have to be a fallen angel, a demon. There are several reasons for this. First, it would not be logical for God to use a good angel in a pagan healing shrine. Second, the word “angel” is used of both good and fallen angels (Matt. 25:41; II Cor. 11:14). The context must determine which it is. Finally, Satan can perform pseudo-healings to deceive people (II Cor. 11:13-15; Rev. 19:20).

O Little Town of Bethlehem

During the Christmas season, we are inundated with images of Bethlehem from Christmas cards or Sunday School material that depicts somebody's imagination of what Bethlehem looked like 2,000 years ago. Some Christmas cards depict Bethlehem as an oasis in the Sahara Desert with domed houses surrounded by palm trees. However, the First century BC/AD reality may be shockingly different from our traditional images of Bethlehem.

In 1985, while working on the Lachish excavation in Israel, I took a group of "diggers" to Bethlehem for a tour on one of our free afternoons. We hopped on the Arab bus #22 at Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem and road the seven miles to Bethlehem. When we disembarked at Manger Square we were greeted with the hustle and bustle of the crowded market place. One of our diggers, Tina, a fourteen-year old girl who came to dig with her grandfather, stood stunned and in a state of shock. She blurted out, "This isn't the little town of Bethlehem!" That's right Tina; much has changed in the last 2,000 years.

The First century village of Bethlehem was located just east of the main north-south road running along the spine of the Hill Country of Judah. The road was called the "Patriarchal Highway" because Abraham, Isaac and Jacob traveled on it. The village was situated in a transitional zone between the fertile farmland in the hill country and the pasturelands of the Wilderness of Judah to the east of Bethlehem. The two agricultural ways of life met in Bethlehem, the farmer and the shepherd.

Bethlehem is first mentioned in the Bible during the period of the Judges. This well-known story is found in the book of Ruth. Famine struck the area and the family of Elimelech and Naomi migrated to the Land of Moab to the east of the Dead Sea. In due time, Elimelech and his two sons died. When Naomi heard that the Lord had visited Bethlehem and blessed the fields with an abundant harvest, she and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, returned to Bethlehem. In order to make ends meet, Ruth enrolled in God's "workfare" program and went into the barley and wheat fields to glean the grain that was left by the harvesters. The owner of one of the fields, Boaz, inquired about the identity of this new woman. When he found out she was related to a relative of his, he arranged for Ruth to work in his fields. This touching love-story ends with Boaz redeeming Ruth in the gates of Bethlehem, marrying her and having a child names Obed. The last verses of the book of Ruth lists the genealogy of part of the tribe of Judah, from Perez down to David, the first legitimate king of Israel.

Bethlehem is mentioned several times in the life of David. It was here that Samuel anointed David king of Israel for the first time (1 Sam. 16:1-13). Later, when David fled from Saul, he was hiding in a cave at Adullam. While there, he desired water from the well by the city gate of Bethlehem. One problem, the city was under the control of the Philistines. This was no problem for three of David's mighty men who broke through the Philistine line and drew water from the well for David. Yet David, realizing these men had risked their lives in order to get this water, poured out the water before the LORD (II Sam. 23:13-17).

Toward the end of the 8th century BC, the super-power Assyria was threatening the Kingdom of Judah. The Prophet Micah prophesied, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (5:2). There are three points in this prophecy that should be noted. First, Micah singles out the place where the Messiah would be born, Bethlehem in Judah. At this time in Israel, there were two other Bethlehems in the Land of Israel. One was in Lower Galilee in the tribal territory of Zebulun (Josh. 19:15). The other was in the territory of Benjamin, just north of Jerusalem. It was near this Bethlehem that Rachel was buried (Neh. 7:26; Gen. 35:16,19; 48:7; 1 Sam. 10:2; Jer. 13:4-7; 18:23; Hareuveni 1991:64-71). Second, Micah describes God's purpose for the Messiah. He shall be a ruler in Israel. There is a day coming when the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, shall sit on the throne of His father David and reign over the House of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32,33, cf. 2 Sam. 7:12-17; Ps. 110). Third, Micah describes the Person of the Messiah. He was from of old, from everlasting. John begins his gospel with the eternality of the Lord Jesus (John 1:1-3,14).

The Lord Jesus was conceived in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit in Nazareth (Luke 1:35). In order for this prophecy to be fulfilled, Mary would have to go to Bethlehem. God in His sovereignty, moved the heart of Caesar Augusta in Rome to declare a census in which all residents had to be enrolled in their own city (Prov. 21:1; Luke 2:1-3). Joseph, who was betrothed to Mary, had ancestral roots in Bethlehem. Micah's prophecy was

marvelously fulfilled when Joseph returned with Mary to his ancestral home.

Bethlehem means “House of Bread.” On the night when Jesus was born, the village lived up to its name. The “Bread of Life” came down from Heaven to enter human history in the “House of Bread” (John 6:35, 51).

That night, an Angel of the LORD announced to the shepherds, “for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). These shepherds were the ones who provided lambs and goats for the Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. They knew the importance of the shedding of blood for the atonement of sins. I wonder if they knew what John the Baptizer would say some thirty years later? “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The reason the Lord Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, came to earth was to die and pay for all our sins, be buried and raised from the dead. He offers His righteousness and a home in heaven to all who would put their trust in Him alone for their salvation (John 3:16; 6:47; 10:11-18; Eph. 2:8,9; Phil. 3:9).

Yes Tina, there once was a little town of Bethlehem and you can still sing, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!”

That The World May Believe

John 17:20, 21

In the High Priestly prayer recorded in John 17, the Lord Jesus prays, “I do not pray for these alone [the eleven disciples in the Upper Room with Him], but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (17:20, 21 NKJV, see also verses 22,23).

Francis Schaeffer identified these verses as the “final apologetics” in reaching the world with the gospel. If the world sees that Christians are unified and display the oneness of the Body of Christ, it will compel them to believe.

In the early 20th century, Captain Bertram Dickson, the British military consul in Asia Minor, visited the region of Kurdistan in what is now southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq. He described the history, geography, geology, flora and fauna of the region, as well as the people in an article. He relates an interesting story that is a commentary on the words of the Lord Jesus.

There were those in the region that identified themselves as Assyrians, being remnants of the mighty Assyrian Empire that fled Nineveh after the city was conquered and the empire collapsed in 612 BC (cf. Nahum 3:15b-18). In the course of time, these people converted to Christianity. The Moslem invasion of the area in a much later period caused them to flee to the mountains of Kurdistan for refuge.

When Captain Dickson visited this mountainous region he encountered three groups of Christians: the Nestorians, the Jacobites and the Chaldeans (Church of Rome). He observed that their “internecine jealousies are stronger than the Christian-Moslem hate.” In other words, the Christians may have gotten along with their Moslem neighbors at times, but they could not stand each other!

The captain relates a story that allegedly happened the year before his visit. A Kurdish man approached the important and powerful Moslem sheikh of Shemsdinan with a dilemma. As the story goes, the man told the sheikh that he had a rooster that spoke to him and said on three separate occasions, “Christ’s religion is the only faith.” The man inquired of the sheikh as to what he should do: convert to Christianity or kill the rooster as an infidel?! The sheikh thought long and hard about this matter and finally decided that the rooster should be kept until it could identify which of the three Christian sects was the real one. “Meanwhile”, he said, “we will continue to be Moslems!”

This is a sad statement on how the world might views the sectarian divisions within Christendom. It seems that Jesus’ words in John 17 are more than a helpful suggestion ... we need to love one another.

Text and Tell: The Excavations at Bethsaida

Where is Bethsaida?

Bethsaida is mentioned more times in the gospels than any other city with the exception of Jerusalem and Capernaum, yet scholars still are debating the exact location of this site.

The name “Bethsaida” means either “house of the fisherman” or “house of the hunter.” Both names fit well the geographical context. Bethsaida was the birthplace of at least three of Jesus’ early disciples – Peter, Andrew and Philip – and Philip apparently still lived there while a disciple (John 1:44; 12:21). Bethsaida was one point of what Bargil Pixner calls the “Evangelical Triangle” (1992: 34-35). Korazin and Tabgha were the other two points of the triangle and Capernaum was the midpoint of the triangle’s base. Jesus did most of His mighty works and miracles of His Galilean ministry within these three points (Matt. 11:21; Luke 9:10). Two recorded miracles are the healing of the blind man outside the city of Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26) and the feeding of the 5,000 men, plus women and children in a “deserted place” within the region of Bethsaida (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:11-17; John 6:1-13). Prior to this miracle, Jesus turned to Philip and asked him where they should buy bread. Philip, whose hometown was just down the hill, would have known where all the bakeries were.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, recounts three incidents relating to Bethsaida. First, Herod Philip

expanded the city to a polis and named it after Julia, the daughter of Caesar [Augustus] (Antiquities 18:28; LCL 9:25). However, the excavator of Et-Tell, Rami Arav, has suggested, based on some coins, that it was “the wife of Caesar Augustus and mother of Tiberias Caesar [who was] ... accepted into the Julian family is 14 CE and then officially took on the name Julia Augusta ...” M. Avi-Yonah concurred (Kuhn and Arav 1991: 88). Josephus’ second point regarding Bethsaida is that Herod Philip died in Julias and was buried in a sepulcher there after a costly funeral (Antiquities 18: 108; LCL 9: 77). Josephus also relates his own experience during the First Jewish Revolt. A battle took place between the Jewish forces under Josephus and the Roman legion commanded by Sulla in the fall of AD 66 (Life 398-406; LCL 1:147-149). Josephus includes a geographical reference when he says that the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee “after passing the city of Julias” (Wars 3: 515; LCL 2: 721).

In spite of all these literary sources, the site of Bethsaida has not been positively identified. Where was the city? Was there one, or were there two Bethsaidas? Is Bethsaida Julias different from Bethsaida in Galilee?

The Site Identification

One of the earliest explorers to visit the Holy land, Edward Robinson, identified Bethsaida Julias with Et-Tell, 2 kilometers from the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and to the east of the Jordan River. He also maintained there was a second Bethsaida in Galilee, based on the passage in John 12:21. Since the territory of Galilee was to the west of the Jordan River, he

identified Bethsaida in Galilee with Tabgha, to the west of Capernaum (1977: 289, 290, 295, 308, 309).

Ever since the days of Robinson the site of Bethsaida has been hotly debated. Today, four different scholars argue for three different locations of the site. Dr. Rami Arav, the excavator of Et-Tell, maintains that the site of Bethsaida is only at Et-Tell and concluded that Tel el-Araj has no Herodian remains and can not be Biblical Bethsaida. Another scholar, Mendel Nun, a fisherman from Kibbutz Ein Gev and an expert on the Sea of Galilee, believes there are Herodian remains at Tel el-Araj and that is Biblical Bethsaida (1997; 1998). Bargil Pixner (1982: 165-170; 1985: 204-216) and an Israeli archaeologist Dan Urman (1985: 121) have suggested that Bethsaida had two parts. Tel el-Araj was the Jewish fishing village to be identified with Bethsaida in Galilee, whole Et-Tell was the acropolis of the city and identified with the Hellenistic Bethsaida Julias. They suggest that the Jordan River ran a course to the east of Tel el-Araj in antiquity, today known as the es-Saki lagoon, putting it in Galilee (Inbar 1974). G. Schumacher, the early surveyor of the Golan Heights, suggested el-Mes'adiyeh was Bethsaida Julias and Tel el-Araj was the fishing village. Et-Tell appeared to him to be too far inland to be the fishing village of Bethsaida (1888: 93, 94, 221, 245, 246).

The Excavations and Surveys

In 1987, Rami Arav of the Golan Research Institute and the University of Haifa began a regional study of the Plain of Bethsaida. One of his objectives was to positively identify the site of Biblical Bethsaida. Arav wanted to change the question marks in the Bible

atlases to exclamation marks! To meet his objectives, he conducted excavations at Et-Tell and Tel el-Araj. At Et-Tell, he uncovered remains from the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods (second century BC to AD 65/66). These remains from the Early Roman period were sufficient evidence, according to Arav, to identify Et-tell with Bethsaida of the Biblical narrative (1991: 104). Among other finds, he discovered a private residence with a courtyard from the late Hellenistic-Early Roman period. "The finds in the house, such as fishing net weights (lead), hooks (iron), and a needle (bronze) for repairing nets and sails, indicate that a fisherman owned the house" (Arav 1991: 104). One important find was a clay seal depicting a scene with two people standing in a boat and fish underneath (1991: 102, 103).

Jim Strange conducted a survey at el-Mesadiyeh in 1982. He did not find conclusive early Roman pottery (1982: 255, cf. Kuhn and Arav 1991: 86). However, Dan Urman and Mendel Nun did find some while conducting a survey in the fall of 1974 (Urman 1985: 201, site 128). In a survey conducted in the fall of 1990 by Yosef Stepansky, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine remains were found (1992: 87).

Arav put in one 4 x 4 meter square at Tel el-Araj in 1987 and discovered "a floor and two walls forming a corner" (1991: 94). He noted that there was a "sterile level" underneath this Byzantine building. The pottery from this square dated to the Byzantine 2 period (AD 419-640). Based on this limited probe, Arav concluded that there were no Hellenistic or Roman remains, and thus the site could not be identified with Biblical Bethsaida (Arav 1988: 187, 188; Kuhn and Arav 1991: 93, 94). In a personal correspondence, Dr. Arav noted he

could not excavate further down because the water table was high.

In Rami Arav justified in making the claim that there is no Early Roman occupation at this site? A German traveler, K. E. Wilken, sometime before 1956, visited the site of Tel el-Araj. A cistern was being constructed while he was there. During construction, the walls collapsed and Wilken observed the stratification. He noted that “there was an upper layer of about twenty inches composed of alluvial sand; below that was a layer of about six inches with sherds of the Roman period down to about AD 250. He mentioned the typical red-colored sherds and painted jar-handles. Another layer of alluvial sand of twelve to fourteen inches, which lay above the next layer, he assigns to the time of Christ, for from it he was able to extract four lamps and eleven small coins showing three ears of grain on one side; these, he asserts, were minted in the time of Pilate (AD 26-36). The coins with the three ears of grain are either from the time of Pontius Pilate (Kindler 1974: 102) or Agrippa I (Kindler 1974: 42). He notes that the stratum in question was destroyed by fire (Kraeling 1956: 388, 389). If this report is accurate (Rami has serious questions about it), then Wilken was able to observe another level because of a low water table.

A heart-shaped column can be seen protruding from the surface of the site. This column belongs to a synagogue or some other monumental building. Mosaics were also discovered in the area.

In the fall of 1990, Y. Stepansky conducted a survey at the site as part of the Archaeological Survey of Israel project. He found Early Roman and Late Roman remains

on the site, including a Herodian lamp and an eastern terra sigillata bowl. These finds led the surveyor to conclude that “the continuing identification of the site with Bethsaida cannot be excluded” (1992: 87).

Unfortunately, the fluctuating water level of the Sea of Galilee has made excavating at Tel el-Araj more difficult because of its high water table. If there is another drought like the one from 1989-1991, and the water table drops again, then it would behoove someone to excavate Tel el-Araj.

I think the jury is still out on the identification of Bethsaida. There are Early Roman remains at Tel el-Araj and the nature of that settlement should be ascertained before ruling out the site as Bethsaida. Mendel Nun suggested that since the water level of the Sea of Galilee was lower in antiquity, the city was much larger than previously assumed. The fluctuation level in antiquity was from 209.25 meters below sea level down to 210.75 meters below sea level. It is higher today because the water level of the lake is regulated by the National Water Carrier (Nun 1991).

This observation was confirmed by Stepansky’s survey in the fall of 1990. He observed that “additional lines of building remains can be traced along 200-300 meters of the 25-30 meter wide strip of beach exposed by the receding waters. Visible next to the hill on the south are the foundations of a round structure (about 5 meters diameter), similar to a building located about 30 meters west of the hill, above the exposed beach. The ancient site probably extended over an area of some tens of dunams, encompassing the hill, the center of which

probably contained remains of a public building" (1992: 87).

Further excavations are required to give a definitive answer to the identification of the site of Biblical Bethsaida.

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This article first appeared in

Archaeology in the Biblical World, (1995) 3/1: 6-11. It was slightly revised and updated on November 10, 2007. A lengthy and more detailed article is in preparation.

Ancient Harbors Of The Sea Of Galilee

Jesus spent much time on and around the Sea of Galilee with His fishermen-disciples. These disciples, who gave up all to follow Him (Luke 5:11), were good sailors. They knew the lake and its harbors well. The Gospels often refer to their maritime activities and the harbors they used. Now, for the first time in recent history, information on the harbors used by Jesus and His disciples is coming to light. Sixteen harbors and anchorages have been identified and surveyed by Mendel Nun, a fisherman from Kibbutz Ein Gev (Nun 1989a). I am deeply indebted to him for sharing his wealth of knowledge concerning the lake and its history.

In this article I will discuss some of the lake's ancient harbors and their implications for gospel geography. Five geographical "problems" will be examined. First, the location of the calling of the disciples (Tabgha, the fishing suburbs of Capernaum - Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; John 21:1-17). Second, the location of the casting of the demons into the swine (Gadara, the Kibbutz Ha'on harbor - Matt. 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-40). Third, the location of the feeding of the 5,000 (near the Aish Harbor, the probable fishing suburbs of Bethsaida-in-Galilee - Matt. 14:15-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:12-17; John 6:1-14). Fourth, the feeding of the 4,000 (Kursi - Matt. 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-9). And finally, the location of Magdala / Dalmanutha (Matt. 15:38; Mark 8:10).

The History of Research

In the past, explorers have searched in vain for Sea of Galilee harbors from the New Testament period. They have been unsuccessful because two millennia of wind and wave action have eroded the harbor superstructures. Only the foundations remain, and they were, until recently, hidden beneath the water.

Mendel Nun has determined that the water level of the lake varied between 209.5 and 210.5 meters below sea level in antiquity. In 1932, a dam was built at the southern outlet of the Jordan River allowing the maximum level to be controlled. It is normally maintained at -209 meters. With the recent drought, however, the level has dropped to a dangerously low -213 meters (Nun 1991: 10). Since one-third of all the drinking water for modern Israel comes from the Sea of Galilee, this is a serious problem. There could be adverse ecological effects as well. For those doing research on the antiquities of the lake, however, the drop has proven to be a boon. Many ancient harbors are now exposed for the first time in the modern era.

The first ancient harbor to be found was at Kursi, on the eastern shore of the lake. Excavations were conducted here by the Department of Antiquities in the early 1970's. The harbor was discovered in an underwater survey carried out by S. Shapira and A. Raban of the Society for Underwater Archaeological Research. During the ensuing summer, the water level dropped and the harbors became visible from shore (Tzaferis 1983; Nun 1989c). Nun has since surveyed the entire lake, documenting 15 additional ancient harbors and anchorages. We will consider several of these harbors as

they relate to geographical “problems” in the gospel narratives.

Geographical Problems in the Gospel Narrative

The Calling of the Disciples

The first stop on our excursion around the Sea of Galilee is the “harbor of St. Peter” [as Mendel Nun has labeled it (1989a:22, 23)]. It is located just northeast of the Church of the Primacy of St. Peter in the area of Tabgha, on the northwest side of the lake. Visible only when the water level falls to -211.50 meters, the harbor is comprised of two breakwaters. The first, 60 meters long, is parallel to the shore and curves to the entrance on the east side. The second, perpendicular to shore, is 40 meters long.

Tabgha, the corrupted form of Heptategon, means “seven springs.” It is the winter fishing ground for fishermen from Capernaum (Pixner 1985:196-206). During the winter months its seven warm springs attract musht, commonly called “St. Peter’s fish,” to its shores. This would be the logical place for Peter and Andrew to have been throwing their cast nets during the winter of AD 28 when Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17), more than a year after believing in Him as Savior (John 2:11).

Several months later, after the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord had to “recall” Peter while he was washing his nets along the shore in the morning after a long, unproductive night of fishing. The springs would be an ideal place for this activity. Jesus got Peter’s attention by a miraculous draught of fish. This was indeed a miracle

because the net Jesus commanded Peter to let down was a trammel net. This type of net is used only at night and close to shore (Luke 5:1-11; Nun 1989b:28-40). The goodness of God led Peter to repentance. He confessed, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Following this experience, the disciples "left all to follow Him" (Luke 5:11).

An early church tradition places Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the disciples here at Tabgha (John 21; Nun 1989b:41-44).

Casting the Demons onto the Swine

In Matthew 8, Mark 5 and Luke 8 we have the account of Jesus exorcising demons from a man (or two men – Matt. 8:28) who lived in a cemetery near the Sea of Galilee. The location of this event has been uncertain (Nun 1989c). There is disagreement as to whether the text should read "Gergesa", "Gerasa", or "Gadara."

Personally, I believe Mark 5:1 and Luke 8:26 should read Gadarenes and Matt. 8:28 should be Gergesenes. Some have objected to these readings because Gadara, located at Umm Qeis about 6 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, is too far away to have a harbor on the lake. In 1985, as a result of the low water level, a harbor was discovered south of Tel Samra, now the campground of Kibbutz Ha'on. It is the closest point along the lake shore relative to Umm Qeis.

What is more, the Kibbutz Ha'on harbor is the largest on the east side of the lake. Its outer breakwater is about 250 meters long, with a 5 meter wide base. The quay, or landing area, is approximately 200 meters long. There is also a 500 meter pier along the shore (Nun 1989a: 16-18). Nun surmises: "One can only assume that a

splendid harbor such as this did not serve a small population. It is much more likely that it once had been the harbor of Gadara, located on the heights of Gilead above the Yarmuk River – the largest and most magnificent of the Hellenistic towns that encircled the Sea of Galilee” (1989a: 17).

Coins from Gadara depict boats commemorating the “Naumachia,” or naval battles reenacted by the people of Gadara. Several scholars have suggested that these battles took place on the Yarmuk River (Dalman n.d.: 178, 179). A more plausible setting is the Kibbutz Ha’on harbor. Here, there is sufficient room for maneuvering and the long pier would provide seating for spectators.

Recently, a Byzantine church was discovered at Tel Samra adjacent to the harbor (Nun 1989a:16). To whom or what was this church dedicated? Did it commemorate the demoniac event?

Assuming that the demoniac event took place at the harbor of Gadara, how does the geography fit the Biblical text? Jesus and His disciples landed at the harbor and were met by a demon possessed man who lived in tombs (Mark 5:2; Luke 8:27; Matt. 8:28 says there were two demoniacs). That there were tombs here is attested by the discovery of three sarcophagi in the area. The demons requested that they be thrown into a herd of swine which were “a good way off,” “on / near the mountain(s)” (the Golan Heights – Matt. 8:30; Mark 5:11; Luke 8:32). The swine then ran down a “steep place into the sea and drowned” (Matt. 8:32; Mark 5:13; Luke 8:33).

There are two possibilities as to where this event took place. The first is just behind Kibbutz Ha’on where a

ridge coming down from the Golan Heights fits the description. The second is on the grounds of Kibbutz Ma'agan, about a mile to the southwest. Located here is the only cliff which drops directly into the sea.

After the demise of the swine, the predominantly Gentile population of the Decapolis pleaded with Jesus to leave their territory. One scholar has suggested that killing the pigs could have been an attack on the cultic practices of the Decapolis cities (Johnson 1989:49, 50). Jesus departed, but He left the delivered demoniac to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him (Mark 5:20; Luke 8:39).

Feeding the 5,000

In the spring of AD 29, just before Passover, Jesus performed the miracle of feeding 5,000 men, plus women and children with five barley loaves and two small sardines. At Tabgha there is a mosaic commemorating this miracle. In addition, an early church tradition places the event at Tabgha (Shenhav 1984; Pixner 1985). But, does Tabgha fit the geographical data in the Gospels?

The Twelve were sent out to preach the gospel to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." Upon their return (probably to Capernaum), Jesus took them by boat to a "deserted place" (Matt. 14:13; Mark 6:32) which "belonged to the city of Bethsaida" (Luke 9:10). The problem here is that there are two towns named Bethsaida. I believe this text refers to Bethsaida-in-Galilee, located at Tel el-Araj on the north shore of the lake (Laney 1986:81-82). The other Bethsaida is Bethsaida Julias, one of the capitals of Gaulanitis, which

I believe, to be located at el-Mes'adiyeh, to the southeast of Tel el-Araj.

The multitude ran before the boat and arrived at the site of the feeding before Jesus and His disciples. There is no indication that they crossed the Jordan River, which would have been high due to the spring rains. Thus, the feeding of the 5,000 should be placed in Galilee, to the west of the Jordan River. I suggest it took place in the area of Moshav Almagor, between Capernaum and Bethsaida-in-Galilee, within the district of Bethsaida.

After feeding the multitudes, Jesus sent His disciples by boat to Bethsaida (probably Julias). Just below Moshav Almagor, to the east of Ammun Bay, which is rich in sweet water springs, is an anchorage at Aish, or Khirbet Osheh. It is located about one mile northeast of Capernaum and a little over one mile west of Bethsaida-in-Galilee. It had a 100 meter long promenade built of large stones and two parallel breakwaters, 20 meters apart, extending into the lake (Nun 1989a:23). It is likely that this was where the disciples' boat was moored during the feeding of the 5,000 and where they departed to the "other side." Possibly Jesus was concerned for their safety. Herod Antipas would not have been pleased with the idea of making Jesus "King of Israel" (John 6:15).

The area of Moshav Almagor and the Aish anchorage nicely fits the Gospel descriptions of the feeding of the 5,000. Placing the miracle at Tabgha was no doubt for the convenience of early pilgrims.

As the disciples were crossing the lake, a violent winter wind storm swept down from the Golan Heights. It was on this occasion that Jesus walked upon the sea and

calmed the wind (Matt. 14:25-32; Mark 6:48-51; John 6:19-21). Eventually they landed on the west side of the lake at the “land of Gennesaret,” where they anchored in the harbor of Gennesar (Nun 1989a:23). The next day Jesus went to the synagogue of Capernaum about 3 miles away and gave His discourse on the “Bread of Life” (John 6:22-71).

Feeding the 4,000

The focus of Jesus’ ministry changed after the feeding of the 5,000. Now, He wanted to spend time alone with His disciples. They traveled to Tyre and Sidon where they spent much time together. After ministering to the Syro-Phoenician woman, they departed from the region and came to the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Decapolis (Mark 7:31). There Jesus healed many, primarily Gentiles, for three days. As a result, they “glorified the God of Israel” (Matt. 15:29-31; Mark 7:31-37). Toward the end of the third day the multitudes were fed with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. Although we can be certain that the event took place on the east side of the lake, exactly where is another matter.

Father Bargil Pixner places the event at Tel Hadar on the northeast shore of the lake. He has even set up a marker to commemorate the event. Tel Hadar, however, is in the region of Gaulanitis, north of the area of the Decapolis. The border between the Decapolis and Gaulanitis apparently was the Wadi Samak (Dalman n.d.: 170). I suggest that the feeding of the 4,000 took place at the Kursi Church, excavated in the 1970’s, just south of the Wadi Samak. In fact, I believe the church was built to commemorate this event, rather than the casting

of the demons into the swine as the excavators propose (Tzaferis 1983:43-48; 1989:44-51; Nun 1989c).

There are several reasons for this suggestion. First, as argued earlier, I believe the demoniac event took place at Gadara eight miles to the south. Second, there is no indication from the mosaics on the floor of the church that it commemorated the demoniac event. Third, early church sources and pilgrim accounts, while stating that the demoniac event took place on the east side of the lake, do not give a specific location. Fourth, the mosaic provides a hint that this is where Jesus fed the 4,000.

The church was built in the late fifth, or early sixth, century AD and lasted until the Persian invasion of AD 614 when it was destroyed. Approximately 60% of the mosaic floor survived the destruction. The central nave suffered the most. Except for some birds and animal medallions which were destroyed during an Islamic iconoclastic movement, the two side aisles are relatively intact.

The side aisles were made up of 296 medallions containing various depictions. Vassilios Tzaferis, the excavator, describes them as follows: “[they] contained a variety of exotic and common birds, different types of fish, stylized flowers, plants, vegetables, harvest symbols and ceremonial objects. Within the row each motif was repeated four times. For the most part, the arrangement of the motifs alternated between rows of images such as birds, fish, everyday objects, or plant motifs” (1983:24).

What interests me the most are the fish (1983:Plate XI: 1). Although they have been partially destroyed, Nun has identified them as barbel fish (1989c:24). The

Gospel narratives state that the fish involved in this miracle were “small fish,” possibly the sardines for which the Wadi Samak is noted. There are also baskets in the mosaics (Tzaferis 1983:Plate X:5). They have handles as did those in the Gospel account. One basket is similar to the one on the mosaic floor at Tabgha.

To the southeast of the church, on the slopes of Wadi Samak, is an ancient tower. According to the excavator, this is the “chapel of the miracle of the swine” (Tzaferis 1983:49-51). Some have suggested it was built over the tombs in which the demoniac(s) lived. Nothing in the chapel, however, indicates to whom or what it was dedicated. It could just as well have been dedicated to the healing events which took place prior to the feeding of the 4,000. Matthew tells us that Jesus “went up on the mountain and sat down there” (15:29). Kursi, interestingly enough, means “chair,” a place for sitting down. For the convenience of pilgrims, the chapel was placed only a little ways up the slope of the mountain.

After feeding the 4,000 people, Jesus and His disciples went to Dalmanutha / Magdala on the west side of the lake. Some 300 meters to the west of the church is a small, 2.5 acre, site named Tel Kursi. North of Tel Kursi are the remains of an ancient harbor. Its breakwater curves for 150 meters and has a holding tank for fish, with an aqueduct for bringing fresh water from the Wadi Samak (Nun 1989a:20-21). This would have been the harbor from which Jesus left to go to Magdala.

Location of Magdala / Dalmanutha

Magdala is located about 3 miles northwest of modern Tiberias. Remains of a harbor have surfaced here (Nun 1989a:20-21). It consisted of two parts; an open dock for

loading and unloading during the summer, and a basin, within a 70 meter breakwater to protect the ships from the winter storms. Mark's Gospel calls the area the "region of Dalmanutha." How is this to be understood?

It has been suggested that Dalmanutha is a transliteration of the Syriac word for "harbor" (Laney 1986:85). Magdala, also known as Tarichea, was noted as a place for salting fish. Possibly it got its nickname, "the harbor," because fishermen brought their sardines here for salting. Josephus records that there were many ships at Magdala (230 or 330 depending on which account you read, Wars 2:635-637) during the battle of the First Jewish Revolt. He also hints that one of the other industries in the area was shipbuilding. The nickname could also derive from this activity.

In recent years, two important discoveries have been made at Magdala. In February 1986, the now famous first century AD boat was found in the harbor. The boat has been variously called "The Jesus Boat," the "Disciples' Boat," or the "Josephus Boat." It is now on display at Kibbutz Ginossar (Wachsmann 1988:18-33; 1990). Secondly, a first century AD synagogue has been excavated near the town square by the Franciscans (Corbo 1983:355-378; Strange and Shanks 1983:29). Perhaps this is the place where the Pharisees and Sadducees came to seek a "sign from heaven" from Jesus (Matt. 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-13).

Conclusions

Jesus and His disciples traveled the Sea of Galilee by boat, going from one harbor to another. Recent climatic conditions have resulted in the exposure of many

ancient harbors around the lake. This has given scholars fresh data with which to resolve old problems.

The harbor at Tabgha confirms that fishermen from Capernaum fished there during the winter months. The harbor at Gadara (Kibbutz Ha'on) adds credibility to the reading of "Gadara" in the gospel narratives. Light is shed on the term "Dalmanutha" ("harbor") as a result of new finds at Magdala. Finally, I have set forth two new proposals. First, the feeding of the 5,000 took place near Moshav Almagor with the disciples departing from the Aish harbor. Second, the Kursi church has been misidentified. Rather than being the place where Jesus cast the demons into the swine, I believe it to be the place where Jesus fed the 4,000.

For the last 2,000 years, pilgrims and tourists have been attracted to the Sea of Galilee to worship, understand and appreciate the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. I trust these ideas will serve to draw us closer to Him, encourage us to walk in His footsteps and be more like Him, day by day.

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The article was published in

Archaeology and Biblical Research, 4/4 (1991) 111-121.

The Parable Of The Two Builders

When Jesus preached a sermon, told a parable, or gave a discourse, He always used object lessons that were familiar to His hearers in order to illustrate His point. The archaeology and geography of Bethsaida provides the background for two of His parables. These parables, referred to as the “parable of the two builders,” are recorded in Matthew 7:24-27 (Sermon on the Mount) and Luke 6:47-49 (Sermon on the Plain). The evidence suggests that these were two different sermons that were given at different times, several months apart.

As I understand the chronology of the life of Christ; Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior at the wedding at Cana of Galilee during the summer of AD 26 (John 2:11). In the spring of AD 28, Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to become “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20).

As Jesus trained His disciples in the art of “fishing for men” they visited the synagogues of Galilee. At one point, He sat down on the slopes of a mountain overlooking the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and addressed His disciples – those who had already trusted Him as Savior and decided to follow Him – yet He also allowed the crowd that had gathered to listen in on His sermon (Matt. 5:1). His primary audience, however, was His disciples. This sermon, delivered in the Spring of AD 28, is known today as the Sermon on the Mount.

The next day, Peter was “recalled” after catching a miraculous draught of fish and realizing the Lord Jesus could be trusted to provide his daily needs. At this point

in his walk with the Lord, Peter “forsook all and followed Him” (Luke 5:11). Later that summer, Jesus again addressed His disciples on the Plains of Bethsaida (Luke 6:20-49). This sermon, commonly called the Sermon on the Plain, reflects a deeper commitment to the call of discipleship. Yet Jesus ends both sermons with similar parables. For a discussion of this chronology and its spiritual implications, see Franz 1993: 92-96.

These parables conclude two sermons that lay “down the standards of conduct appropriate to a disciple of Jesus as he lives in anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God” (Hodges 1985: 21). Jesus contrasted two examples of disciples: one hears the words of the sermon and does what is instructed, while the other hears the words but does not act on what was heard. Jesus likened the first disciple to a wise builder who built his house on the rock and the second disciple to a foolish builder who built his house on the sand. The house that withstood the rains, flood and winds was the one which had a deep foundation down to bedrock (Luke 6:48).

Where was the sand to which Jesus pointed as an object lesson in these parables? It must be by the Sea of Galilee because that is where Jesus gave the parable. Also, Josephus the First Century AD Jewish historian described the “Lake of Gennesar [as] ... everywhere ending in pebbly or sandy beaches” (Wars 3: 506, 507; LCL 2:719). K. E. Wilken, a German traveler who visited the site of Tel el-Araj, the site of Bethsaida in Galilee, observed two strata of human occupation sandwiched between “alluvial sand” when a cistern at the site collapsed (Kraeling 1956: 388, 389). A casual visit to the site reveals the same alluvial sand today. For a

discussion of the location of Bethsaida, see Franz 1995: 6-11.

I think this alluvial sand is the background to the parables of the two builders, and something with which the disciples were well familiar. Bethsaida in Galilee was the birthplace of Philip, Andrew and Peter (John 1:44; 12:21). They knew that the alluvial sand was very hard in the summertime. Perhaps they recalled “Uncle Akiva” or “Cousin Ezra” building their houses on this hard alluvial sand. One may have dug a foundation down to bedrock while the other did not. When the early rains and the winter rains came, the Jordan River overflowed its banks. This, along with the winter windstorms caused the house that was not built with a foundation to collapse.

Interestingly, on February 21, 1978, the Israel Water Systems put in a channel for some pipes in the area of Tel el-Araj. At a depth of three meters under the water table, carved basalt stones of different sizes were observed. They appeared to be part of the foundation of a building (Sharavani 1978). Unfortunately, no pottery was collected that would help date the structure. This would reflect the building method described in the parables.

If the hard alluvial sand of Bethsaida is the background for these parables, then the issue is not where the houses were built, i.e. on sand or rock, because both houses were built on the hard alluvial sand during the summer months. The important point is how the houses were built, i.e. with or without a foundation that was dug down to bedrock. The contrast is obvious. The wise builder looked to the future and knew the early rains

would come and the Jordan River would overflow its banks and loosen up the hard alluvial sand and make it unstable. If the house had no foundation, it would collapse. The foolish builder, on the other hand, thought only of the present and thought the hard alluvial sand would remain in that state throughout the winter months. Much to his surprise, it did not. The wise builder was concerned that the house would remain standing when the sand became loose and soft, so he dug a deep foundation down to bedrock. On the other hand, the foolish builder was only concerned with the outward appearance of his house so he did not dig a foundation for his house. The wise builder counted the cost and put time, energy and effort into building a foundation for his house, while the foolish builder took shortcuts and ignored the need for a foundation.

The application of these two parables is also quite obvious. Jesus intended His disciples to hear His words of these two sermons and obey them. The wise builder dug a foundation and built his house on top of it, so when the winds, rains and floods came the house remained standing. Likewise, the serious disciple of the Lord Jesus must put time, energy and effort into living the Christian life as outlined in the Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain. Paul, in the same vein, said those believers who successfully lived the Christian life will be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ (I Cor. 3:10-15). On the other hand, the foolish builder did not dig a foundation for his house so it collapsed. Jesus likened this to a disciple who only heard the words of the Sermons and did nothing about them. Paul described this manifestation of the believer's works as being burned with fire at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That

believer would suffer loss, yet he himself would be saved, yet so as through the fire (I Cor. 3:15). This believer would also be ashamed at the coming of the Lord Jesus (I John 2:28).

May we follow the admonition of James, the Son of Zebedee, an “ear-witness” to the Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain, when he instructs us to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

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This article first appeared in

Archaeology in the Biblical World, (1995) 3/1: 6-11. It
was revised and updated on November 9, 2007.

The Demoniacs Of Gadara

The account in the Synoptic gospels of the demoniacs of Gadara is a pivotal event in the Galilean ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. This event is recorded in all three Synoptic gospels (Matt. 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). This paper will examine several “problems” relating to this account and then an attempt will be made to place it in proper perspective in relation to the whole of the Lord Jesus’ ministry.

The first issue to be examined is the textual problem of the passage. Does the text read the region of the Gergesenes, Gadarenes or Gerasenes? The conclusion of this textual problem will determine the outcome of the second “problem”, which is the identification of the site where this event took place. Did it take place in the region of Gergesa, Gadara, or Jerash? The text is clear that this event took place on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Two (maybe three) possible sites have been proposed for the setting of the casting of the demons into the swine. The first possibility, which is now a National Park, is the Byzantine Kursi church on the southern banks of the Wadi Samek. The other possibility is Tel Samra, situated under the campground of Kibbutz Ha’on. The third issue, a moral one, is why did the Lord Jesus allow the herd of swine to be destroyed? After all, they were part of God’s creation! Is it because they were not kosher, or did they have some cultic connections? If these issues can be successfully resolved, then it will give us a clearer perspective on the ministry of the Lord Jesus and the message that each gospel writer is trying to set forth.

The Textual Problem

I believe that the Textus Receptus has the better reading concerning this textual problem. The proper reading of the text should be the region of the “Gergesenes” in Matthew’s gospel (8:28), and the region of the “Gadarenes” in Mark’s (5:1) and Luke’s (8:26) gospels. If this is the case, is this a contradiction? Were they two separate regions, or different names for the same region? I would like to propose that they were two different names for the same region. One must keep in mind the audience to whom each gospel is addressed. Matthew, the former tax collector from Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is writing primarily to a Jewish audience, probably in the Land of Israel. Mark appears to be addressing a Jewish audience in the Diaspora, possibly Rome. Luke is writing to a Gentile audience somewhere in the Roman world.

If the reading in Matthew’s gospel is “Gergasenes”, then there are two possible interpretations of the name (Lightfoot 1859:II:166, 409, 410). The first is it stands for an “old Gergashite family.” Unfortunately, of the seven references to the nation of the Gergashites that were in the Land when the Israelites entered, none of them give any geographical hints as to where the nation was located (Gen. 10:16; 15:21; Deut. 7:1; Josh. 3:10; 24:11; I Chron. 1:14; Neh. 9:8). There is supposedly a Talmudic reference which places them in the region of Gilead or the Golan Heights, but I have not been able to confirm this. Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, would refer to the region by its old Semitic name. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the city of Beth-Shean, another Decapolis city. During the Hellenistic period, the name of the city was changed to Scythopolis,

yet “the Jews there continued to call the place by its old name. A bilingual ossuary inscription found in Jerusalem has the Semitic inscription ‘Ammyiah ha-Beshanit’ and ‘Hanin ha-Beshani’ which corresponds in the Greek part of the inscription to ‘Ammia Skuthopolitissa’ and ‘Anin Skuthpoleites’. Josephus makes a point of saying that the ‘Greeks’ called the place Scythopolis (Antiq. 12:348; 13:188 [LCL 7:181, 321]) and the Talmudic sources always call the place by the shortened form ‘Beishan’ (which is preserved in the Arabic ‘Beisan’)” (Rainey 1973). There is another bilingual ossuary from Jerusalem with the name “Papias, / the Be(t)shanite” in Hebrew and “Papias and Salomich (!) / the Scythopolitans” in Greek (Rahmani 1994:112, no. 139). Another possibility is that it refers to “the muddy and clayey nature of the soil which is called ‘gergishta’ by the Jews” (Lightfoot 1859:II: 410). If this is the case, then Matthew reflects the local conditions which he was aware of from living across the Lake, perhaps this was a nickname for the region. Mark and Luke, writing to audiences that might not be acquainted with the geography of the region refers to the place by its Greek name, Gadara, one of the Decapolis cities.

Two or One Demoniacs?

I find it interesting that Matthew records two demoniacs in his account, and I think he does so with a purpose in mind. There is no contradiction between Matthew and the other two Synoptic gospel writers. If there are two demoniacs, then there is obviously at least one. Mark and Luke are emphasizing the leader of the two, but why does Matthew mention two? In the Hebrew mindset, a fact is established in a court of law by two or more

witnesses (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15). The Spirit of God had Matthew emphasize the second demoniac because He was pointing out to the Jewish mindset, that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jewish people and the Kingdom of Heaven was to include Gentiles! Yet Matthew confirmed this concept by two Gentile demoniacs being healed on the first trip the Lord Jesus and His disciples took to Gentile territory.

The Location of the Event

All geographers of the Bible place the event of the demoniac on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Yet there is a difference of opinions as to where on the east side. Tourists visiting Israel today are shown the remains of the Byzantine church / monastery complex at Kursi, now a National Park, on the southern banks of Wadi Samek. Just to the south of the site is a sharp decline that might fit the geographical requirements for the place where the swine went into the sea. The site of Kursi was excavated in the early 1970's and identified by the excavators with the demoniac event (Tzaferis 1983: 43-48). Yet if one reads the excavation report carefully, there is no archaeological support for this identification. Unfortunately, only the western part of the mosaic floor in the nave (central aisle) of the church was left intact, while the eastern part was badly damaged. If there were any inscriptions identifying to whom or what this church was dedicated to in the eastern end of the nave, it was destroyed (1983:23). One scholar suggested there was possibly a scene of pigs on the floor (Nun 1989b: 25). However, this is wishful thinking on his part based on his assumption that this church commemorated the place where Jesus exorcised

the demons into the swine. Those who hold to the Kursi site as the place of the demoniac event also argue that Mark and Luke would use the familiar Greek name “Gadara” because the readers would be familiar with this name. However, this conclusion fails to take into account the other Decapolis city between Kursi and Gadara, namely Hippos (or Susita). Their Gentile readers would be familiar with this city as well.

I have proposed elsewhere that the Kursi church should be identified with the feeding of the 4,000 recorded in the gospel narratives (Matt. 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-10; Franz 1991: 117-120). I was intrigued to find that C. J. Ellicott (1874:205, 206, note 3) proposed this identification in 1874 yet he gave no reason for it, nor was he aware of the Byzantine church.

I have also proposed that the casting of the demons into the swine took place at the ancient harbor located just south of Tel Samra, now the campground of Kibbutz Ha'on (Franz 1991:114-116). Some textual critics have objected to the reading of Gadara, located at Umm Qeis, south of the Yarmuk River, because it is too far from the Sea of Galilee (10 Kilometers as the crow flies) and had no control over any part of the Lake. In 1985, however, as a result of the low water level, a harbor was discovered south of Tel Samra. This harbor is the largest harbor on the east side of the lake, larger than Hippos (Susita), the other Decapolis city bordering the lake. Its outer breakwater measures some 250 meters long and has a 5 meter wide base. The quay, or landing place for the boats, is some 200 meters long. There is also a 500 meter pier along the shore (Nun 1989a: 16-18). Mendel Nun, a fisherman from Kibbutz Ein Gev and a noted authority on the Sea of Galilee surmised: “One can only

assume that a splendid harbor such as this did not serve a small population. It is much more likely that it once had been the harbor of Gadara, located on the heights of Gilead above the Yarmuk River - the largest and most magnificent of the Hellenistic towns that encircled the Sea of Galilee" (1989a: 17).

Coins from Gadara were discovered which depict boats commemorating the "Naumachia," or naval battles reenacted by the people of Gadara. Several scholars have suggested that these battles took place on the Yarmuk River (Dalman n.d.: 178, 179). But along the shore of the Sea of Galilee is now a more defensible conclusion. The "shore" conclusion would allow for the comfortable seating of the spectators along the 500 meter pier as they watched the sea battles.

Another interesting observation is the discovery of a Byzantine "chapel / church" unearthed in the excavations of Tel Samra adjacent to the harbor (Nun 1989a:16). To whom or what was this church dedicated? Did it commemorate the demoniac event? We do not know for sure because the excavations have never been properly published.

Assuming the location of this event is the harbor of Gadara, how does the geography fit the Biblical text? The Lord Jesus and His disciples landed in the harbor and got out of the boat and were met by a demon possessed man (men) who lived in tombs (Mark 5:2; Luke 8:27). There were tombs in the area as attested to by three sarcophagi that were found in the area. The demons requested to be thrown into the herd of swine which were "a good way off", "on / near the mountain

(s)” (the Golan Heights – Matt. 8:32; Mark 5:13; Luke 8:33).

There are two possibilities as to where this event took place. The first possibility is just behind Kibbutz Ha'on. There is a ridge there that comes down from the Golan Heights that would allow the swine to run down from the top of the heights. The second possibility, suggested by Michael Avi-Yonah, is in on the grounds of Kibbutz Ma'agan (CBA 233; 2002:172, 173). This location is the only one in the southern part of the lake with a cliff that drops off into the lake. However, it should be pointed out that text does not demand a cliff. After the swine were destroyed, the predominately Gentile population of the Decapolis pleaded with the Lord Jesus to leave their territory. Apparently He was disrupting their economy and culinary delights, i.e. pork chops and ham!

Why Were the Swine Destroyed?

Some critics have objected to this story because it seems like a senseless waste of a herd of pigs. Again, the audience of each gospel is to be kept in mind. Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, wanted to emphasize that the Lord Jesus was upholding the Mosaic Law concerning the prohibition of eating pork (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8; Isa. 65:4; 66:3, 17) and His words, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). Mark and Luke had another purpose in mind. Dr. Earl S. Johnson, Jr., in a paper delivered at the 1989 AAR / SBL meeting in Los Angeles, CA, pointed out that: “Since Mark’s gospel was written to Christians living somewhere in the Roman Empire, possibly even in Rome itself, it is not unlikely that this miracle narrative could

be better understood if it were examined from a Gentile or Roman perspective. Information about the nature of Geresá [his suggestion, although it also holds true for Gadara – GF] as a Roman city, evidence about the practice of the Roman soldiers to memorialize themselves in provincial necropolis, and the Roman use of pigs for sacrifice, especially for atonement, all indicate that Mark's narrative clearly has a Roman perspective in mind and that it serves a function much like the temple cleansing scene in chapter 11: Jew and Roman alike must abandon former practices of sacrifice in order to follow Jesus Christ, the one whose death and resurrection make all these rituals superfluous" (1989:49, 50).

Theological Implications of the Event

This event is pivotal in the Galilean ministry of the Lord Jesus. In order to appreciate this significance, a review of the events leading up to it will be given. The time setting for this event is around November of AD 28. Apparently, the day before (according to Jewish reckoning) the Lord Jesus was having an evening meal with His disciples (Mark 3:20), but was interrupted by one who was brought to Him demon possessed, blind and mute (Matt. 12:22). The Lord Jesus healed him and the multitudes began to wonder if He was not the Son of David (Matt. 12:23). The scribes from Jerusalem (Mark 3:22) and Pharisees (Matt. 12:24) attributed His power to Beelzebub / Satan. The Lord Jesus then gave the parable of the kingdom that was divided against itself (Matt. 12:25-30; Mark 3:23-27) and pronounced the "unpardonable sin" (Matt. 12:31, 32; Mark 3:26-30).

Later, some Scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign (Matt. 12:38-42). The Lord Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah the Prophet". This sign has a two-fold meaning. First, it was a prophecy concerning the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and second, an illusion to the salvation of the Gentiles. He gives two cases of Gentile salvation to prove His point, first, the men of Nineveh rising up in judgment because they repented, and second, the Queen of Sheba because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Interestingly, Matthew, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, quotes Isaiah 42:1-3 just before this section (Matt. 12:18-20). He concluded with the interpretative statement, "And in His name Gentiles will trust" (Matt. 12:21).

On the next morning (Matt. 13:1, but still the same day according to Jewish reckoning), the Lord Jesus took the multitudes outside Capernaum to a little cove just west of the city and gives the parables of the Sower and the Four Fields, the Wheat and the Tares, Light under a Basket, Growing Seed, Mustard Seed, and Leaven (Matt. 13:2-35; Mark 4:1-34; Luke 8:4-18; Crisler 1976:134-138). Before dismissing the crowd, He gave a command to His disciples to depart with Him to the "other side" (Matt. 8:18-22). The Lord Jesus dismissed the crowd and went back to Peter's house in Capernaum and explained the parable of the Wheat and the Tares as well as gave four more parables, i.e. the Hidden Treasure, Pearl of Great Price, Drag-net and Householder to His disciples (Matt. 13:36-52).

The demoniac event is the first recorded time in Jesus' public ministry where He takes His disciples to Gentile

territory. The response of His disciples was interesting. One disciple was over excited and said he would follow Jesus wherever He went. The Lord Jesus pointed out that “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” This response is probably an allusion to the rejection that occurred the night before by the Scribes and Pharisees and in preparation by the Gentiles of Gadara on the next day. Another disciple, possibly Peter, gave a lame excuse about reburying his father because he did not want to go over to those unclean, catfish and swine eating pagans in the Decapolis. The Lord rebuked him and said, “Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt. 8:21, 22; Franz 1992: 54-58). As it turned out, all the disciples embarked into the boat and “crossed over to the other side” to Gentile territory. On the way over, there was a violent winter windstorm that the Lord Jesus, the Master of the Sea, rebuked and the disciples marveled and wondered, “Who is this Man that even the winds and waves obey Him?”

This review was given to show that the Demoniac event was pivotal in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. He had been rejected by the Scribes from Jerusalem and the Pharisees, and now began to change the focus of His ministry to include the Gentiles. It should be pointed out, however, that the nation as a whole did not reject Him at this time. Six months later there is still a large multitude following Him, in fact, they wanted to make Him King! (See John 6 and the feeding of the 5,000).

The response of one of the demoniacs is quite interesting. After their salvation experience, according to Luke’s gospel, one of the demoniacs was “sitting at the feet of Jesus” (8:35). Sitting at the feet of a person is

a rabbinic term for “I want to be your disciple!” How quickly he grasped the matchless grace of God in his life and wanted to study and be used by his new Master. The Lord Jesus sent him back to his family and friends to be the first Gentile missionary to the Gentiles recorded in the Gospels. He commanded the delivered demoniac to return to his house and tell his family and friends what great things the Lord (Kurious – Mark 5:19) and God (Theos – Luke 8:39) had done for him. Interestingly, this Gentile had a high Christology of Jesus because he went back to his city and throughout the Decapolis to tell everyone what great things JESUS had done for him! He clearly understood who delivered him from the demons and provided his salvation, Jesus, who is both Lord and God. For the next year and a half he shared the good news of Jesus in the Decapolis. The next time Jesus came to the region of the Decapolis, there were 4,000 Gentiles waiting to greet Him and hear His words (Matt. 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-10).

Also note, Jesus commanded him to return to his house, yet he went throughout the Decapolis proclaiming the good news of Christ. The grace of God in his life motivated him to do more than what was required or commanded. Should not that be true of each and every one of us who know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior?

Conclusions

This portion of God’s Word is fascinating when understood in the historical, geographical and theological context in which it was written and has some very practical lessons for believers in the Lord Jesus today.

We have suggested that the proper reading of the text in Matthew is “Gergesene” and in Mark and Luke, “Gadarenes.” Thus the demoniac is from the region of Gadara or Gergesa. These two names are different names for the same city / region. If this is the case, than the casting of the demons into the herd of swine took place near the newly discovered harbor of Gadara, now located near Tel Samra, or the campground for Kibbutz Ha’on. The reason the Lord Jesus allowed the demons to go into the herd of swine and be destroyed was to show the Roman reading audience that salvation is to be found by faith alone in the lord Jesus Christ and not in the atonement of pigs.

If this account is placed in its proper chronological setting it has some interesting theological implications as well as practical applications. The trip to Gadara was the first time in the ministry of the Lord Jesus where He went to Gentile territory. This occurred after the religious establishment rejected Him. Now, the Lord Jesus changed the focus of His ministry toward the Gentiles.

While He had stated on a prior occasion that God loved the world (John 3:16), only now does He actively begin to proclaim that message to the Gentiles. This upset at least one disciple who made an excuse to avoid the trip to Gentile territory. The Lord Jesus rebuked him and he went anyway. By this, the Lord Jesus was beginning to break down the prejudicial barriers of His Jewish disciples toward the unkosher, pagan Gentiles. Well might we learn this lesson: The Kingdom of God is for all, even those who are not like ourselves. As the Sunday School song goes, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white,

they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.”

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This paper was first read at the Eastern Region Evangelical Theological Society meeting held at Westminster Theological Seminary in PA on April 5, 1991.

Let The Dead Bury Their Own Dead

There are two incidents recorded in the Gospels when a disciple requested a “leave of absence” in order to “bury” his father (Matt. 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-60).

Although the requests appear reasonable, Jesus gave a seemingly harsh reply in each case: “Follow Me, let the dead bury their own dead.”

This statement is often considered a “hard saying” of Jesus (Bruce 1983: 161-163). Some critical scholars suggest that Jesus was encouraging His disciples to break the fifth commandment (honor your father and mother) by not giving their fathers a proper burial (Sanders 1985: 252-255). Is He really demanding this? Most commentaries suggest Jesus meant, “Leave the (spiritual) dead to bury the (physical) dead” (Fitzmyer 1981: 836; Liefeld 1984: 935). This interpretation, though common (Fitzmyer calls it the “majority interpretation”), is not consistent with the text and with Jewish burial practices of the first century AD.

Problems with the “Majority Interpretation”

Byron McCane, of Duke University, points out three problems with the “majority interpretation” (hereafter MI; 1990:38-39). First, it does not give an adequate explanation of the disciples’ request, “Let me first go and bury my father.” The MI sees the request as a conflict of loyalties between the disciples’ responsibilities to their dead fathers and their commitment to follow Jesus. This minimizes the importance of the adverb “first.” In each case, a disciple was requesting time to fulfill his family obligation

regarding the burial of his father. Once this was discharged, the disciple would return and follow Jesus. Thus the MI does not explain the disciples' request for time.

Secondly, those who follow the MI generally omit the words "their own dead," because they want to distinguish between two meanings of the word "dead." "Let the spiritually deal bury the physically dead." However, the text says, "their own dead," indicating that both occurrences of "dead" are connected in a reflexive possessive relation. There is no need to spiritualize the text regarding the dead; both are physically dead!

Finally, the MI goes against first-century Jewish burial customs. In the first century, when a person died, they normally were taken and buried immediately in the family burial cave that had been hewn out of bedrock. [For the archaeology of Jewish tombs during the New Testament period, see Rahmani 1958, 1961, 1982a]. This custom is based on the injunction found in the Mosaic Law, not to leave the corpse on an executed person on the tree overnight (Deut. 21:22-23). Two examples of immediate burials are found in the New Testament: Jesus (John 19:31) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:6-10).

Immediately after the burial, the family would separate itself and mourn for seven days. This mourning period was called shiv'ah. It would have been impossible for the disciples to make their request if their father had just died. If they were the eldest sons, they were obligated by custom to immediately bury their fathers. If the MI is correct, the disciples would have been acting contrary to normal first-century Jewish burial practices.

An Interpretation Based on First-Century Jewish Burial Practices

McCane suggests an interpretation that is consistent with first-century Jewish burial practices (1990:40-41). After a body was placed in a burial cave, it was left to decompose. The family mourned for seven days. This initial mourning period was followed by a less intense 30-day period of mourning, called *shloshim*. However, the entire mourning period was not fully over until the flesh of the deceased had decomposed, usually about a year later. The Jerusalem Talmud states: When the flesh had wasted away, the bones were collected and placed in chests (ossuaries). On that day (the son) mourned, but the following day he was glad, because his forebears rested from judgment (Moed Qatan 1:5).

The final act of mourning, the gathering of the bones into a bone box called an ossuary, was called “ossilegium,” or “secondary burial.” It is this act, I believe, that is in view in our Lord’s response. [For a good discussion of secondary burials, see Meyers 1971; Rahmani 1981. On ossuaries, see Rahmani 1982b]. The disciples’ request and Jesus’ response makes good sense in light of the Jewish custom of secondary burial. When the disciples requested time to bury their fathers they were actually asking for time to finish the rite of secondary burial. Their father had died, been placed in the family burial cave, and the sons had sat *shiv’ah* and most likely *shloshim*. They had requested anywhere from a few weeks to up to 11 months to finish the ritual of ossilegium before they returned to Jesus.

Jesus’ sharp answer also fits well with secondary burial. The fathers had been buried in the family burial caves

and their bodies were slowly decomposing. In the tombs, along with the fathers, were other family members who had died, some awaiting secondary burial, others already placed in ossuaries. When Jesus stated: "Let the dead bury their own dead," He was referring to two different kinds of dead in the tomb: the bones of the deceased which had already been neatly placed in ossuaries and the fathers who had yet to be reburied. The phrase "own dead" indicates that the fathers were included among the dead.

The Setting of This Saying

The Gospels record two incidents where disciples approached the Lord to request a "leave of absence" from following Him. The first request is recorded in Matthew 8. Jesus was about to take the Twelve across the Sea of Galilee to the Decapolis city of Gadara. Chronologically, this trip is the first recorded journey of Jesus to minister in Gentile territory. One of His disciples hesitated, probably because he did not want to go to those unclean, non-kosher pagan Gentiles.

So he made an excuse, "Let me first go and bury my father." He most likely appealed to the Jewish burial practice of ossilegium, or secondary burial, which would remove him from following the Lord for up to eleven months. Jesus saw this as an excuse not to minister to the Gentiles. As a result He rebuked him with a statement of irony and challenged the disciple to follow Him. Quite possibly this was Peter because he is known to have had a problem associating with Gentiles (Acts 10:9-22; Gal. 2:11-12).

The second incident is recorded in Luke 9:59-60. Another disciple, possibly one of the 70 (Luke 10:1, 17)

was going to Jerusalem for the Feast of Succoth (Tabernacles) during the fall of AD 29. He asked to be excused for the same reason. It may be that this disciple was taking advantage of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to rebury the bones of his father in the Holy City (cf. Meyers 1971-72: 98, 99; Avigad 1962). If so, Jesus felt it was more pressing for him to go with the 70 to Perea than to rebury the bones of his father in Jerusalem.

In each case, the father had died more than a month prior and the Lord rebuked the disciples with the same stern statement.

The Reason for Jesus' Response

Why would Jesus respond in a seemingly harsh manner? The purpose of His response may have been twofold. The first purpose was to encourage the disciples to faithfully follow Him. The second purpose and perhaps more importantly, was to teach correct theology.

The concept of gathering the bones of one's ancestors is deeply embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures and reflected in Israelite burial practices (Gen. 49:29; Judges 2:10; 16:31; 1 Kings 11:21, 43, etc.). However, by New Testament times, the concept had taken on a new meaning. According to the Rabbinic sources, the decomposition of the flesh atoned for the sins of the dead person (a kind of purgatory) and the final stage of this process was gathering the bones and placing them in an ossuary (Meyers 1971: 80-85). Jesus confronts this contrary theology. Only faith in Christ's redemptive work on the cross can atone for sin, not rotting flesh or any other work or merit of our own (Heb. 9:22, 26; Acts 4:12; Eph. 2:8, 9). Jesus may have rebuked these two

disciples rather harshly because they were following the corrupted practice of secondary burial.

Conclusion

An amplified (interpretive) rendering of this statement might be: Look, you have already honored your father by giving him a proper burial in the family sepulcher. Now, instead of waiting for the flesh to decompose, this can never atone for sin, go and preach the Kingdom of God and tell of the only true means of atonement, faith alone in Christ. Let the bones of you dead father's ancestors gather his bones and place them in an ossuary. You follow me! This interpretation allows for Jesus to have upheld the fifth commandment, takes the text at face value, and does justice to the Jewish burial practices of the first century. The interpretation is therefore consistent theologically, Biblically, and historically, and answers the critics accurately.

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The Luke Travel Narrative (Luke 9:51 to Luke 19:47)

Introduction

Some critical scholars have suggested that the “Luke Travel Narrative” (Luke 9:51-19:47) are not historically and geographically correct. This paper will propose a chronological and historical reconstruction of the last six months of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ based on a harmonization of the “Luke Travel Narrative” and the Gospel of John. If this harmonization / chronology is accepted, the parables and discourses that the Lord Jesus gives during this last six months of His life takes on a new meaning. He uses the surrounding topography, flora and fauna and material culture to illustrate the word-pictures in His discourses and parables.

The Historicity of the “Luke Travel Narrative”

Biblical scholars have long been puzzled by Luke’s travel narrative, or “central section” as it is sometimes called. Luke begins this section by stating that Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem (9:51, 53; 13:22, 33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28). However, the Biblical geographer has problems tracing the route because Jesus begins by going through Samaria (9:52), is later found in Bethany (10:38-42), then “between Samaria and Galilee” (17:11) and finally at Jericho (19:11). If He is going to Jerusalem, this is not the most direct way!

Critical scholars have picked up on this erratic itinerary and questioned the accuracy of this section. For example, J. A. Robertson wrote: “There is no portion of

the writings of Luke which presents a more forbidding obstacle to our acceptance of the claims of the evangelist to be an accurate and orderly historian than the section of the Third Gospel which is sometimes called 'the Travel Narrative.' It is the happy hunting ground of the detractors of the historian. And his defenders have sought to gloss over the difficulties that confront us here by suggesting that the 'order' in which Luke declares he has arranged his material is logical rather than chronological" (1919:54-55). C. C. McCown suggests that the geography of the Luke travel Narrative contains omissions, inexactitudes, and positive errors. He states, "... for Luke geography and topography serve merely as literary devices. He is not interested in itineraries as were travelers, both Christian and non-Christians, at a slightly later time ... His geographical settings were intended to give life and color to the pictures he was drawing. They are a literary artifice like the pastoral scenes of Hellenistic and Roman poets" (1938:56, see also 1932).

I have a problem squaring these statements of the critical scholars with the opening words of Luke's gospel. Luke states: "In as much as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seems good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (1:1-4, all Scripture quotes are from the New King James Version).

The problem can be resolved if a careful examination of the beginning of the Luke Travel Narrative is made. Luke 9:51 says: “

Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him [the Lord Jesus] to be received up, that He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem ...” Professor David Gooding, in his commentary on Luke’s Gospel, puts this verse in proper perspective. He says: “We should at once notice carefully what the goal of the journey is said to be. It is sometimes stated on the basis of 9:51 that our Lord’s goal on this journey was Jerusalem. But this is not so. Our Lord’s journey certainly lay via Jerusalem; but the goal of the journey was what Luke describes as ‘being received up’. The phrase has the same sense as that given by the early Christian hymn quoted by Paul (I Tim. 3:16) which says that Christ ‘was believed on in the world, received up in glory’. In other words by ‘being received up’ Luke is referring to Christ’s ascension into heaven. That and no less was the goal of the journey” (1987:179). If Dr. Gooding is correct, and I believe he is, then the Lord Jesus could take three of four journeys to Jerusalem and Luke would be perfectly correct in his chronology and geography.

A Proposed Reconstruction

Harmonies of the gospels are not in vogue in scholarly circles today. I believe they are still valid tools, and therefore, I will attempt to harmonize the Luke Travel Narrative with the Gospel of John, chapters 7-12.

The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles via Samaria (Luke 9:51-10:16; Fall AD 29)

The Lord Jesus went secretly up to Jerusalem via Samaria for the Feast of Succoth (Tabernacles) in the Fall of AD 29. [I am assuming an AD 30 crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem]. This was the fastest, yet potentially more dangerous route to Jerusalem from Galilee. Josephus describes the route via Samaria as being “for rapid travel, it was essential to take that route, by which Jerusalem may be reached in three days from Galilee” (

Life 269; LCL 1:101). The route was dangerous because of the hatred between the Jews and Samaritans.

Josephus records elsewhere: “Hatred also arose between the Samaritans and the Jews for the following reason. It was the custom of the Galileans at the time of a festival to pass through the Samaritan territory on their way to the Holy City. On one occasion, while they were passing through, certain inhabitants of a village called Ginae, which was situated on the border between Samaria and the Great Plain, joined battle with the Galileans and slew a great number of them” (

Antiquities 20:118; LCL 10:63. In

Wars 2:232; LCL 2:415, only one Galilean was killed at Gema). The site of Ginae / Gema was known in the Bible as Ein-Gannin (Josh. 19:21) and it situated at modern day Jenin on the edge of the Plain of Esdraelon.

More than likely the Lord Jesus took advantage of the locale to remind His disciples of past Israelite history. As they crossed the Plain of Esdraelon, He pointed westward to the Carmel Range and recounted the

encounter between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (II Kings 18). After being rejected in the first Samaritan village (Jenin), two disciples, James and John ("the sons of thunder"), recalled the lesson and said, "

Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" (Luke 9:54). The disciples had heard the lesson, but failed to grasp the true meaning and application for their lives.

A little further on the road, the Lord Jesus instructed His disciples on the cost of discipleship. One disciple volunteered to follow the Lord wherever He went, but requested to first say farewell to his family. The Lord Jesus responded, "

No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God" (9:62). In September, one would notice the Samaritan farmer out plowing his field in order to get it ready for the fall planting.

As they walked further on the road, Jesus noticed only a small number of farmers out in the olive groves harvesting the olives. Jesus made an analogy to a spiritual harvest when He said, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest" (10:2). The chronology is important at this point. The grain harvest is in May and June and is the one Jesus refers to in John 4:35. But the harvest Jesus had in mind is in the fall, thus the olive harvest. He also reiterates the woes against Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (10:13-16) to the Galilean pilgrims that were

in the caravan heading for Jerusalem. Jesus had given these same woes more than a year earlier in Capernaum (Matt. 11:20-24).

The Feast of Succoth (Tabernacles) in Jerusalem (John 7:14-10:21)

The Lord Jesus arrived in Jerusalem about the middle of the Feast of Succoth. It was during this time He taught in the Temple and had a heated discussion with the Pharisees. He forgave the woman taken in adultery and well as healed a man who was born blind. Lord records nothing of the events that transpired in Jerusalem for the Feast of Succoth.

After the Feast of Succoth in Jerusalem / Bethany (Luke 10:17-11:13, or 12:53)

Jesus, along with His twelve disciples, probably enjoyed the hospitality of Lazarus, Mary and Martha in Bethany while awaiting the return of the seventy disciples that Jesus had sent out to Peraea just prior to Succoth (Luke 10:1). When they did return, they rejoiced that the demons were subject to them. Jesus had to put things in proper perspective and admonished them to not rejoice in the demons being subject to them, but rather, that their names were written in heaven (10:17-20).

The parable of the Good Samaritan (10:23-37) was probably given in the Temple area, maybe even on the “Rabbinic stairs” at the southern entrance of the Temple enclosure. Jesus used the Roman road from Jerusalem to Jericho to illustrate the answer to the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” A certain man was going down to Jericho (a 1,000 meter elevation change) and fell among robbers. The rugged terrain of the Wilderness of Judea

would be an ideal place for bandits to hide in order to ambush unsuspecting travelers. The priests and Levites would be on this road because they were either going to, or coming from their Temple duties. The rabbinic sources indicate that Jericho was largely inhabited by priests during the Second Temple period.

The “certain village” (10:32) where Mary and Martha resided was Bethany (cf. John 11). The Lord Jesus was praying in a “certain place” when His disciples asked Him to instruct them in prayer (11:1). There is an early church tradition that Jesus instructed His disciples on the Mount of Olives. Today, the Pater Noster Church preserves this tradition with over 65 tiled panels with the Lord’s Prayer in different languages. It should be pointed out that this instruction is different than the Lord’s Prayer given in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 6 more than a year and a half earlier. That may be a reflection of the disciple’s short memory!

The First Peraean Ministry (Luke 11:14, or 12:54 - 13:33, note 13:22)

Professor M. Avi-Yonah describes Peraea, the territory east of the Jordan River, as a “long and comparatively narrow stretch of land, extending from Amathus in the north to Machaerus and the River Arnon in the south. Narrow at its northern and southern ends, it widened in the middle where it bordered with Philadelphia. ... The fertility of the Jordan Valley meant that settlements were close to each other and hence the units of administration were fairly small. Peraea faced the district of Jericho and parts of Samaria on the west. ... Its importance was that it provided a strip of Jewish

territory east of the Jordan which could be regarded as being almost in touch with Jewish Galilee. Consequently Jews who wished to avoid the 'contamination' of passing through the country of the Samaritans were able to approach Jerusalem by way of Peraea, crossing opposite Jericho and then going up to Jerusalem ...” (1974:1:96-97).

In the first phase of Jesus' Peraean ministry there are a few chronological and geographical indicators that should be pointed out. Jesus instructs the multitudes regarding the “signs of the times” when He says, “

When you see a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming'; and so it is” (12:54). This is a reference to the “former (or early) rains” that begin soon after the Feast of Succoth. Probably at the northern most point of Peraea, Jesus turned around and headed back towards Jerusalem, thus the statement: “And He went through the cities and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem” (13:22). As this phase of His Peraean ministry drew to a close, some Pharisees warned Jesus, probably opposite Jericho in Peraea, that Herod Antipas wanted to kill Him (13:31). This statement could only have been made in the territory controlled by Herod Antipas, i.e. Galilee or Peraea. Galilee should be ruled out because He sets His location as two and a half days from Jerusalem (13:33).

The Festival of Hanukkah in Jerusalem (Luke 13:34-14:33; John 10:22-39; December AD 29)

The Lord Jesus visited Jerusalem for the Festival of Hanukkah during the winter of AD 29. This feast was a memorial to the purification and rededication of the

Temple by Judas Maccabeus on Kislev 25, 165 BC (Franz 1998:91, 92).

In John's Gospel, Jesus walked into the Temple, in Solomon's porch on the outer fringes of the Temple enclosure. Here, the religious leaders surrounded the Lord Jesus and asked Him to tell them plainly whether He was the Messiah or not (10:24). Jesus answered, "

I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (10:25-27). Luke describes what takes place after this rejection. Jesus said, "

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'" (13:34, 35). This was the last time Jesus would be in Jerusalem until He returned for His "Final Week". On "Palm Sunday" of Passion Week, the crowd quoted Psalm 118:26, "

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" in fulfillment of Jesus' words four months prior (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13).

While in Jerusalem for Hanukkah, Jesus gives two parables concerning banquets. One concerns the taking of the lowly place (Luke 14:7-14) and the second is the parable of the Great Supper. The setting or backdrop for these parables could be any of the palatial structures in

the Upper City of Jerusalem, some excavated by Nahman Avigad in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City (1980:95-120). After Hanukkah John records that Jesus went “ beyond the Jordan to the place where John was baptizing at first and there He stayed” (10:40). This began the second phase of His Peraean ministry.

The Second Peraean Ministry (Luke 14:34-17:10; John 10:40-42; Winter AD 30)

The Lord Jesus went to Peraea via Jericho. This route is reflected in the reference to salt (Luke 14:34, 35) which would be in abundance in the area because of the Dead Sea. Also the reference to the audience of the three parables that followed: the parable of the lost sheep, coin and sons. Jesus was addressing tax-collectors that would be living in border cities. Jericho was the first city one came to as they entered Judea from Peraea. This locale also provides the setting for the parable of the lost sheep. In this parable, Jesus states, “

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?” (15:4). The Judean Wilderness, which Jesus and His disciples passed through on the way to Jericho, would be fresh in the minds of His disciples and well known to the audience of tax-collectors in Jericho. Jesus had told a similar story several months earlier in Capernaum (Matt. 18:11-14). In the Galilean setting He talked about the sheep being lost in the mountains. Jesus used the same illustration but adapted it to fit the locale where He was speaking.

From this vantage point in Jericho, the Lord Jesus could also point south toward the community that resided at

Qumran when He gave the parable of the unjust steward (16:1-13). In this parable, Jesus makes reference to the “sons of light” (16:8) which, according to the sectarian literature from Qumran, was one of the designations of the inhabitants of Qumran (Flusser 1988: 150-168).

Jesus could also point to Macherus, the summer palace of Herod Antipas in Peraea, when He spoke about divorce (16:18). Within the past year, Herod Antipas had divorced his Nabatean wife and married another divorcee, Herodias. It was here John the Baptizer [Remember, John was not a Baptist, he was a Jew] was beheaded for standing for the truth and condemning Herod for his actions (Mark 6:18; Hoehner 1980: 110-171).

In the account of the rich man and Lazarus, Jericho would be the ideal setting for this event (Luke 16:19-31). Lazarus was begging near the palatial structures that were near Herodian Jericho (2001:40-63).

The Raising of Lazarus in Bethany (John 11:1-53)

After hearing the news of the sickness of His friend Lazarus, [a different Lazarus than the one mentioned in Luke 16], Jesus waited two days before returning to Judea. His disciples warned Him of the possible impending danger that waited Him if He went to Jerusalem. On this occasion, Jesus goes to Bethany, on the back side of the Mount of Olives, and raises Lazarus from the dead. As a result, the religious establishment plotted to put Jesus to death (11:53).

The Retreat to Ephraim (John 11:54-57)

Jesus withdrew to Ephraim, modern day Taiyibeh, some 20 miles (according to Eusebius, but 12 ½ miles as the crow flies) north of Jerusalem to remain in seclusion with His disciples. From Taiyibeh, one could see the range of the Mount of Olives and any movement toward Ephraim if the religious establishment wanted to find Jesus in order to do Him harm. Situated on the edge of the Wilderness of Ephraim sometimes afforded the Lord Jesus the opportunity of solitude and preparation for the Passion Week to follow.

The Last Journey to Jerusalem for the Passover via the Jezreel Valley and Peraea (Luke 17:11-19:27; Matt. 19:1-20:34; Mark 10:1-52)

Rather than going directly into Jerusalem from Ephraim, Jesus went through Samaria to join up with the Galilean pilgrims, probably near Scythopolis (ancient Beth Shan) heading to Jerusalem via Peraea. Luke 17:11 is the pivotal passage in this regards. It states: “

Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee.” Plummer grasps the geographical significance of this passage. He states, “It means ‘through what lies between.’ i.e. along the frontier, or simply, ‘between.’ ... ‘Through the midst of Samaria and Galilee’ would imply that Jesus was moving from Jerusalem, whereas we are expressly told that He was journeying towards it. Samaria, being on the right, would naturally be mentioned first if He was going eastward along the frontier between Samaria and Galilee possibly by the route which ends at Bethshean, near the Jordan” (1981:403). Somewhere in the Jezreel Valley

was a “certain village” where ten lepers begged the Lord Jesus to heal them. One of these lepers was a Samaritan who returned and thanked the Lord Jesus for healing him (Luke 17:11-19).

At this point the Synoptic gospels pick up each other and follow the Lord Jesus to Jerusalem. One “apparent contradiction”, concerning the healing of the blind man (men) near Jericho, should be discussed at this point (Matt. 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-32; Luke 18:35-43).

Matthew records that two blind men were healed as they left Jericho. Mark mentions only one as they left Jericho. Luke seems to contradict this by saying there was only one who was healed as Jesus entered Jericho. If there were two men healed, then there is at least one man who was healed. Matthew, for his purposes, mentions that there were two. The real problem lies with “leaving” and “entering” Jericho. Edersheim in his monumental *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* comments on this problem with these words, “But, in regards to the other divergence, as trifling as it is, that St. Luke places the incident at the arrival, the other two evangelists at the departure of Jesus from Jericho, it is better to admit our inability to conciliate these differing notes of time, than to make the clumsy attempts at harmonizing them. We can readily believe that there may have been circumstances unknown to us, which might show these statements to be not really diverging” (1976:II:355). I believe the solution to the problem is now at hand. Based on what we know about Jericho in the Second Temple period we can conclude there were two Jericho’s, one which was populated by Jews and the other by Romans. The Jewish city of Jericho was under the modern town of Jericho, near the city

square. Herodian Jericho is situated 1 ½ kilometers to the west on the Roman road leading up to Jerusalem. This was the royal winter place of Herod the Great and was surrounded by villas of the wealthy. The event which follows the healing of the blind man in Luke's gospel is Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus. He lived in Herodian Jericho because he was a very wealthy man as well as a tax collector. He would not have lived in Jewish Jericho.

The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-44; Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; John 12:12-19; Sunday, April 2, AD 30)

All four gospels record the triumphal entry into Jerusalem by the Lord Jesus on "Palm Sunday", thus ended His "Final Journey" to Jerusalem. This week was the most important week in the history of humanity, for it was in this week that the Lord Jesus suffered for the sins of the entire world and rose triumphantly from the grave three days later. It was because of this cross work that He could offer salvation, a home in heaven, His righteousness to any and all who would put their trust in Him alone as their Savior (John 3:16; Eph. 3:8, 9; Phil. 3:9).

Concluding Thoughts

I have attempted to harmonize the last six months in the Life of the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the accounts in the Luke "travel narrative" as well as the Gospel of John. The critics failed to understand the importance of Luke 9:51, thinking that the final destination intended was Jerusalem. As a result of this misunderstanding they saw geographical problems in the narrative. If we

correctly understand the phrase “received up” to refer to the ascension of the Lord Jesus to heaven, the text would allow three or four journeys to Jerusalem that finally ended in the Passion Week and Luke ends his gospel with the ascension of the Lord Jesus from Bethany into Heaven. That, and only that, was the final goal of His journey!

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The Mystery of Godliness Hymn

(I Tim. 3:14-16)

Introduction

At the beginning of the second century AD, during the reign of Emperor Trajan, Christians were being persecuted for their faith. Pliny the Younger, the imperial representative in Bithynia and Pontus (just below the Black Sea in northern Turkey) from AD 111-113, wrote a letter back to the emperor asking for advice on what to do about the number of Christians being executed for their faith. In one of the letters he wrote that the Christians met “regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to be a god” (

Letters 10:96:7; LCL 2:289). Eusebius of Caesarea, an early church historian, wrote about this incident in AD 325. He quoted Pliny as saying “they rose at dawn to sing to Christ as though a God” (

Ecclesiastical History 3:33; LCL 1:277). Pliny’s perception of Jesus was not accurate because Jesus is God manifest in human flesh!

More than likely, one of the hymns that they chanted or sang in their services was I Timothy 3:16.

God was manifest in the flesh,

Justified in the Spirit,

Seen by angels,

Preached among the Gentiles,

Believed on in the world,

Received up in glory.

This hymn summarizes in six lines the earthly life and ministry of the Lord Jesus from His Incarnation to the Ascension.

The Context of First Timothy

Paul has been released from his first imprisonment in Rome (ca. AD 62) and is on his fourth missionary journey. He wrote his son in the faith, Timothy, from Macedonia (I Tim. 1:3) advising him to stay in Ephesus and await his arrival (2:14). In his first epistle to Timothy, he instructs him on how to conduct himself “in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (3:15). Paul warns Timothy about heresy that has crept into the church (1:3-11). He also instructs him about the importance of prayer and the role of women in the church (2:1-15). Leadership in the church was of utmost importance in dealing with these situations, so he sets forth the qualification of the only two church officers: elders and deacons (3:1-13).

Paul stated that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (3:15). One of those truths is the “mystery of godliness” (3:16a), which Paul conveyed in the form of a hymn.

In the beginning of chapter 4, Paul gives a warning from the Spirit that in the latter times “some will depart from the faith” (4:1) which involves the “mystery of godliness” concerning the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul penned these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and said they were

“without controversy.” In other words, these were foundational truths that everyone should agree on.

What is the Mystery of Godliness?

The Apostle Paul, when he described the “mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4), also set forth a definition of a mystery. He wrote that it is a truth “which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (3:5). In other words, it is a Biblical truth that is revealed for the first time by the Holy Spirit.

One scholar commented: “The mystery of godliness is Christ Himself; that godliness, hidden in ages past, has now been revealed, and is seen not to be an abstract ideal, a mere attribute of a personality, but actually a person, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Massinger 1939: 481). He went on to say that: “The mystery of godliness was manifested in the flesh, not a burning bush, not in a pillar of cloud alone, but in actual human flesh” (1939: 483).

This mystery is put in the form of a hymn so people can sing it and remember it. Let us examine each of the six lines of this powerful hymn proclaiming the Person, earthly life and work of the Lord Jesus.

God was Manifested in the Flesh

The Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is one of the foundational doctrinal truths of the Christian Church. This song begins, “

God was manifested in the flesh.”

There is a discussion among textual critics whether the word “God” is in the original text of I Tim. 3:16, or if it’s

the Greek word “Who” or “He”. The overwhelming testimony of the Early Church Fathers, based on the manuscripts that they had in their possession, is that the word “Theos” (God) was the word originally penned by the Apostle Paul (Miller 1979: 137).

Even if the word “Who” was in the original manuscript, to whom is the pronoun referring too? In the preceding verse, there are three nouns: “the church,” “the Living God,” and “the truth.” Which one is in grammatical agreement with the masculine pronoun “Who”? The nouns “church” and “truth” can be ruled out because they are feminine. Thus leaving the masculine noun “living God” to be in grammatical agreement with the masculine pronoun “Who.” “Thus, it can be safely concluded that ‘the living God’ is the direct antecedent of the ‘who,’ and could read, ‘The living God ... who was manifest in flesh’” (Rowell 1957: 76). Either way, God was manifested in the flesh!

In one line, the Apostle Paul sets forth the great doctrinal truth of the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ – God took on human flesh. Theologians call this the “Hypostatic Union” because perfect humanity was united with undiminished deity, and joined in one Person forever. This is a truth our finite minds might find hard to grasp, yet it is clearly taught in the Scriptures.

The dual nature of Christ – fully God and fully man, is attested to in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament. The prophet Zechariah describes the return of the LORD (Yahweh) to the earth at the end of the Tribulation period. In chapter 12, he predicted that the LORD would fight for Jerusalem. In verse 10, he says, “

And I [the LORD, Yahweh] will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication [the Holy Spirit]; then they will look upon Me [the LORD, Yahweh] whom they have pierced; they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.” When was the LORD (Yahweh) pierced? The piercing of the LORD was outside the walls of Jerusalem in AD 30 when the Lord Jesus was crucified on Calvary’s cross in order to pay for all our sins (John 19:33-37). The Apostle John wrote at the beginning of the Revelation of Jesus Christ: “

Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen” (1:7). John confirmed the words of Zechariah that one day, the people of Israel will recognize their Messiah when He returns to earth.

The Eighth century BC prophet Isaiah sets forth the dual nature of the Messiah in the “Immanuel section” of his book (Isaiah 7-12). He predicted that Messiah, the Lord Jesus, would be born of a virgin in Isaiah 7:14. The Gospel writer Matthew quotes this passage in the account of the birth of the Lord Jesus and said: “

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us’” (1:22, 23). This was fulfilled when Jesus dwelt among men and walked upon the earth (John 1:14; I John 1:1-2).

A few chapters later, Isaiah predicted, “

For unto us a Child is born [His temporal humanity],
Unto us a Son is given [His eternal deity]" (9:6a). A few
lines later, Immanuel is called the Mighty God. The
Apostle John begins his gospel, "

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with
God, and the Word was God [His deity]. ...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us [His
humanity], and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the
only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:1,
14).

The dual nature of the Lord Jesus is seen in John chapter
4. In His deity, His omniscience knew all that the
Samaritan women had done (4:16-18, 29), yet in His
humanity, He thirsted for water (4:7). In chapter 11, it
was His omnipotence that raised Lazarus from the dead,
yet in His humanity, He wept over the death of His
friend (11:30).

The Book of Hebrews demonstrates the superiority of
the Lord Jesus, and His sacrifice for sins, over the
sacrificial system of the Temple in Jerusalem. In chapter
1, the deity of the Lord Jesus is set forth and in chapter
2, His humanity. In chapter 1, it is written; "

But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever
and ever'" (1:8, quoting from Psalm 45:6). Yet in chapter
2, a commentary on the humanity of the Lord Jesus from
Psalm 8 is given: "

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the
angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory
and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste
death for everyone" (2:9).

The Scriptures set forth at least eight reasons why God became a man in the Person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The first reason is to reveal God to man (John 1:1, 14, 18). The second, is to reveal a Perfect Man as an example for believers to follow when going through persecution (I Peter. 2:21). The third reason is to provide a sacrifice for sins (Heb. 10:1-10). The fourth reason is that He destroyed the work of Satan (John 16:11; Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:14; I John 3:8). The fifth reason was to fulfill the Davidic Covenant (II Samuel 7:10-16; Luke 1:31-33; Rev. 19:16). The sixth and seventh reasons are so that He could be both a Prophet (Deut. 18:15-18) and High Priest (Heb. 2:16, 17; 7:1-8:1; 9:11, 12, 24). The final reason is so that He could shed His blood for the remission of sins (Heb. 9:22). For a full discussion of some of these points, see Thiessen 1974: 289-294.

The third reason (a sacrifice for sins) and last reason (shed His blood for the remission of sins) are why Christians remember the Lord Jesus at the Lord's Supper. Only God manifest in human flesh could be the perfect, sinless sacrifice for all our sins and offer us the free gift of eternal life when we put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Sin-Bearer Savior (I Peter 1:18,19; John 3:16; Eph. 2:8,9; I John 5:13). Have you trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as the One who died to pay for all your sins and rose again from the dead three days later in order to prove that sin had been paid for?

Justified in the Spirit

The second line of the Mystery of Godliness Hymn is that He was "justified in the Spirit." Martin Massinger comments: "The justification referred to here is obviously not theological justification such as Paul

discusses in the epistle of Romans. The Lord Jesus Christ, the spotless Lamb of God, God Himself, needs not to be justified. He is 'holy, guileless, undefiled, separate from sinners' (Heb. 7:26). But His holiness, His absolute sinlessness, His deity needed to be vindicated" (Massinger 1939: 483). He was vindicated by the Spirit at His baptism, temptation in the Wilderness, during His public ministry and Resurrection from the dead.

At the baptism of the Lord Jesus, John the Baptizer (he was a Jew, not a Baptist!), was telling the people they need to repent (change their minds) for the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. When Jesus saw John baptizing in the Jordan River, probably near Jericho, He too was baptized in order to " fulfill all righteousness", i.e. to be identified with His people Israel (Matt. 3:15). As He was immersed into the water's of the Jordan River, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended in the form of a dove and a voice from Heaven said, "

This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21, 22). The entire Triune God was present at the baptism of the Lord Jesus at the beginning of His earthly ministry and He was vindicated by the voice of the Father and the sign of the Holy Spirit.

Immediately after His baptism He was led by the Holy Spirit into the Wilderness (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1) where He was tested for forty days by the Devil. These tests were not to see if the Lord Jesus would sin, but to demonstrate that the Lord Jesus could not sin, would not sin, and did not sin, because in Him was no

sin (James 1:13; Heb. 4:15; II Cor. 5:21). During His public ministry “

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).

The ultimate vindication was at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The Apostle Paul wrote that the Lord Jesus was “born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness [the Holy Spirit], by the resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:3-4). The entire Triune God was involved in the resurrection of Jesus: the Father (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12), the Son (John 10:17, 18), and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11; I Pet. 3:18).

Seen by Angels

The third line of the Mystery of Godliness Hymn is that He was “seen by angels.” Paul wrote to the church at Colossae that the Lord Jesus is the Head of all principalities and power, which included the angelic beings (Col. 2:10).

They beheld Him even before the Incarnation. Isaiah records that in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw the LORD sitting on His throne. Above Him were seraphim (angelic beings) that were saying to one another: “

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:1-3). The Apostle John comments on this event and said, “

These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him [the Lord Jesus]” (John 12:41).

The angelic beings worship the Lord Jesus (Rev. 5:11, 12; Heb. 1:6; Phil. 2:9-11), yet Peter points out that angels desired to look into His sufferings and glories, but they could never appropriate it for themselves (I Pet. 1:12).

They are also the silent spectators in the Church as they observe the different roles of the men and women (I Cor. 11:10), yet one day believers will judge the angels (I Cor. 6:3).

The book of Hebrews declared that the Lord Jesus was made a little lower than the angels while He walked among men (Heb. 2:9). Even then, the angels observed Him.

The Angel Gabriel informed Mary that she would have a Child by the Holy Spirit and He would be the Savior of the world (Luke 1:26-38). An angel confirmed to Joseph that the Child that Mary was carrying was of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20). At the birth of the Lord Jesus, the angels announced the glad tidings of His birth. The heavenly hosts praised God by saying: “

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:8-14).

After the Lord Jesus was tested by the Devil for forty days, to prove that He could not sin, did not sin, and would not sin, the Devil departed from Him and the angels came and ministered to Him (Matt. 4:11).

As the Lord Jesus agonized in Gethsemane, He prayed: “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” An angel came from heaven to strengthen Him in this trying time (Matt. 22:42, 43). Yet at the crucifixion, there were no

angels to strengthen Him. This event He had to bear alone. Just prior to going to Golgotha, Jesus had said to the chief priests that the time had come for the power of darkness. This seems to imply that Satan and his hoards were at the crucifixion (Luke 22:53). Yet it was at the Cross where Jesus triumphed over them and they were defeated (Col. 2:15).

An earthquake occurred at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and an angel of the Lord rolled back the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb. As he sat on it, the women appeared at the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. The angel reassured them that Jesus was not there because “

He is raised as He said. Come; see the place where the Lord lay” (Matt. 28:2-6; Luke 24:1-6).

Forty days after the resurrection, the Lord Jesus took His disciples to the backside of the Mount of Olives and there He ascended into Heaven. As He went up, two men in white apparel (apparently angels) said: “

Men of Galilee, why do you stand here gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into Heaven” (Acts 1:9-11). When the Lord Jesus returns to the Mount of Olives at His second advent after the seven year period of Tribulation (Zech. 14:4, 5), He will come with His saints (the Church) and the angels who will gather His elect (the believing remnant of Israel that survives the Great Tribulation) from the four corners of the earth (Matt. 24:31; 25:31; II Thess. 1:7).

He was seen by angels and they had an important role in His earthy life and ministry.

Preached Among the Gentiles

The fourth line of the Mystery of Godliness Hymn was that He was “preached among the Gentiles.” Jesus’ primary ministry was to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel”, i.e a Jewish ministry (Matt. 10:6; Matt. 15:24). Yet He did have a ministry to Gentiles in order to teach His kosher Jewish disciples that God loved the world and that salvation was for all, Jew and Gentile alike.

Over the forty days between the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and His Ascension, He gave the “Great Commission” (to go into all the world) on at least four occasions (Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15, 16; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8). After Pentecost, these kosher disciples started in Jerusalem, then over time went to Judea and Samaria, and eventually spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth reaching three distinctive ethnic groups: Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles.

Early in Jesus’ ministry He had a visit from Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This very learned man knew Jesus was a teacher sent from God. Jesus explained to him how he could be “born again” (from above) and then made a very profound statement for a Jewish mind. He said: “

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God’s love was not just for one nation, but for all people in the entire world.

This was true in the Hebrew Scriptures as well. Jonah and the salvation of the people of Nineveh is a good example. God sent Jonah to preach to the wicked people

of Nineveh, but instead, Jonah went in the opposite direction in order to get as far away from God as possible (or so he thought!, cf. Ps. 139:7-9). After being swallowed by a great fish, Jonah came to his senses and went to Nineveh. His message was short and to the point: “

Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). The king repented and issued a decree for all in the city to do the same. Thus God relented from His planned destruction. Jonah protested and said to God: “

I know You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm” (4:2). Jonah went outside the city to wait for the fireworks. He wanted to see God zap the city! But because the people repented, God relented. Jonah could not rejoice in God’s love for those wicked people who turned to Him.

Israel was to be a light unto the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6), a task that they failed at many times. From the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, His heart was set on the evangelization of the world! His strategy was to start with Israel, because they knew the Scriptures, and then go from there to the Gentiles.

In His public and private ministry, the Lord Jesus came in contact with individual Gentiles. According to Eusebius, one of the church Fathers, the woman with the issue of blood twelve years was a pagan from Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48;

Eccl. Hist.7:18; LCL 2: 175-177). The centurion in Capernaum was a Gentile (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10).

The Syro-Phonician woman from Tyre was also a Gentile (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30).

In the travels of the Lord Jesus, He left Jewish territory on at least three occasions in order to minister in Gentile territory. The first recorded trip is after the rejection by the religious leaders and the (false) accusation that He did His miracles by the power of Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15). He gave the parables of the Kingdom from a boat just off shore of the Sea of Galilee to the west of Capernaum (Matt. 13; Mark 4; Luke 8). That evening, He took His disciples to “the other side” (a code name for Gentile territory). This is a major refocus in Jesus’s ministry. He there institutes the Gentile phase of His ministry. On the way over, they encounter a violent windstorm, but eventually land at the harbor of the Decapolis city of Gadera (Kibbutz Ha’on; Franz 1991:114-116). The welcome reception was lead by two demoniacs from Gadera (Matt. 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39). Jesus casts the demons out of these individuals and into a herd of swine. The Gentiles of the Decapolis ask Jesus to leave their territory. Before He does, one of the demoniacs “sits at the feet of Jesus,” in essence, asking Him if He will make him one of His disciple (Luke 8:35). He instructs the demoniac to go tell the people in the Decapolis what great things the “Lord” (Mark 5:19) and “God” (Luke 8:39) had done for him. The born-again demoniac had a correct Christology because He went and told everybody what great things JESUS had done for him (Mark 5:20; Luke 8:39)! The demoniac’s ministry in the Decapolis would lay the foundation for Jesus ministry in the Decapolis later on.

After this, Jesus sends His twelve disciples “to the lost sheep of the House of Israel” (Matt. 10). He instructs them not to go via the roads of the Gentiles, nor enter Samaritan cities. His purpose for limiting the disciples activities to Jewish people was so He could set forth a principle that Paul would state years later in Romans 1:16. The gospel should go “to the Jews first, and then the Gentiles.” After this mission, the disciples returned to Capernaum before Passover and Jesus “debriefed” them in a deserted place near Bethsaida. The crowds follow and Jesus ended up feeding 5,000 men plus women and children (Matt. 14:15-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14).

At this point there is another subtle refocus in Jesus ministry. From this point on, He tried to avoid the crowds. He knew His “hour had not yet come”, but He also knew that He had one year to train the Twelve before His death and resurrection. He spends time with them privately in order to prepare them for their mission to the world after His ascension.

His second trip to Gentile territory was sometime after Passover of AD 29. Jesus took His disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). While in Tyre, a Syro-Phoenician woman begs Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. The conversation that follows is interesting. At the beginning, Jesus is silent. He wanted to see what His disciples would do. They in turn wanted Jesus to send her away. He finally says, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The woman then worshiped Him. Jesus turns to her and says, “

O woman, great is your faith” (Matt. 15:28).

Jesus kept silent and then said what He said to this woman in order to get her to express her faith in Him in front of the disciples. He even commends her for her faith. Jesus deliberately does this so the disciples could see that salvation was for the Gentiles as well. After this encounter, He immediately took His disciples back to the Decapolis region (Gentile territory) and ministered there.

The visit to the Decapolis is the third time Jesus visits Gentile territory. This event, in my understanding, took place at the “Kursi church” on the east side of the Sea of Galilee and on the southern side of the Wadi Samek (Franz 1991:117-120). During the Second Temple period, this was the border between the Decapolis to the south and Phillips territory of Gaulanitus to the north.

In the Decapolis, the demoniac from Gadera had faithfully proclaimed what Jesus had done for him. When Jesus arrived, He healed many Gentiles who were lame, blind, mute, and maimed (Matt. 15:29-31; Mark 7:31-37). Interestingly, Matthew points out that these Gentiles “glorified the God of Israel” (Matt. 15:31). [Mark does not mention this]. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience, demonstrating that Jesus was the fulfillment of the all that the prophets spoke and wrote about in the Hebrew Scriptures, wanting to “provoke Israel to jealousy”. Paul had the same thought in Romans 11:11-14. Jesus instructed the Gentiles of the Decapolis to “tell no one” of the incident, yet they proclaimed the message of the Lord Jesus widely (Mark 7:35), presumably among the Gentiles!

He then had compassion on the multitude after hearing Him for three days, so He fed them from seven loaves of

bread and some sardines (Matt. 15:32-39; Mark 9:1-9). The demoniac of Gadera, the first Gentile missionary to the Gentiles in the New Testament, had been a very effective evangelist.

Jesus may not have had an extensive ministry among the Gentiles, but He did have a ministry to them and they continued it. He was trying to get His “kosher” disciples to see that salvation was for the entire world, including the Gentiles.

Believed on in the world

The fifth line of the Mystery of Godliness Hymn is that He was “believed on in the world.” God’s only condition for salvation is to “believe.” The concept of “belief” in the New Testament is to trust in, rely upon, or depend upon the Lord Jesus Christ, as God manifest in human flesh, who died for sin and rose again from the dead three days later, all according to the Scriptures (I Cor. 15:3, 4). During the Old Testament period, a person received salvation “with a credit card”, i.e., one would trust now and someone else would pay for it later. In other words, a person would trust that God would provide the sacrifice that would take away their sins. The One who eventually paid for sin completely was the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. After the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, a person gets a “gift certificate” for salvation. The Lord Jesus has already paid for all sin, so all a person has to do is to accept a “gift certificate” salvation, i.e., put their trust in the Lord Jesus as Savior (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 4:5; I John 5:13).

The Apostle John tells us why he wrote his gospel. “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these

[signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:30, 31). The purpose was to bring people to faith in the Lord Jesus. John does that by recording a number of miracles that Jesus did and the reaction of the people who saw these signs.

Jesus’s disciples (students) believed on Him after they saw Him turn the water into wine (or grape juice, depending on your theology!) at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:11). Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, apparently came to faith when he met Jesus at night in Jerusalem (John 3:1-21), but keeps it a secret until after the death of the Lord Jesus (7:50-52; 19:39).

A Samaritan woman from the village of Sychar came to faith near a well dug by the Patriarch Jacob, and then she went to tell all her friends in the village about Jesus. Many of them trusted Christ as the Savior of the world (John 4:5-45). A nobleman’s son was sick in Capernaum. He traveled to Cana of Galilee to seek the help of the Lord Jesus. He believed as well (John 4:46-54).

Gentiles also came to faith. One could tell of the centurion who built the synagogue of Capernaum for the people of the city (Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) and the Syro-Phonician woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30).

Many people believed on Him in the Temple during the Feast of Succoth (Tabernacles) in AD 29 (John 8:30). Many people who saw and heard of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, believed (John 11:45). Secretly, some rulers of the Jewish people trusted Jesus as their Messiah (John 14:42).

The purpose of God being manifest in human flesh was so that He could “ give His life a ransom for

many" (Mark 10:45) and bring many to faith in Himself. He was believed on in the world.

Received up in Glory

The final line of the Mystery of Godliness Hymn is that he was "received up in glory." The Lord Jesus left the glories and splendors of Heaven and lived among sinful human beings in a corrupt and fallen world. After His death on the Cross in order to pay for the sins of all humanity, He returned to Heaven. His being "received up in glory" refers to His ascension into Heaven.

Dr. Luke records that "when the time had come for Him to be received up, that he steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). Dr. David Gooding, a noted Septuagint scholar, commented on this verse. "We should at once notice carefully what the goal of the journey is said to be. It is sometimes stated on the basis of 9:51 that our Lord's goal on this journey was Jerusalem. But that is not so. Our Lord's journey certainly lay via Jerusalem; but the goal of the journey was what Luke here describes as 'being received up'. The phrase has the sense as that given it by the early Christians hymn quoted by Paul (I Tim. 3:16) which says that Christ 'was believed on in the world, received up in glory'. In other words by 'being received up' Luke is referring to Christ's ascension into heaven. That and no less was the goal of the journey" (1987:179).

The Ascension of the Lord Jesus from the back side of the Mount of Olives, near Bethany, is recorded by John Mark and Dr. Luke (Mark 16:19, 20; Luke 24:49-53; Acts 1:6-11). This was the grand seal to His work of redemption.

The ascension was important because the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus, gave gifted individuals to the Church, His Body. The book of Ephesians arrived in Ephesus a year or so before Paul's first epistle to Timothy, so he and the church at Ephesus were well familiar with the practical importance of this doctrinal truth. “

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men ' [a quotation from Ps. 68:18].

(Now this, 'He ascended'

- what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying [building up, spiritually and numerically] of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:7-12).

A psalm that has been attributed to the ascension of the Lord Jesus to Heaven is Psalm 24. The last few verses state:

“Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is the King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is the King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory. Selah” (24: 7-10).

At His ascension, the Lord Jesus returned to the glories of Heaven as the Conquering King of Glory and the LORD of Hosts because of His death on the Cross. There on the Cross, He paid for all sin, vanquished death and defeated Satan.

In the Upper Room Discourse (John 12-14), the Lord Jesus said to His disciples: “

Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out” (John 12:31). Later, on the Temple Mount, He said that the Spirit was going to “convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. ... Of judgment because the ruler of this world is judged” (John 16: 8, 11).

On the Cross, He made His last triumphant cry: “

It is finished” (John 19:30). The cry was actually one word in Greek and it was a legal term for a bill, or debt that had been fully paid. All the sin of the entire world had been laid upon Him and paid in full (I John 2:2). The death of the Lord Jesus satisfied the justice of a holy God so any and all who put their trust in the Lord Jesus would be given God’s righteousness, the forgiveness of sins, a home in Heaven and the free gift of eternal life (Romans 3:25; I John 2:2).

The Apostle John wrote:

“For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the Devil” (I John 3:8), which He did on the Cross. To the Colossian believers, Paul wrote:

“Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in

it" (2:15). Satan and his dominion were defeated at the Cross. In Hebrews chapter 2, it is stated:

"Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the Devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (2:14, 15). Thus the Lord, mighty in battle, could enter the gates of Heaven a Conquering Victor because sin, death and Satan were defeated.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, some of whom questioned the importance of the resurrection, that " the last enemy that will be destroyed is death" (I Cor. 15:26). Because of His death and resurrection, the believer in the Lord Jesus has the same hope of ultimate victory over death and this should motive believers to faithful service. Paul continued: "

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' [A quotation from Isa. 25:8]. 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' [A quotation of Hosea 13:14].

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15: 54-58).

Applications

Why does Paul include this hymn in his epistle to Timothy? I believe he included it for three reasons. The first reason is directed at unbelievers who have not trusted the Lord Jesus as Savior. The second reason is so that believers can be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus. The final reason is to encourage the church to sing Christo-centric hymns.

First, the church, the pillar and ground of the truth, was entrusted with the hymn of the mystery of godliness which describes the Person, life, and work of the Lord Jesus. This hymn gave the purpose of His coming to earth. He was manifested in the flesh so that He could die and pay for sin and then be believed on in the world. The church was to share with a lost and dying world how they can be certain that their sins were forgiven, they could receive the righteousness of God, a home in Heaven and the free gift of eternal life. If a person would believe in (put their trust in) the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who died for their sins and rose again from the dead, God would be faithful to His promise to save that person and make them a child of God and Christ would dwell in them.

The second reason he included this hymn is to make the mystery of godliness practical in the life of the believer. The mystery of godliness is the Lord Jesus Himself. When a person comes to faith in the Lord Jesus, that individual is indwelt by the Godhead, including the Lord Jesus. Paul wrote to the Philippian believers, “

For me to live is Christ” (1:21). To the Colossian believers he stated, “

Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27).

One person observed: "Godliness is not being like God, or following our Great Example, or observing the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. Godliness is Christ in the life of a believer; or, to present a different angle, it is the Holy Spirit working His blessed fruit" (Massinger 1939: 485). Sometimes the manifestation of that godliness is hindered in the life of the believer because of the sin nature that causes believers to sin. Fortunately, we have an Advocate with the Father, the Lord Jesus, and we can confess our sins to Him and he will forgive us our sins (I John 1:5-2:2).

The believer has the indwelling Spirit of God that enables him/her to live a godly life, but Massinger goes on to observe, "Insofar as [the] gracious work of the Spirit is permitted to go unhindered by sin, the mystery of godliness is reveled in the experience of the believer. But this manifestation is never perfect, and the process is never complete in this life because of the presence and the opposition of the sinful nature" (1939: 489).

One day, at the redemption of our bodies, the believer in the Lord Jesus will be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:23, 29). This will occur when the Lord Jesus reveals Himself the second time, but until then, the hope of His return should led to godly living. The Apostle John wrote: "

Beloved, now are we the children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (I John 3:2, 3).

The third reason he includes this hymn is to give the church an example of a Christo-centric hymn that they

may pattern their singing after in the worship meeting. Paul admonishes the believers in Ephesus to be filled with the Spirit. The fruit of that is “ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (5:19). To the Colossian church he said: “

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (3:16). Are the hymns we sing in church “Christo-centric” or are they human-centered? Are they honoring to the Lord or glorifying human achievements? Are they doctrinally based or are they the touchy-feely, make me feel good kind of songs? A beautiful example of a Christo-centric hymn was composed by a publisher and book seller (not a theologian), Josiah Conder (1789-1855):

Thou art the Everlasting Word,
The Father's only Son;
God manifestly seen and heard,
And heaven's beloved One:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow,
In Thee most perfectly expressed
The Father's glories shine;
Of the full Deity possessed,
Eternally divine:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.

True image of the Infinite,
Whose essence is concealed;
Brightness of uncreated light;
The heart of God revealed:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.
But the high mysteries of Thy Name
An angel's grasp transcend;
The Father only – glorious claim! –
The son can comprehend:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.
Throughout the universe of bliss,
The center Thou, and sun;
Th' eternal theme of praise of this,
To Heav'n's beloved one:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.

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September 11, 2001: America in the "Valley of Decision"

On Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, a friend called and said, "Gordon, turn on the television, a plane has just crashed into the World Trade Center!" I was shocked and said, "Are you kidding me?" With urgency in her voice she said, "No!" I rushed down stairs and watched in horror as they replayed the video of the second plane hitting the Twin Towers and then saw the eventual collapse of both buildings.

As a nation, our hearts and prayers go out to the family and friends of those who perished in this horrific attack. We are also grateful to the men and women of the Port Authority, police, fire and emergency medical services, as well as the many volunteers, who risked their lives to evacuate and rescue the people trapped in the doomed and collapsed buildings. Words can not express our appreciation for the leadership shown by the mayor, governor, and president.

Six days later, on Monday afternoon, September 17, 2001, I crossed the upper level of the George Washington Bridge into New York City on my way to teach my classes at New York School of the Bible. It was a beautifully clear day and I took my usual look down the Hudson River in order to view the magnificent Manhattan skyline. But this time it was different, the Twin Towers were gone! It was an eerie experience.

King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, stated that God had "put eternity in the hearts" of human beings but they could not "find out the work of God from

beginning to end” (Eccl. 3:11). In other words, our God given desire is to ask why something happens and to seek the purpose or meaning of an event. Yet God has kept back the meaning or stated purpose of some things, seemingly so we will trust Him in our daily walk and learn to enjoy life because it is a gift from Him (Eccl. 3:13).¹ We will never fully know, this side of eternity, why an event like this tragic attack happened. Yet the Bible gives us clues to help us contemplate this event and use it to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of life.

The Ultimate Cause

The ultimate cause of this tragedy, like any violent and wicked action, is sin. Sin entered the world in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed a Holy God (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12). Since that point, the creation has been groaning as it waits for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:18-23).

As a result of the Fall, every human being, except the Lord Jesus (God manifest in the flesh), has been born a sinner (Ps. 51:5; Eph. 2:3; Jer. 17:9; cf. Heb. 4:15; 7:26; II Cor. 5:21). There are all kinds of sinners in this world, moral and immoral, as well as pious and evil, but we are all sinners (Rom. 3:23)!

One religious leader blamed this tragedy on civil libertarians, feminists, homosexuals, abortionists, the ACLU and liberal judges. If he thought this was God’s judgment then he was too selective in his list of sinners. He forgot to mention the adulterers, liars, murderers, the covetous idol worshippers that bow down to the altar of the Almighty Dollar, those who hate, as well as those who neglect the poor, and other such sinners (I Tim. 1:9,10; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5; Rev. 21:8). While it is

true, America is a nation of sinners (James 2:10), one must be careful not to presume the mind of God and say that this was His judgment. What we can say for sure is that some sinful people performed diabolical acts of wickedness against fellow human beings that led to destructive consequences for both righteous and unrighteous people. While God hates sin, He somehow allowed this evil to happen. But we must understand clearly that He was not the Author of this horrific act. His nature is to do only good but His nature also determines that He brings good out of evil (Ps. 5:4; Gen. 18:25; 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

One of the reasons Mr. bin Laden tried to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993 was because it was a fitting symbol of American (and Western) materialism and greed. In attacking what the terrorists said was a symbol of greed, they also sought to destroy the lives of people who were working or visiting these apparent monuments to all that the terrorists say was evil. The terrorists apparently see murder as less evil than greed. The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy who was ministering in Ephesus, the commercial center of Asia Minor, reminds us that the “love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (I Tim. 6:10). But the believer should never conclude, as the terrorists apparently do, that all those people working in the World Trade Center were greedy, covetous, lovers of money and materialistic. My assumption is that they were simply normal people from America and 63 other countries who were doing their jobs on what they thought was a normal day of the week. There certainly is a “spirit of materialism” in America and the World Trade Center may symbolize that spirit.

This time the terrorists attacked the chief financial and military centers of the United States. I am reminded of the proud King Uzziah and the people of Judah who emulated their king. Both were proud of their material possessions (II Chron. 26:6-8; Isa. 2:7a) and military might (II Chron. 26:9-15; Isa. 2:7b). Yet because of his heart being lifted up, Uzziah was struck with leprosy (II Chron. 26:16-19) and Judah was humbled by an earthquake (Isa. 2:19,21).² The principle that Solomon gave is borne out in Uzziah's experience: "Pride goes before destruction and the haughty spirit before the fall" (Prov. 16:18). We must at least wonder if this recent attack is God's way of humbling us, as individuals and as a nation, in order to bring believers back to Himself and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ and to present the unsaved with their need of salvation.

This tragedy might serve as a wake-up call to both America and to the world from a God who loves the world (John 3:16). America is far from a righteous nation, yet the Holy Spirit is doing His job of convicting men and women, boys and girls, of their sin (singular) of unbelief (John 16:8,9). Each individual must realize that he or she is a sinner and cannot save him or herself from the penalty of sin. The Lord Jesus, God manifest in human flesh, demonstrated the love of God for sinners by dying on the Cross of Calvary to pay for all our sins. Three days later He rose again from the dead to prove that all our sins had been paid for and He has conquered death. When people trust (believe) in the Lord Jesus Christ, God forgives their sins, gives them His righteousness and these believers can know for certain that they have a home in Heaven (John 3:16; 6:47; Acts 4:12; 13:38,39; 16:31; Rom. 5:8; II Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9; I

John 5:13). The gift of eternal life has been and is freely given by God to all who put their trust in His Son and not any merits or works of their own (Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8,9; Tit. 3:5).

Unfortunately the hijackers/terrorists were tragically misinformed by their religious indoctrination which says that if they were martyred for the Islamic cause they would go to Paradise. One political cartoonist captured this delusion by drawing five hijackers dressed in Islamic cleric garb holding knives and looking around at the flames of Hell. Before them was Satan sitting behind a booth marked "Hell Information". One of the terrorists ponders, "I'm confused, this doesn't look like Paradise..."³ More than likely, none of these Moslems trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. Because they rejected Him, they will spend eternity separated from God, and each other, in Hell. Unfortunately, the Biblical description of Hell is far worst than that which is depicted in the cartoon (Matt. 25:41; Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:19-31; Jude 13; Rev. 20:10-15).

The Prophetic Implications

I believe that the Rapture of the Church will take place before the Seventieth Week of Daniel (the seven-year period of the Tribulation). The Rapture is a signless event. As I understand it, nothing has to be fulfilled before the Rapture of the Church and in my opinion, nothing has been fulfilled yet. The events we see in the world today could possibly be the "stage setting" for the final conflict. On the other hand, they may not be.

Two radio talk show hosts were interviewing an Israeli intelligence officer. He correctly diagnosed the conflict as a religious one. This conflict is between an extreme

form of Islam, on the one hand, and the Jewish State of Israel and the “Christian” Western World on the other. Let’s be honest, in the Western World, Biblical Christianity, sad to say, has taken a back seat to materialism, sports, and the worship of the Almighty Dollar, Yen, and the Euro!

Mr. bin Laden confirmed the conflict was a religious one when he called for a Jihad (holy war) against “the new Christian-Jewish crusade led by the big crusader Bush under the flag of the Cross.”⁴ Yet my mind was drawn to two passages of Scripture, Ezekiel 38 and Daniel 11. These two passages from the Word of God inform us that one day there will be an attack on Israel by a Middle Eastern confederation, possibly an Islamic one.

Ezekiel 38 predicts an attack on the Land of Israel from Gog, Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Gomer and Togarmah (38:2, 3, 6). Contrary to most popular prophecy teachers, this is not a confederation of communist countries led by the Soviet Union or even Russia today. All these places are in the area of modern-day Turkey!⁵ At present, Turkey has treaties and is at peace with Israel. It is a secular Islamic republic, but it would not take much for it to adopt extremist religious and political leanings and quickly and violently turn on Israel. Ezekiel also predicts that Persia (modern day Iran), Ethiopia and Libya would join this coalition (38:5). The common denominator of all these states now is that they are Islamic, not Arab states.

Daniel 11:40-45 predicts that the “king of the north” (Syria and Iraq) and the “king of the south” (Egypt) would come against Jerusalem. These are all Arab, as well as Islamic, states. This campaign

against Jerusalem, described in Ezekiel 38 and Daniel 11, should be seen as a religious war, not a political one.

I do not think we have heard the last from these evil people and their diabolical deeds. When and if a coalition of states wages a campaign against terrorism, they must do it with the utmost care. As this campaign could easily backfire and result in the Islamic world turning on the West and possibly leading to a war like that described by the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. One example of a potentially dangerous comment was when President Bush said that going after Mr. bin Laden was a “crusade”. That word is a very volatile word in the Moslem world because they remember the barbarism of the “Christian” church during the Crusades of the 11th to the 13th centuries. A point not lost on Mr. bin Laden when he called President Bush “the big crusader!”

Observations on “spirits”

On Friday, Sept. 14, 2001, a National Prayer Service was held in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. One of the opening prayers was to the “God of Abraham, Mohammed and Jesus Christ.” That invocation is emphatically not Biblical theology. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Who is the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, is different than the Allah of Mohammed! Christians must beware of this revived “ecumenical spirit” that these tragic events have fostered. The Lord Jesus made it clear at the Last Supper that He is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6; cf. I Tim. 2:5,6). The apostle Paul also warns of being “unequally yoked together with unbelievers” in spiritual matters (II Cor. 6:14-18).

Another “spirit” to be aware of is the “patriotic spirit”, also called the “spirit of America”, and our self-reliance. While I am thankful to be an American and grateful to the Lord for this nation and the freedoms that we still have, we must realize we are not a perfect and righteous nation. As Christians, our first allegiance is to our heavenly citizenship (Phil. 3:20). I am also thankful for the initial measure of unity shown by the Congress and the outpouring of love and support by and for the people of New York. However, remember the account when some people approached Jesus and told Him about Pilate mingling some Galileans' blood with their sacrifices and the tower of Siloam falling on 18 people and killing them? What was Jesus' response? He said, “Unless you repent (change your mind) you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:1-5)! It is a strong and sober warning.

As we watch the news, it is easy to identify the boast of our self-reliance. “ We will get through this”, “ we will rebuild”, “ we will not be intimidated”, yet only lip service is given to God when we sing “God bless America” or put up a sign with such words. Perhaps we bow our heads for a moment of silence, yet no mention is made of the Lord Jesus. In the two hour “Prayer for America” rally at Yankee Stadium on Sunday, September 23, Jesus was mentioned only five times!

An interesting parallel can be seen in the instructions of Moses to the Children of Israel just before they cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moses commands them to keep the commandments and to love the Lord with all their hearts. When God blesses them, they are not to say, “My power and the might of my hands have gained me this wealth”. Because if they forget the Lord and follow after other gods, they shall perish (Deut.

8:11-20; 11:8-17; cf. Lev. 26:18-39). The prophet Zechariah put it this way, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My spirit.’ Says the LORD of Hosts” (4:6). What we do should be done in the power of the Holy Spirit in order to bring glory to the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:16).

Perhaps the Lord would use these events to bring about genuine revival in America. During the days that the prophet Joel ministered, Judah was hit with a severe locust plague, famine, drought and fires. Revival began with one man, Joel, when he cried out to the Lord (1:19). He called on the spiritual leadership of the nation to fast and call a sacred assembly to petition the Lord (1:13, 14). He admonished them to return to the Lord and not rituals (2:12, 13). It appears that God heard their prayers and restored the Land (2:21-27). The foundation of Joel’s preaching was the Mosaic Law and the prayer of Solomon (Deut. 28, 30; Lev. 26; II Chron. 6:12-42; 7:13, 14).

Our Personal Response

What should be our response to this tragedy? There are several observations I have made in the course of these events.

First, believers in the Lord Jesus must realize every breath we take is a gift from God (Acts 17:25). We never know when it will be our last. As I watched a TV interview with several NY City firefighters, one of them recalled the words of the chief chaplain of New York’s bravest, Mychal Judge, who died in the collapse. He said, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him what you are going to do tomorrow.” This caught the essence of James 4:13-17. In this passage, James describes the

arrogant merchants who plan their buying and selling activities and anticipate a profit, yet they do not realize that life is like a vapor! James admonishes them to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." It is a humbling thought to realize Someone else holds our future!

The second observation is that the "sword" is given to the state to fight evil (Rom. 13:1-4). We should pray for the Lord to give wisdom to our leaders for the heavy decisions that have to be made (I Tim. 2:1, 2).

Third, as individual believers, we are not to repay evil for evil (Rom. 12:17). It is a shame that people would take matters into their own hands and try to run down Moslems on the street or even shoot them just because they are Moslems or Arab. More than likely most Arabs and/or Moslems living in this country do not agree with the thoughts or actions of extremists of the same nationality or religion. If someone attacks these Arabs and/or Moslems in the name of vengeance, it is not vengeance, but rather, unprovoked violence! While the Apostle Paul, quoting Deut. 32:35, states that "'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord". The individual believer should "overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:19, 21).

The fourth observation is that believers are to love their neighbors (Rom. 13:8-10). If the Lord put a Moslem family in your neighborhood it is for a purpose. If your colleague at work is a Moslem or you have a non-Christian person in class, it is for a purpose. If we show love for one another and love for our neighbor, then by life and lips we can win that family, friend, colleague, or classmate to Jesus Christ (John 17:21).

The final observation is the most important for someone who does not know the Lord Jesus Christ as his or her own Savior. Nobody knows when life will end. I'm sure most of those people going to work in the World Trade Center, or the Pentagon, or boarding four ill-fated flights on the morning of September 11 did not think it would be their last day on earth. Each of them, within a split second, was ushered into eternity. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Now is the day of salvation" (II Cor. 6:2). A person's eternal destiny is determined in this life. Will you trust the One Who loves you, the Lord Jesus Christ, and Who died for your sins and rose from the dead and be guaranteed a place in Heaven, or will you continue to reject Him and spend an eternity separated from Him in Hell? It is the most important decision anyone will ever make. Where will you spend eternity?

A Final Thought

King Hezekiah was sitting in his palace in Jerusalem receiving reports of the Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 BC. One of his messengers brought a letter from Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, threatening him with the total destruction of Jerusalem (Isa. 37:8-13). Hezekiah received the letter and spread it before the Lord in the Temple. He prayed, basically, "Lord, this is Your problem, what are You going to do about it?" (Isa. 37:14-20). The Lord sent the prophet Isaiah with the promise that God would take care of the problem (Isa. 37:21-35). Hezekiah rested in the promise of "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. Trust in the LORD forever, for in YAHWEH, the LORD, is everlasting strength" (Isa. 26:3, 4). The LORD was faithful to His promise and the

Angel of the LORD destroyed the Assyrian army that had encircled Jerusalem (Isa. 37:36).

On Sunday, September 16, I was at a small gathering of believers in southern New Jersey to remember the Lord Jesus in the Breaking of Bread. At the end of the service, one brother gave out a hymn written by Edward H. Bickersteth (1825-1906) based on Isaiah 26. The words of "Peace, Perfect Peace" were such a comfort and encouragement in this time of turmoil.

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?

The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.

Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?

To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?

In Jesus' bosom naught but calm is found.

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?

In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.

Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?

Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.

Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?

Jesus has vanquished death and all its power.

It is enough: earth's struggles soon shall cease,

And Jesus call us to heaven's perfect peace.

1 J. S. Wright, *The Interpretation of Ecclesiastes*. Pp. 133-150 in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*. Edited by W. Kaiser, Jr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

2 Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, records that these two events occurred at the same time. *Antiquities of the Jews* 9:222-227; Loeb Classical Library 6:117-121.

3 Cartoon by Sean Delonas, *The New York Post*, September 16, 2001, page 50.

4 *New York Post*, September 25, 2001, page 5.

5 E. Yamauchi, *Foes from the Northern Frontier* (1982). Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Mephibosheth: An Overcomers Forerunner

This “testimony” of Mephibosheth was written for the Winter 1985 issue of *The Overcomer* a periodical of the Christian Overcomers of NJ, an organization serving physically disabled youth and adults.

Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony with you this evening. As some of you noticed, I came to this banquet in a special chariot (archaeological note: this was the ancient forerunner to the wheelchair!). For thirty-six years I have had to get around in this or on the back of a donkey, depending on the roads.

My life had a storybook beginning. When I was born, I was a healthy and happy baby. My dad was crown prince and my grandfather, king of the nation. They named me Merib-baal (“contender against Baal”) because they wanted me to grow up to love the LORD God of Israel and fight against Baal, a false god of our Canaanite and Philistine neighbors. What more could I ask for? I had everything going for me, the future looked bright! Yet one day double tragedy struck.

The first tragedy was that my father, Prince Jonathan, and two of my uncles were killed in a battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa (I Sam. 31:2). During the same battle my grandfather, King Saul, committed suicide and soon after the Philistines mutilated his body (I Sam. 31:4, 9, 10).

The second tragedy occurred when news of the defeat reached the palace. My nurse picked me up and started to flee but accidentally dropped me, leading to a

paralysis of the lower legs. The doctors did all they could, but to no avail. The diagnosis was permanent paralysis. I would never walk again! (II Sam. 4:4). Emotionally, this was a very trying time for me, even at the tender age of five years old. My life was changed. I was different than other children my age.

The next few years were the most difficult for me. My uncle, Ishbosheth, did not want me around while he struggled with my father's best friend David for the throne. I think he felt threatened that someone might want to make me king instead of him. I was sent off to live with a family in Lo-Debar. Some of you know about that place. No respectable person in his right mind would want to live there! The city is situated in the Jordan Valley which is unbelievably hot in the summer; there is no pasture land anywhere, hence its name. It is only eight miles from the Philistine stronghold of Beth-shan! Talk about living conditions, it was unbearable! During the summers, I would often dream and long for the cool breeze that floated through the palace of Gibeah in the Hill Country of Benjamin. All the talk of royalty was over after the "high society" people sent me off to the middle of nowhere.

Well, it was not all that bad. I did meet a very caring young lady and we got married. (Historical note: they married in their early teens back then). The LORD blessed us with a son, Micha, whose name means "Who is like the LORD" (II Sam. 9:12).

Toward the end of my teenage years the isolation I experienced and my struggles took a dramatic turn for the better. By this time, King David secured the throne, consolidated the kingdom and built a lovely palace in his

new capital Jerusalem. He inquired as to whether any relatives of my grandfather were still alive. He wanted to show them kindness for the sake of my father. A former servant named Ziba told him of my whereabouts and condition.

I was very thankful for David's attitude and the way he treated me. First, he reached out to me and accepted me for who I was, not what I was. He saw me as a person, not a problem and welcomed me to his family with open arms. Second, David did not pamper me or spoil me even though I ate at his table. He gave me the responsibility of administering the land and servants that formally belonged to my grandfather. To this day, I am an active contributing member of this society (II Sam. 9).

Some of you are probably wondering how I got my nickname "Mephibosheth" which means "exterminating the idols." After I settled in Jerusalem, I got involved in spiritual things. I could not move fast, but I could move, so I would go around smashing idols of Baal and other pagan gods which were in the shrines on the hill tops in the kingdom. Then I would try and turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord God of Israel (Deut. 11:8-32). Mind you, I had the full backing and blessing of the king when I did this. My paralysis slowed me down, but did not stop me. I am still involved in the work of the Lord, even with my handicap.

I would like to close with the words of a song with which you are all familiar. It was written by King David when he fled from his rebellious son Absalom. Humanly speaking, David has lost everything. I think we can all

relate to that experience sometime in our life. Through the trying time, David could still say:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil; My cups runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the House of the LORD forever.

The Angelic Proclamation To The Shepherds Luke 2:8-15

I would like to draw back the curtains on the Drama of World Redemption and take a peek at what was going on behind the scenes during the second half of the First Century BC. I will also consider the events leading up to the birth of the Lord Jesus and the announcement of that birth by the angels to the shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem.

This may seem like a daunting task; and I am not presuming that I have all the answers. I am like the Monday morning quarterback that analyzes the Sunday afternoon football game with 20-20 hindsight pointing out the team's mistakes, analyzing why they lost the game, and showing how they could have won.

As an archaeologist, historian and a student of the Scriptures, I will bring some of the "secular" and "sacred" sources together to see the announcement of the birth of the Lord Jesus by the angels in the greater context of world redemption and the "conflict of the ages," the war between God and Satan. For a good Biblical overview of the conflict between God and Satan, see Renald E. Showers's, *What on Earth is God Doing? Satan's Conflict with God* (1973).

An Overview of the Conflict of the Ages

This drama, or conflict, actually began in the Garden of Eden. Eve, our first mother, was deceived by Satan who was disguised as a serpent. She fell into transgression and disobeyed the Word of God (I Tim. 2:13, 14). God

cursed the serpent and said to him: “ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Gen. 3:13). This was the first prophecy at the beginning of the long war between God and Satan.

Years later, God made an unconditional covenant with Abraham where He promised a land to Abraham and his descendents (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15:1-21; 17:4-8). After God tested Abraham to see if he would offer his “son, [his] only son Isaac,” Abraham passed this test and God reconfirmed the covenant with Abraham by saying: “ By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son – blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendents as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashores; and your descendents shall possess the gates of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:16-18).

The Apostle Paul provided an inspired commentary on this verse when he wrote to the church in Galatia: “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16).

The promised Seed would come through Abraham, Isaac (Gen. 17:19; 26:1-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:10-15), Judah (Gen. 49:10), and David (Ruth 4:17-22). Nathan the prophet set forth the unconditional Davidic covenant in II Sam. 7, which promised that a descendent of David would sit upon the throne of David forever (7:4-17).

The kings of Judah were sometimes not on their best behavior. At one point, Satan thought he won a victory when he saw Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah or Coniah) sinning grossly. God was so displeased with Jehoiachin that Jeremiah records this prophecy: “Is this man Coniah a despised, broken idol – a vessel in which is no pleasure? Why are they cast out, he and his descendents, and cast into a land which they do not know? O earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the LORD: ‘Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not prosper in his days; for none of his descendents will prosper, sitting on the throne of David, and ruling anymore in Judah’” (Jer. 22:28-30). Satan thought he had won a victory in the war with God, now there could be no Messiah to fulfill the Davidic covenant!

Satan, however, was in for a big surprise. When the Lord Jesus was born, He could claim a legal right to the throne of David through His adoptive father Joseph. Joseph was related to David through David’s son Solomon, but there was still the problem of the curse against Jehoiachin (Matt. 1:1-17). The seeming victory of Satan was turned to defeat when he found out that the blood line of the Messiah came through his mother Mary, who was also related to David by another one of David’s son, Nathan (Luke 3:23-38). The Lord Jesus had a legal, as well as a blood claim, to the throne of David. Thus, He will be able to fulfill the Davidic covenant. One day in the future, He shall rule upon the throne of David from Jerusalem (Luke 1:30-33).

Satan also knew the prophecies of Daniel chapter 9, verses 24-27, and knew it was about time for the Messiah to come to earth. His thinking was: “I will put

one of my puppets on the throne of an empire that will rule the world and bring peace and prosperity. And I will have some of my messengers herald him as a savior. Perhaps the people of the world will fall for my messiah and his “heaven on earth” and forget about God’s Savior who will rule in Jerusalem.” Satan began to put him plan into motion.

Octavian / Caesar Augustus

On September 23, 63 BC (on the Julian calendar), Gaius Octavian was born in Rome just before sunrise.

Apparently his father, Senator Octavius, was present at the birth of Octavian because he was late for work in the Roman Senate. When he arrived at the Senate building, he announced the birth of his son. A senator who heard the announcement, Nigidius Figulus, was also an astrologer, so he inquired as to the time of the birth.

According to the Roman historian Suetonius, when he found out, he “declared that the ruler of the world had been born” (Deified Augustus I: 94: 5; LCL 1: 267).

Another Roman historian named Dio Cassius, records that Nigidius cried out, “You have begotten a master over us!” (Roman History 45: 1: 3-5; LCL 4: 409).

A numismatic scholar was able to cast Augustus’ horoscope and demonstrate from the ancient sources that the astrological charts “predicted” Augustus rule (Molnar 1994a: 6-15). He comments: “I believe that Augustus was certain that he had an ironclad astral license for imperial rule. I also suspect that he probably took advantage of this starry legacy by exploiting the superstition of his friends and foes. Friendly believers of astral fatalism would have been inclined to support him in achieving his ‘inevitable’ destiny, whereas his

adversaries may have been reluctant to fight fate: a powerful formula for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although it is pure conjecture, I cannot help but wonder how even Julius Caesar may have been influenced to adopt this distant nephew who had a wondrous horoscope claiming omnipotence and world rule” (1994a: 6, 7).

Firmicus Maternus, an astrological writer in the 4th century AD, wrote concerning Augustus’ horoscope, “[It] will make emperors whose rule extends throughout the whole world and whose power is so great that it approaches that of the gods” (Molnar 1994a: 12).

Divination and astrology were widespread in the Roman world at this time. Satan used astrology, something that the Word of God condemns and forbids (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:9-24; Isa. 47:13-14), to set up his puppet to be the ruler of the world.

Suetonius mentioned that he read an account of the conception of Octavian in a book called *Theologumena* (“Discourse about the gods”) by Asclepias of Mendes. According to the story, Attia was impregnated by a serpent in the temple of Apollo. After this happened, a discoloration on her body was seen in the form of a serpent. Ten months later, Octavian was born and he was regarded as the son of the god Apollo (Deified Augustus 94:4; LCL 1: 265, 267). Dio Cassius also relates the same story (Roman History 45: 2, 3; LCL 4:407-409). There were coins minted by Augustus with the inscription on it, “son of god.” While he was the adopted son of the deified Julius Caesar, he was also the son of the god Apollo.

When Octavian was 19 years old, his uncle, Julius Caesar was assassinated in the Senate building on the

Ides of March, 44 BC (something else the astrological charts predicted. See Molnar 1994b: 6-10). The two leading conspirators, Brutus and Cassius, fled to the east and raised an army to retake Rome and return it to a Republic and not the dictatorship that Julius Caesar had established. Two and a half years later (October 42 BC), an exhausted and undermanned army led by Octavian and Mark Antony met the armies of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. As fate would have it, the armies of Brutus and Cassius were defeated and the two men committed suicide.

In 40 BC Virgil (70-19 BC), a prophet of Satan, masquerading as a world renowned poet, wrote a poem called the "Fourth Eclogue" about a virgin and a divine child who will end the civil wars in the Roman world and bring peace and prosperity to the world. It would be a paradise on earth. Thus began the "golden age" of Rome. Peace seemed to prevail after the death of Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII in Egypt in 30 BC when Octavian became the sole ruler of the Roman world.

In January 27 BC, Octavian was given the title Augustus which means one who is worthy of honor and worship, like a god. The "secular Games" were celebrated in 17 BC in honor of Augustus' rule of peace and prosperity. Coins were minted commemorating his rule. Some even had inscriptions on them that called Augustus the "son of god." In 13 BC an altar of peace was dedicated in Rome. Also, the doors of the Temple of Janus, the god of war, were closed because Rome was not a war with anybody because Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, had prevailed.

It was in this context, on May 14, 6 BC, the real Prince of Peace, the Lord Jesus was born. According to one of the early Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria (ca. 160-215 AD), the date given on the Egyptian calendar for the birth of Jesus was Pachom 25 (Stromata 1:21; 1994:333b). On the Gregorian calendar, this date is May 14th, 6 BC (Faulstich 1989: 3-14). Apparently Clement had access to records that we do not have today and I have no reason to doubt this date.

The Angelic Announcement - 2:8-15

Dr. Luke links the birth of the Lord Jesus with the reign of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1). Unbeknownst to Caesar Augustus, the decree that he made for the world to be registered, was used by God to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2, “ But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.”

Mary, pregnant with Jesus, had returned to Nazareth. This decree brought her and Joseph from the village of Nazareth in Lower Galilee to Bethlehem in the Hill Country of Judah. God has a sense of humor as He used Satan’s puppet, Caesar Augustus, to bring about the fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy. Augustus was clueless as to what was going on behind the scenes in the “conflict of the ages.”

At the birth of Octavian there were some impressive natal signs in the stars as far as the astrologers were concerned. But at the birth of the Lord Jesus, God does a “one-upman” on Satan and his prognosticators. The “glory of the Lord” shone around the shepherds. This glory of the Lord is known in the Hebrew Scriptures as

the Shechinah Glory. This bright manifestation of God had resided in the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, and also in Solomon's Temple. But the Glory of the LORD departed from that temple right before the Babylonian's destroyed Jerusalem in 587/6 BC (Ezek. 8-11).

When a remnant of Judeans returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel after the Babylonian captivity the Temple was rebuilt. We know there were five things that were in Solomon's Temple that were not in the Second Temple. They were: (1) The Ark of the Covenant which included the cover and the Cherubim, (2) the fire on the altar (cf. Lev. 1:7), (3) the Shechinah Glory (4) the Holy Spirit [of Prophecy], and (5) the Urim-we-Thummim (BT Yoma 21b; Moed 3: 94). The Glory of the Lord was missing from the Second Temple.

The Shechinah Glory had not been seen for over 580 years. It showed up on the night of the birth of the Lord Jesus and then disappeared again. It will not be seen on earth again until after the seven year period of Tribulation and Jesus' establishment of His Kingdom in Jerusalem and the building of the Millennial Temple (Ezek. 43:1-5). Ezekiel ends his book with the phrase, "The LORD is There." He says that because the Shechinah Glory has returned to the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

An Angel of the LORD also appeared when Jesus was born and said to the shepherds near Bethlehem: "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: You will find a Babe

wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:10-12).

Caesar Augustus had a natal sign in the stars at his birth, but the sign the angel gave to the shepherds for the location of the Messiah was that they would find him wrapped in swaddling cloth, lying in a manger! Hardly the sign one would expect for the birth of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who would one day rule the world.

There was an interesting Greek inscription found in Priene in western Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Part of this lengthy 84 line inscription said: “Since the Providence which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue [divine power] that he might benefit mankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendents, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance [“epiphany,” often used of Hellenistic rulers] (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the good tidings [gospel] that came by reason of him” (Boring, Berger, and Colpe 1995: para. 225). The Greek transcript of the whole inscription can be found in Dittenberger 1905:48-60; Inscription 458. The original is on display in the Berlin Museum and consists of two blocks of different types of stone. The upper block is blue limestone, while the lower one is white marble (Sherk 1969:329; For photographs, see Deissmann 1995; Figs. 70 and 71, between pages 366 and 367).

This inscription was executed in 9 BC after “Paullus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of Asia, wrote to the provincial assembly urging the council to adopt the natal day of Augustus as the beginning of the official year in the province, and to change from the lunar to the solar reckoning of the Julian calendar. The assembly adopted the recommendation enthusiastically as a means of conferring honor upon the deified emperor. Copies of the decree were ordered to be engraved and set up in different cities” (Abbott and Johnson 1968: 331).

Fragments of this inscription have also been found in Apamea (Latin fragments), Dorylaeum, Eumenia and Maeonia.

My sanctified imagination chuckles at the thought of this Angel of the Lord watching the workmen at Priene chisel this inscription in the white marble and saying to himself: “You just wait! Three more years and the real epiphany will take place and good tidings will be given because Jesus will be born. He will be the true Savior of the World and also the Messiah and Lord, not Caesar Augustus!”

After the shepherds were instructed as to where to find the Messiah, a multitude of the heavenly host appeared praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14). The peace that the angels spoke about was not the Pax Romana, but a peace that only God could give.

Today we hear much about the “separation of church and state” in the news, but believe it or not, this so-called separation is not found in the Constitution! The angelic announcement demonstrates that God is blatantly involved in the political affairs of the Roman

Empire. These statements by the angels are a polemic against Caesar Augustus, and his foreign policies. Jesus is LORD and one day He will rule the world with justice and righteousness and only then will true peace prevail.

Almost 12 years after the death of Caesar Augustus in AD 14, the Lord Jesus identified with His Covenant People, Israel, when He went to the Jordan River and was immersed into the water by John the Baptizer (Luke 3:21, 22). [Remember this: John was not a Baptist, he was a Jew!]

The Spirit of God led the Lord Jesus into the Wilderness in order for Him to be tested (Luke 4:1). Satan picked up a rock and said: “ If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (Luke 3:3). Here is a hint at what Caesar Augustus did for the people of Rome. He gave them bread and games. His policy was to feed and entertain the people so that they would like him. Jesus rebuked Satan by saying: “ It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God” (Luke 3:4). Jesus points out to Satan that there is more to life than just food and entertainment. One must be obedient to the Word of God.

When Jesus delivered His “Sermon on the Mount” He taught His disciples to pray, “Give us this day, our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). He then goes on to give a commentary on what we commonly call the “Lord’s prayer” (Matt. 6:14-7:6). His commentary on the daily bread concept is found in Matt. 6:25-34. Jesus said not to be anxious, like the Gentiles, about what they are going to eat, drink or wear, but if they would seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then all these things (food, clothing and drink) will be added to

them (Matt. 6:31-33). For the believer in the Lord Jesus, we should be seeking God in our daily life and living for Him.

Jesus is again tested by Satan when He is taken to a high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:5). Satan again tempts Jesus by saying, “ All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if you will worship before me, all will be Yours” (Luke 4:6, 7). Was Satan discarding one puppet and trying to enlist another? Satan had given Caesar Augustus an empire that stretched from Britain, all around the Mediterranean Sea, and he even received tribute as far away as India. Jesus refused to play Satan’s game and made the statement: “ Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve’” (Luke 4:8). Satan was offering Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in order to get Him to avoid the Cross. Jesus was steadfast. He knew He had to go to the Cross and die and pay for all the sins of all the world. He had to defeat Satan and conquer death before He could claim the throne of David and rule triumphantly from Jerusalem.

Later in Jesus’ ministry He was in the region of Caesarea Philippi at the base of Mount Hermon in the northern part of Israel. It was in this region that Herod the Great built a temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar Augustus after Caesar had visit the area in 20 BC (Antiquities 15: 354, 363, 364; LCL 8: 171, 175, 177). Jesus asked His disciples: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matt. 16:16).

The Lord Jesus acknowledged that Peter got the answer correct when He said, “Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:17, 18). At this point, Jesus begins to plainly tell His disciples that He would be going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, but He would be raised from the dead three days later (Matt. 16:21). Peter rebuked the Lord Jesus because he wanted to rule and reign with Christ. Jesus turned the tables on Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men” (Matt. 16:23).

Augustus had said before he died that he hoped that he had laid the foundation for a kingdom that would last immovably. At Caesarea Philippi, in the shadows of the Augustan temple, Jesus declared, “ Upon this Rock, I will build My Church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Catch the irony of the historical contrasts. Caesar Augustus is dead and his ashes are in an urn buried in the Mausoleum of Augustus on the banks of the Tiber River in Rome. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus died on a cruel cross, but was raised from the dead from a tomb in Jerusalem and has ascended into Heaven where He is seated at the right hand of the Father. Caesar Augustus’ great empire was in total shambles only a few years after his death and it no longer exists today. On the other hand, the Church of Jesus Christ continued and will continue to be built until He returns to take His

Church home to be with Himself (John 14:1-6; I Thess. 4:13-18).

A discerning First-century AD Roman philosopher once stated: "Caesar can bring peace to the world; both on land and sea, but he can not bring peace to the hearts of men and women." I am sure the Apostle Paul was aware of that statement when he penned the words to the church in Rome: " Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1, 2). The word justified is a legal term for the act of God whereby He declares a sinner righteous. When a person places their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and Him alone, God declares that person righteous. Because that person is righteous, they have peace with God, something Augustus could not provide for the people of the Roman Empire.

Caesar Augustus was a nice guy and very generous with his money (Suetonius, Deified Augustus 41; LCL 1: 189), helping people out whenever and wherever he could, but he was still a sinner and could not pay for his own sins, let alone the sins of the world. The Apostle Peter, writing from Rome, put it eloquently, yet simply: " knowing that [we] were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (I Pet. 1:18, 19). Only the Lord Jesus Christ, God manifest in human flesh, could pay the debt that each of us owed a Holy God. On the Cross He cried, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). The Greek word, tetelestai, is an economic term for a transaction that has been paid in full. There is nothing we have to do, nor is there anything we can do,

to pay for our salvation. It has already been paid for us by the Lord Jesus.

To the church at Philippi in Macedonia, a Roman colony and the place where Octavian (later to be called Caesar Augustus) and Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius, Paul wrote about the “Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” and he also wrote about the “God of peace” (Phil. 4:7, 9); Something and some One which Caesar Augustus knew nothing about.

Application

How do we apply these words of the angels to our lives today? The shepherds responded by going to Bethlehem to see the Babe wrapped in swaddling cloth lying in a manger. These shepherds were no ordinary shepherds. According to the rabbinic sources, they were the ones who raised the lambs and sheep for the Temple sacrifices. They knew of the many lambs sacrificed in the Temple. They also knew that the blood of the lambs only atoned for, or covered the sins of, the nation, but the blood of these lambs never took away the sin. They knew better than most people the limitation of the blood of the lambs they raised for the Temple. Because of this limitation, they were looking forward to the day when the Lord would provide the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world forever (John 1:29). By faith, they understood that the baby Jesus (YHWH is salvation) would be their Savior and He would not only atone for sin, but would take their sins completely away forever.

After seeing Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus, they returned to their sheepfolds “glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them” (Luke 2:20). From Joseph, they would

have heard that Jesus would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). How much these shepherds knew of the death of Christ, we are not told. But in a bit of irony, they had seen the Lamb of God who would put them out of business some 35 years later. When the Lord Jesus died on Calvary’s cross He paid for sin, once and for all, and there was no more need for the sacrifices in the Temple (Heb. 9:26-10:18). Have you accepted the good tidings that the angels spoke about? Have you trusted the Savior that they proclaimed? Or do you trust in one of Satan’s pseudo-messiahs? Are we looking for “heaven on earth” or are you searching for a happy life with one of Satan’s gimmicks?

As the Apostle Peter says, “ We have a more sure word of prophecy” (II Pet. 1:19; cf. Isa. 8:19, 20). We do not need to read our daily horoscope in the newspaper, nor call 1-800-PSYCHIC, or have our palms read, or consult the dead at a séance in order to find out the future or to have a fulfilling life. All these things are condemned by the Scriptures, and forbidden for believers to be engaged in. In order to find fulfillment in our life and to discern God’s will for our life, we need to read the Word of God and understand the principles laid down in the Word for our lives and use these to determine what God’s will is for our individual lives. It is also the Word of God that tells us what the future will be for the Church, Israel and an unbelieving world. It also answers the question: Who will rule the earth? It will not be Caesar Augustus, or any other puppet in Satan’s closet, but it will be the Lord Jesus Christ who will rule for a thousand years on the throne of David in Jerusalem. Even so, come Lord Jesus!

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The Tyrian Shekel and the Temple of Jerusalem

Students of the Bible are aware of the connection between the Jerusalem Temple and the city of Tyre. Hiram, king of Tyre, sent cedars of Lebanon, cypress logs and artisans to Jerusalem to help King Solomon build the First Temple (I Kings 5; II Chron. 2).

Most people may not be aware that there is a connection between the city of Tyre and the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the Tyrian shekel.

Every year, a Jewish man, 20-years old and older, paid a voluntary half shekel Temple tax to the Jerusalem Temple. This tax, instituted by Moses (Ex. 30:11-16), was paid in either the Tyrian shekel (for himself and another person) or half-shekel (for only himself) during the Second Temple period (Mishnah Bekhoroth 8:7;

Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 11a).

The shekel, with the laureate head of Melqarth-Herakles (a pagan deity) on the obverse and an eagle (a graven image) on the reverse, averaged 14.2 grams in weight and contained at least 94% silver. These coins were minted in Tyre between 126/125 BC and 19/18 BC. After the Roman government closed the Tyre mint, these coins continued to be minted at an unknown mint, probably in or near Jerusalem, from 18/17 BC until AD 69/70. The Jewish celators continued to strike coins with the image of Melqarth-Herakles and the eagle. This was contrary to the clear teachings of the Word of God (Ex. 20:3,4; Deut. 4:16-18; 5:8). Yet the rabbis declared that the Tyrian shekels were the only legal currency that was

acceptable in the Temple (Hendin 2001: 420-429; 2002: 46,47). The rabbis decided that the commandment to give the half-shekel Temple tax, with its proper weight and purity, was more important than the prohibition of who or what image was on the coin.

The Tyrian shekel is mentioned at least twice in the New Testament. The first time it is mentioned is in Matt.

17:24-27 when the Temple Tax collectors asked Peter if he and his Master paid the Temple tax. Peter replied in the affirmative. The Lord Jesus, seeing a teaching opportunity on Biblical greatness, demonstrated humility by paying the Temple tax for Himself and Peter with a shekel coin from a fish's mouth (Franz 1997:81-87). The second mention is in Matt. 26:14, 15 when Judas betrayed the Lord Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, most likely Tyrian shekels from the Temple Treasury.

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Mary's Magnificat— The Mercy Of God (Luke 1: 46-55)

Introduction

I would like to tell you a story that the tabloids would love to put in print. If they did, however, they would distort and twist the account. But unlike the tabloids, the story I am going to tell you is true. I am not making it up.

This story is about two Jewish women who are about to become mothers. Their Hebrew names are Elisheva and Miriam and they are cousins. The older one, Elisheva, was six months along in her pregnancy. The younger one, Miriam, had just gotten pregnant. She did not show it, but she knew she was pregnant. She came from her hometown in the north of the country to visit with her much older cousin in the Hill Country of Judah.

What would have interested the tabloids is this: Elisheva was “well advanced in years,” perhaps collecting “social security” and Miriam was a teen-ager. The second pregnancy might not surprise us today with the teen pregnancy rate the way that it is, but this pregnancy was different. The tabloids would have had a field day with both of them.

I would, however, like to look at these two pregnancies from God's perspective because both were miracle pregnancies. Elisheva had been barren all her adult life. Since this was before the days of fertility drugs, she had all but given up hope of having a child. One day her husband, Zacharias, returned from Jerusalem, where he had been ministering in the Temple and he was mute.

He could not talk! He motioned to her that the Lord had said they would have a child. If she was like Sarah, she would have laughed and said, "Yeah right!" (cf. Gen. 18:12-15). If she was a woman of faith, and I believe she was, she would have bowed her head and said, "Thank you, Lord." However she responded, God was true to His promise and she became pregnant in her old age. This was miracle pregnancy #1. The other woman, Miriam, was an even greater miracle. You see she was a virgin. She had never had sexual relations with any man. This was miracle pregnancy #2.

Miriam knew she was pregnant because the angel Gabriel appeared to her in Nazareth and said, "Do not be afraid, Miriam, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus." The Holy Spirit conceived the child that Miriam carried. She was to be the most blessed and most privileged mother ever to walk the face of the earth. She was the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ. You do not have to go to the tabloids to read about this. Just turn to the gospel of Luke, chapters 1 and 2.

We should always thank God for our mothers and also thank God for Mary. Without mothers, none of us would be here today. Without Mary, none of us would have a Savior because she gave birth to the Savior of the World, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us look at Mary, not through the eyes of theologians, Church Fathers, or even Church councils, but through her own eyes. She left us a psalm (song) that she composed to express the innermost thoughts and feelings of her heart.

The Song

The song (Luke 1:46-55) was originally composed in Hebrew and then later translated by Dr. Luke into Greek (Aytoun 1917: 281-283). As Dr. Randall Buth, a Bible translator for Wycliffe Translators has observed in an article on the verb tenses of this poem, “This phenomenon of poetic tense shifting points specifically to Hebrew – not Greek, not Septuagintal Greek and not Aramaic – as the original language of the poem... It was an originally Hebrew poem that Luke and others have carefully transmitted” (1984: 75, 76).

This psalm can be divided into four stanzas of four lines each (Warfield 1885: 305). The overall psalm has two literary units with two stanzas in each unit. The key word in each literary unit is “mercy” (1:50 and 54). The overriding theme of this psalm is the mercy of God bestowed upon Mary and all those who fear the Lord (1:46-50), as well as God’s covenant people, Israel (1:51-55).

In this psalm, Mary said (1:46-55):

My soul magnifies the Lord,

And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me
blessed.

For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name.

And His mercy is on those who fear Him
From generation to generation.

He has shown strength with His arm;
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich He has sent away empty.
He has helped His servant Israel,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his seed forever.

Mary must have had a godly upbringing by parents who taught her the Word of God at home as well as took her to the synagogue in Nazareth to hear the Word of God read, or sung, and also proclaimed by the rabbi on Shabbat. She had a keen mind that absorbed the truths of the Scriptures. The song that flowed from her heart is packed with excellent Biblical theology concerning the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Avraham, Yitzaq, va-Ya'akov) and His relationship to His covenant people, including Mary.

God's Mercy is Bestowed on Mary and Those Who Fear Him. 1:46-50

In the first literary unit, Mary proclaims the mercy of God toward herself and those who fear Him (1:46-50). This unit has two stanzas. In the first, Mary magnifies the Lord because He is her Savior (1:46-48). In the second stanza, Mary magnifies the Lord because He is mighty, holy, and merciful (1:49, 50). This first unit is intensely personal on Mary's part.

Mary Magnifies the Lord Because He is Her Savior. 1:46-48

Human beings are made in the image of the Triune God. The Triune God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness... so God created man in His own image" (Gen. 1:26, 27). Just as God is a Triune being, so are human beings. We are made up of a body, soul and spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23). Mary involves her whole being in the composition of this song as she bursts into praise. She says with her mouth (her body): "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."

Mary began her song with a paradoxical statement. She said she magnifies the Lord. How can one magnify Someone who is already infinite and eternal in His Person? The Lord is omnipotent (all powerful), omnipresent (everywhere present), omniscient (all knowing), omni-sapient (all wise), eternal, immutable (unchanging), all loving, merciful, gracious, faithful, and infinitely holy. How are you going to magnify that?!

One could conjecture that Mary had seen a glass globe filled with water (the forerunner to the magnifying glass) in the Roman administrative center of Sepphoris, just over the ridge from Nazareth. Being fascinated with this object she noticed that it enlarged an object three times its normal size. The closer glass globe got to an object, the bigger it looked (cf. Seneca, *Natural Questions* 1: 6: 5; LCL 7:57, 59; Tameanko 1989: 26, 27; Lewis 1997:40, 41). Perhaps Mary saw herself as a magnifying glass. She realized that the closer she got to the Lord, the bigger He became in her life. It is obvious from this psalm that Mary knew large portions of the

Hebrew Bible (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings) as well as Biblical theology (Koontz 1959: 339). Even as a teenager, she had been taught well at home and in the synagogue.

By her praise, she made an infinite and eternal God even bigger! She had learned something one of her ancestors, the sweet psalmist of Israel, King David instructed all of us to do. He sang: "I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the LORD; The humble shall hear of it and be glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together" (Ps. 34:1-3). He also sang: "But I am poor and sorrowful; Let your salvation, O God, set me up on high. I will praise the name of God with a song, And I will magnify Him with thanksgiving" (Ps. 69:29, 30). In Mary's composition, she both exalts the name of the Lord and expresses her thanksgiving for what God has done for her.

In her life, that infinite and eternal God became even bigger to her. As she memorized and studied the Scriptures, she understood how vast and infinite her God was, yet He was also a personal God who was interested in everything she said and did.

She goes on to say that her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. In order for a person to have a Savior, they must be a sinner. Mary, like all of us, was a sinner! The Child she carried in her womb was God manifest in human flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ. He was born so that He could die on Calvary's cross in order to pay for all the sins of all humanity (1 John 2:2). In so doing, He became the Savior of the World (John 4:42). Only a sinner needs

a Savior. If a person was sinless, that individual would have no need for a Savior.

The statement that Mary made, that she rejoiced in God her Savior shows Mary knew her spiritual state better than anyone. She understood that she was a sinner and needed a Savior. The closer she got to the Lord, the more she realized her own sinfulness because, as she states in the next stanza, the Lord is holy (Luke 1: 49).

Perhaps Mary recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah when he saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and heard the seraphim say, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Host; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:1-3), he humbly said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of Hosts" (6:5). When Mary did, she too realized she was a sinner and needed a Savior.

Mary had not seen the Lord of Hosts, but she had seen the angel Gabriel. She reflected on his visitation in Nazareth and his statement to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" The angel went on to describe the ultimate destiny of the One whom she would give birth to. He said: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS (Yeshua). He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:28, 30-33). The ultimate destiny of the

Lord Jesus will be to rule upon the throne of David from Jerusalem forever.

After her conception, I am sure Mary compared notes with her betrothed husband Joseph. An Angel of the Lord had paid him a visit in his dreams. The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:20, 21).

Both heavenly visitors said that this Child would be named JESUS. In Hebrew, His name would be "Yehoshua" which is translated into Greek as "Jesus." The name means "YHWH is salvation." However, Joseph was told by an Angel of the Lord what this Child would accomplish during His first coming to the earth: He would save His people from their sins. How this would be accomplished, the angel does not say. I am sure that Joseph would have recalled the passages from the Psalms that described in prophetic terms the crucifixion of the Messiah (Ps. 22) and His subsequent resurrection (Ps. 18). He would also recall the words of the Prophet Isaiah as he looked down the corridors of time to see the Messiah as the Suffering Servant on Calvary's cross when he wrote: "He [the Messiah] is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (53: 3-6).

The angel Gabriel, on the other hand, told Mary that her Son would rule forever on the throne of David. Mary would recall the Davidic Covenant given by Nathan the prophet (2 Sam. 7:4-17). She would also recall the psalms that extol the Davidic Covenant (Ps. 89 and Ps. 110). Both angelic messengers give us a complete picture of the prophetic program of the Messiah. One tells of the purpose of His first coming: to pay for sins. The other tells of the plan for the second coming: to rule from Jerusalem on the throne of David.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum has pointed out that: “The Davidic Covenant promised four eternal things: An eternal throne, an eternal house or dynasty, an eternal kingdom, and an eternal descendant. All four eternal things came out in Gabriel’s message. Concerning the throne he said: the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David. Concerning the house or dynasty—he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever. Concerning the kingdom—of his kingdom there shall be no end. Concerning the eternal descendant, Gabriel said: The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee: wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God. The four eternal things which were promised in the Davidic Covenant were restated here to be fulfilled through Jesus the Messiah. The eternality of the house, throne, and kingdom is guaranteed because the seed of David culminates in a Person who is Himself eternal” (1992:17).

Mary continues her psalm by telling us why she magnified the Lord and rejoiced in God as her Savior. “For (or because) He has regarded the lowly estate of His maidservant” (1:48a).

God’s ways are not always our ways. If we were going to pick somebody to give birth to the Savior of the World, who would also be the King of Israel, we would probably pick a young lady who was from a rich and powerful, politically connected family. Even though Mary was from the House of David, she said that God regarded her “lowly state.” Mary was not referring to her humility, but rather to the social status and economic condition of her family. She lived in Nazareth: a small, obscure, and unimportant village in the hills of Lower Galilee. We know from the excavations that were conducted in Nazareth, that the village was small. It consisted of about 20 houses, and none of the houses were villas like in Sepphoris, just over the ridge from Nazareth. The villagers in Nazareth were simple farmers and shepherds with a low economic status. The words “lowly state” also implies that Mary was probably the youngest in her family.

Mary identifies herself in this psalm as a “maidservant,” the Greek word *doule* means female slave. This recalls her statement to the Angel Gabriel after he announced to Mary that the child she would give birth to would be conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35-37). Mary humbly said, “Behold the maidservant (*doulas*) of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (1:38). Here we see Mary’s humble submission, as a slave, to the Lord and His will. She would trust the Lord that He would take care of her reputation as she carried the Son of God to term.

Mary's trust is expressed in the rest of the verse where she states: "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (1:48b). Later, during the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, the religious leaders said to Jesus, "We are not born of fornication; we have one father - God" (John 8:41). The implication of that verse is that some people thought Mary committed fornication. There are some ancient sources, both Rabbinic and pagan, which state Mary had sexual relations with a Roman soldier named Pantera / Pandira and that he was the father of Jesus (Tabor 2006: 59-72; For a refutation, see Fisher 2006:4-12)! This blasphemous statement aside, Mary knew she was a virgin when the Holy Spirit conceived the Lord Jesus in her and she had done nothing wrong. She firmly believed that God would uphold her reputation.

As history has shown, her statement has proved correct. All generations have called her blessed. This began with the Angel Gabriel when he said, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:28). Then her cousin Elizabeth said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (1:47).

Please notice that both the angel and her cousin said she was to be blessed among women, not above women. Mary is not to be worshipped. She should be thanked for giving birth to the Lord Jesus, but not worshipped. Only God is to be worshipped. As Solomon so eloquently sang, "His name [the LORD] shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed. Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things! And blessed by His glorious

name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and amen” (Ps. 72:17-19).

The Lord Jesus spoke to large crowds during His earthly ministry. On one occasion a women cried out, “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!” (Luke 11:27). The Lord Jesus responded, “More than that, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!” (11:28). Jesus acknowledged the blessedness of His mother, just as she predicted in her “magnificat,” but Jesus drew people’s attention to something far more important – obedience to the Word of God.

Mary Magnifies the Lord because He is Mighty, Holy and Merciful. 1:49, 50

After her conception, Mary went to visit her older cousin Elizabeth in a city in the Hill Country of Judah, most likely a place called Ein Karim, situated in western Jerusalem today. When Mary arrived at her house, Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit said: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe [John] leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of these things, which were told her from the Lord” (Luke 1:41-45). Elizabeth asked a very profound question. Why should the mother of her Lord come to visit her? Elizabeth, who was filled with the Spirit, understood that the baby in Mary’s womb would be her Lord! Here we have an early hint at the deity of the Lord Jesus.

In the second stanza of Mary's psalm, she says, "For He [the Lord and God who is her Savior] who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation" (Luke 1: 49, 50).

Mary extols three attributes of God. He is mighty, He is holy, and He is merciful. The first attribute she extols is the omnipotence of God. He is all mighty. She says of the One who is mighty that He has done great things for her. At the announcement of her conception by the Holy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel states, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). It was the "power of the Highest" that brought about the conception of the Son of God.

Isaiah, in one of his great Messianic prophecies predicted the dual nature of the Lord Jesus and His names when he said: "For unto us a Child is born [His humanity], Unto us a Son is given [His deity]; And the government shall be upon His shoulders. And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God [El Gebor], Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this" (9:6, 7). Isaiah predicted that Mary's Son would be called the "Mighty God."

The second attribute was the holiness of God. One can imagine the tongues wagging at the well of Nazareth when the women went to get water. "Did you hear?

Mary is pregnant! She claims she was a virgin when the Holy Spirit conceived the child in her! We don't believe that. She ought to be stoned." Mary's reputation, and Joseph's honor, was at stake. Yet Mary could say in her innocence, "Holy is His Name." One of the names given to the Lord Jesus was Holy (Rev. 3:7).

The final attribute that Mary extols is the mercy of God. Some believe that the mercy of God is the key to understanding this psalm. The word appears twice in this psalm at the end of each literary unit (Luke 1:50 and 54). J. H. Bernard states: "In the first stanza [literary unit] the singer praises God for His overwhelming Mercy which rests upon her, as it will upon all who fear Him, for ever. She sings of personal mercies, and that with no loud protestations, but with a humble thanksgiving which is sacred indeed. And then, in the second stanza [literary unit], the hymn bursts out uncontrollably – as it seems – into a paean of national hope" (1907: 204).

In the last line of this stanza (1:50), we observe three things associated with the mercy of God. First, God's mercy is unmerited. Second, God's mercy is selective, and finally, God's mercy is unending.

Mercy, by its very nature, is unmerited. Grace and mercy is the flip side of the same coin. Grace is getting what we do not deserve because Someone has already paid for it. Mercy, on the other hand, is not getting what we do deserve. Mary knew she was a sinner and deserved to be separated from God for all eternity in Hell. She also knew that if she put her trust in God that He would provide a Savior to pay for her sins. The One she carried in her womb was born to die! Her Son, the

Son of God, would die to pay for all her sins as well as the sins of the whole world. God's mercy is unmerited.

The mercy of God is also selective. God's mercy is on all those who fear the Lord. The word "fear" has the idea of reverential awe and trust. If a person receives the grace of God, and trusts the Lord to provide a Savior, as Mary had done, they would receive the free gift of eternal life, a home in heaven, the forgiveness of sins, and the righteousness of God. God's mercy is selective for those who fear (trust) Him.

The mercy of God is unending; as Mary put it, "from generation to generation." After the death of the Lord Jesus on Calvary's cross, myriad of men, women and children, from every kindred, tongue, and nation, would put their trust in the Lord Jesus as the One who died and paid for all their sins and rose from the dead three days later to prove that sin had been paid for, death has been conquered and Satan defeated. Truly God's mercy is unending.

God's Mercy is Bestowed on His Covenant People, Israel. 1:51-55

In the second literary unit, Mary proclaims God's mercy toward His covenant people, Israel (1:51-55). As in the first literary unit, this unit is divided into two stanzas. In the first stanza (1:51-54a) we see God demonstrating His mercy by His action. In the second stanza (1:54b-55), God remembers His mercy because of His covenant with Abraham and his Seed, the One whom Mary is carrying in her womb.

The first stanza has a beautiful literary structure. The first line (1:51a) says, "He has shown strength with His

arms.” The verb “He has” goes back to verse 49 where Mary uses the same verb when she states that “He (the Mighty One) has done great things for me.” She will continue the thought of what great things God has done for her and expand that to include what He has done for Israel. She will also use the same verb again in verses 51b, 53a, 53b, and 54a. In verses 51b to 54a Mary contrasts two groups of people. The first group is the “proud” (1:51b) which He (the Mighty One) scatters (a negative statement), and the second group is “His servant Israel” (1:54a) which He helps (a positive statement). Between these two verses, Mary will describe the “proud” as mighty (1:52a) and rich (1:53b). In contrast to “His servant Israel” which is lowly (1:52b) and hungry (1:53a). Basically she says there will be a reversal of fortune between these two groups.

The Mighty One demonstrates His mercy by His actions. 1:51-54a

Mary begins this second literary unit by saying, “He (the Mighty One) has shown strength with His arms” (1:51a). God is invisible and no one has seen Him at any time. But sometimes, in order to have a clearer pictures or better understanding of who God is, anthropomorphic language is used that attribute body parts to God. In this case, Mary says God has shown His strength with His arms.

The arms of God (or hands) are mentioned a number of times in the Hebrew Scriptures, usually in connection with the Exodus from Egypt. In Exodus 6:6, God said: “Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptian, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I

will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgment.” [For context, read Exodus 6:2-9]. After the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, Moses composed a song of deliverance (Ex. 15: 1-18). In the song, he says that “Fear and dread will fall on them (the Philistines, the Edomites, the Moabites and the inhabitants of the Land of Canaan); by the greatness of Your arm” (15:16). See also Deut. 3:24; 4:34; 7:19; 2 Kings 17:36; Ps. 44:3; 89:13; 118:15; Isa. 30:30; Jer. 32:24. God redeemed Israel out of the Egyptian bondage because of His mercy. At the time this happened, the Israelites were worshipping the gods of the Egyptians (Ezek. 20:7-10). They did not deserve redemption, but God in love and mercy redeemed them and brought them out of Egypt.

As the Children of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses wrote the words of the Lord: “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor chose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD you God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments” (Deut. 7:6-9). Notice in these verses, “covenant” and “mercy” are tied together. The Israelites were worshipping the gods of the

Egyptians and did not deserve to be redeemed, but God in mercy brought them out because of a covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The outstretched arm is also used of the “Second Exodus” when the Lord returns His people from the four corners of all the earth to the Land of Israel after the seven year period of Tribulation (Ezek. 20:23, 33, 34; Isa. 11:11; Matt. 24:29-31).

Perhaps Mary also remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah when he stated: “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” Isaiah continued to describe the LORD as the “Man of sorrows” who would take all our iniquities upon Himself (53:3, 6). That “Man of Sorrows” was being nurtured in the womb of Mary as she sang this song.

At this point in her thinking, Mary might be confused because the arm of the Lord would lead to a return to the Land as well as suffering. The Apostle Peter will clarify this confusion. He wrote in his first epistle (AD 43): “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1:10, 11). There would be two advents of the Messiah. The first time He would come to suffer and die for sin, but would subsequently be raised from the dead three days later. The second time He would come would be with His saints to the Mount of Olives and then re-gather the remnant of His People Israel and then establish His Millennial Kingdom (Zech. 14:4-9; Matt. 24: 29-31).

In the next six lines (1:51b-54a), Mary will contrast what God will do with two different groups of people. The first group is the “proud,” and the second, “His servant Israel.”

She says of the proud that God will scatter them in the imagination of their hearts (1:51a). The imagination of the heart shows the deep-rootedness of their problem. The proud are self-sufficient and have no need for God. In some cases, the individuals think they are gods.

How much Mary knew about Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the Roman world, I do not know. The Jewish world was probably better informed than most in the Roman world. There were Jewish people living in the Diaspora (the area outside the Land of Israel) who would return to Jerusalem for the three pilgrim feasts: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost) and Succoth (Tabernacles). As they mixed with their fellow Jews living in the Land of Israel, they shared the news of what was going on in the Roman world. Jewish pilgrims from Asia Minor would have told of an inscription that was executed by the proconsul Paullus Fabius Maximus in 9 BC. The people of Asia Minor acknowledged that “Providence ... [gave] us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue [divine power] that he might benefit mankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendents, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance [“epiphany,” often used of Hellenistic rulers] (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning for the world of the good tidings [gospel] that came by reason of

him” (Boring, Berger, and Colpe 1995: para. 225). Was he proud? You better believe it. He thought he was a god!

When Paul penned his first epistle to Timothy, he concluded with the thought that Jesus is the “blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords” (6:15). The word Potentate is the same word as mighty in Mary’s song. Timothy was ministering in Asia minor when he received the letter during the reign of Emperor Nero. While Nero never claimed to be a god, at least in Rome, the Greek world, of which Asia Minor is a part, considered the emperor a god. There was a coin minted in Laodicea that had a portrait of Nero and the word “theos” (god) by his name!

There is a day coming, in the middle of the seven year Tribulation, when the Man of Sin will be revealed. He will be the Son of Perdition who will oppose and exalt himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the Temple of God, showing himself that he is God! (2 Thess. 2:3, 4). Jesus refers to this event as the “Abomination of Desolation” predicted by Daniel the prophet (Matt. 24:15; cf. Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Paul goes on to describe the end of this Lawless One when he says that the “Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming” (2 Thess. 2:8). That is the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus to earth.

Mary goes on to say that the Mighty One has “put down the mighty from their thrones” (1:52a). The word “mighty” in this verse is the same as the word “mighty” used for God in verse 49. Perhaps Mary had in mind those rulers who thought they were a god. There is a

proverb that every ruler, be it a king, president, prime minister, or whatever, should memorize. "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1). Every ruler should realize that they rule only as long as God allows. When He has used them to fulfill His purposes, whatever they may be, then they are removed from the scene.

The list of rulers who have had a god-complex in history would include the pharaohs, Phillip II, Alexander the Great, Antiochus IV, Caesar Augustus, Caligula, and Domitian. Each and every one of them had their hearts in the hands of the Living God. When He was done with them, their hearts stopped beating.

On the other hand, Mary goes on to say that God exalts the lowly. Her mind probably went back to her ancestor, King David. The LORD instructed Samuel the prophet to take a sacrifice to Bethlehem and anoint a king for Israel from the tribe of Judah and the house of Jesse (1 Sam. 16:1-13). Jesse brought his seven sons before Samuel, but each were rejected by the Lord because "man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart" (6:7). Finally, the eighth and youngest of Jesse's sons is called while he was out in the Judean Desert tending the family flock of sheep. The Lord said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is the one" (16:12). God exalts the lowly (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

In the next verse, Mary contrasts the rich and the hungry. "The 'hungry' are those conscious of a need, particularly the need of righteousness (Matt. 5:6) and a life acceptable with God. Their soul shall be satisfied (Ps. 107:9), but the self-satisfied, represented by the

‘rich’ shall be sent away devoid of the truth and destitute of spiritual wealth” (Koontz 1959: 347).

Mary then concludes this section by saying: “He has helped His servant Israel” (1:54a).

My sanctified imagination would like to think that Mary used this song as a lullaby for the Baby Jesus. I’m sure most of us can remember some of the songs that were sung to us as a little child. I’m sure Jesus would have remembered this one because when He began to teach His disciples He recalled the words from the song His mother sang, “He has scattered the proud,” so He instructed His disciples, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” His mother sang, “He has exalted the humble and meek.” He instructed His disciples, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” His mother sang, “He has filled the hungry.” He continued to instruct His disciples, “Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.” (Matt. 5:3, 5, 6). “The Beatitudes re-echo the phrases of [the] Magnificat, and fill them with a more spiritual meaning” (Bernard 1907: 205, 206).

The Mighty One demonstrates His mercy because He remembered His covenant. 1:54b, 55

The concluding stanza comes back to the remembrance of God’s mercy. It is not that God has forgotten, nor does He have short term memory loss or Alzheimer’s disease, but God remembers because He is celebrating His mercy towards Abraham and his Seed.

Mary probably has in mind the last verse of the book of Micah: “You will give truth to Jacob and mercy to

Abraham, which you have sworn to our fathers from days of old" (7:20), when she says "In remembrance of His mercy to Abraham and to his Seed forever." The phrase, "As He spoke to our Fathers" seems to be a parenthetical statement.

God made an unconditional covenant with Abraham where He promised He would make of Abraham a great nation and make his name great. God would bless him and make him a blessing to others. God also promised a specific land to Abraham and his descendents (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15:1-21; 17:4-8).

After, the LORD put Abraham through ten tests in order to see if he would be faithful to the Lord in all situations (Cassuto 1964: 294-296). Abraham failed some of the tests, yet God was merciful to him and still used him to fulfill His promises. The last test that God gave to Abraham was to see if he would offer his "son, [his] only son Isaac," Abraham passed this test and God reconfirmed the covenant with Abraham by saying: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son - blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendents as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashores; and your descendents shall possess the gates of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:16-18).

The Apostle Paul gave a divine commentary on this verse when he wrote to the church in Galatia: "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

The promised Seed would come through Abraham, Isaac (Gen. 17:19; 26:1-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:10-15), Judah (Gen. 49:10), and David (Ruth 4:17-22). Nathan the prophet set forth the unconditional Davidic covenant in 2 Sam. 7, which promised that a descendent of David would sit upon the throne of David forever (7:4-17). The Seed whom Mary carried in her womb, the Lord Jesus Christ, would be the ultimate blessing to all the people of the earth (Luke 1:42).

Applications

What can we learn from Mary? First and foremost, we, like Mary, are all sinners. Because we are sinners, we need a Savior. That is the reason the Lord Jesus came to earth. He was born, the sinless Son of God, lived a perfect life, never sinning once, and then died on the Cross of Calvary as our Sin Bearer. He rose from the dead three days later to demonstrate that sin had been paid for, death had been conquered and Satan defeated. In grace, He can freely offer any sinner who puts their trust in Him, the forgiveness of sins, a home in heaven, and the free gift of eternal life (John 3:16; Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8, 9; I John 5:13). Mary trusted the Lord to be her Savior.

Second, when we realize what God has done for us, we magnify Him by our lives and by our lips. This is called worship. At the Passover meal, right before Jesus was crucified; He took bread and wine and instituted the Lord's Supper. He instructed His disciples to remember Him in this simple way often (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; John 13:12-30). He apparently thought it important enough to also reiterate order and meaning of the Lord's Table to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor.

11:23-34). Our worship should lead us to witness to a lost and dying world around us. In essence, this song that Mary composed is her verbal testimony to her family and friends as to what God has done for her in her life.

Third, like Mary, we need to know the attributes of God. The only way we can know the attributes of an eternal, holy God is to read about them in His Word. The challenge to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ is to know the Word of God. Mary, I am sure, had godly parents who helped her memorize the Scriptures, took her to the synagogue where she absorbed what was said by the rabbis and from the reading of the Torah scrolls.

Fourth, in the second literary unit, Mary demonstrated her knowledge of the ways of God. She understood that God would ultimately set things in order and bring about the reversal of fortune of the proud and the people of God, if not in this life, then in the ages to come. Mary was also keenly aware of the Abrahamic Covenant and knew God would be faithful to His promises. Believers in the Lord Jesus should be diligent students of the Word of God in order to properly discern the ways of God as revealed in His Word (2 Tim. 2:15).

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