

Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God 1585



Everest - page 5
God Revealed in the Old Testament - page 10
Jesus and Samuel - page 16
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Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

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offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn
men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge
and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

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Better than the Bard

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...

These famous words helped make the playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon one of the world's most renowned dramatists. Often referred to as the 'Bard of Avon', William Shakespeare is viewed by many as the greatest writer in the English language. He lived from 1564–1616 and the recent 400th anniversary of his death has prompted much performance and appreciation of his plays and poetry.

Literary Genius

Shakespeare's popularity is well-founded. There are few writers who can come close to his linguistic skill and ability to create the perfect phrase. Indeed, many expressions common today have their origins in his writing, and yet seem very modern.

If something were to '*vanish into thin air*' or refuse to '*budge an inch*', to be '*cold comfort*' or '*too much of a good thing*', then the description comes from Shakespeare. The same applies if we find ourselves '*tongue-tied*', playing '*fast and loose*' or '*standing on ceremony*'. If something is a '*foregone conclusion*', if '*the game is up*' and '*the truth will out*', then we owe these sayings to the Bard as well. There are many, many more.

Not only this, but his ability to capture human emotions and relationships is remarkable. Consider the power of love and death in *Romeo and Juliet*; honour and betrayal in *Julius Caesar*; ambition and sheer terror in *Macbeth*; and greed in *The Merchant*

of Venice. His words are still used today to reflect current themes such as immigration, royalty, the abuse of power and even the popular opinions about lawyers!



Human Limits

However, even Shakespeare is limited because he was human like the rest of us. It is interesting to see that he admits this within his writings.

His work has no moral or absolute authority; it is simply the product of a sophisticated human mind. He even plays down the importance of his works, for example in the apologetic end to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The close of *The Tempest* stresses how his characters' endeavours are in the hands of others.

Shakespeare's work is limited to this life. Although he writes much about dying and death, he cannot tell us about what lies beyond the grave. Hamlet describes death as '*the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveller returns*'. In other words, it is something nobody can tell us about unless they have come back from the dead.

The Word of God

So then for the most vital questions we need to turn to the greatest book of all – the Bible. It has divine authority with

God as its writer. It can tell us about life, death, and life after death. And it can give us a real, tangible hope for the future.

The Bible makes direct claim to be the fully inspired words of God. Throughout its pages, we read *‘thus says the Lord’*, that *‘the word of the Lord came to’* specific people, and about *‘the word of the Lord through’* His messengers. The Apostle Peter makes a very clear statement:

Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

There is ample evidence in the scriptures that this claim is true. It contains accurate prophecies, consistently fulfilled in every detail, which could not have been written by even the most advanced man or woman. Scientifically accurate descriptions of the earth, the water cycle and how to manage diseases are found in the Bible, centuries before scientists made the same discoveries.

A man-made book by over 40 writers, written over more than 1500 years in different countries, would be a patchwork of totally unrelated pieces; yet the Bible is one coherent whole from start to finish, because its author is God. So we can trust the Bible’s authority and turn to it for ‘life and death’ questions.



Matters of Life and Death

When we turn to the Bible on these subjects, we find clear and consistent teaching. The Lord God created life, and when He takes it away, we die, so He is perfectly placed to tell us about these things. His Son, the Lord Jesus, did rise from the dead and come back to teach his followers. All of this is recorded in our Bibles.

When we die, we simply cease to exist. The Bible describes death like a sleep from which we never wake.

The dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished (Ecclesiastes 9:5–6).

The good news is that God offers us the hope to be awakened from the ‘sleep’ of death, just as Jesus was, and to live for ever in the Kingdom of God on the earth. Jesus said this:

This is the will of Him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).

It is a privilege to spend time with our Bibles, to understand these matters of life and death and to have God-given confidence when, as the Bard said, we ‘suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’.

This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life (Psalm 119:50).

Editor

Everest

Mountains can be dangerous places: in particular, Mount Everest in Nepal is life-threatening. The group of climbers had trained for months before tackling this, the highest mountain in the world. They had paid a large fee to their guides and with them had practised climbing from base camp to enable their bodies to acclimatise to the harsh conditions. Their guides reassured them, “It is our job to get you up and down again alive. You must do as we say.”

Finally, the day came, and with a break in the storm, they tackled the final ascent. They were desperate to reach the top, even when the weather changed and the guides told them to turn back. The guides listened to their pleas and pressed on, so they did indeed reach the summit, with great elation.

But on the way down conditions rapidly deteriorated: it got colder, visibility was reduced to zero, they got lost and they ran out of oxygen. The guides and walkers could not get down safely and their dead bodies were left on the mountain.

Fatal Mistakes

When climbing a dangerous mountain, all of our good intentions, preparation, strenuous effort, and trust become useless if our guide makes a fatal mistake. It is exactly the same with religious faith. Good intentions, commitment and zeal are not enough. The Bible states quite clearly that God has told us how to please Him, and that it is futile to try any other way or compromise His instruction. The Jews were

told not to tamper with the Law God gave them:

You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you (Deuteronomy 4:2).

The warning is repeated in Deuteronomy 12:32, and again in the last book of the Bible – Revelation 22:18. In the Law, the people were commanded not to take notice of false prophets who wanted to lead them away from God, who taught things contrary to the Law. This was to apply even if the prophet was able to do miracles or foretell the future (look at Deuteronomy 13:1–3).

Yet throughout history, people have preferred to believe lies or follow their own ways. The first example is in Genesis chapter 3, where Eve did not believe what God had told her about the consequences of eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Instead she listened to the lies of the serpent, which brought death.

Deluded Guides

The books of Kings and Chronicles tell a sad history of Jewish kings, most of whom led the nation astray by corrupting the true religion. They compromised their worship by combining it with that of the surrounding nations, which the people probably enjoyed! However, God hated it.

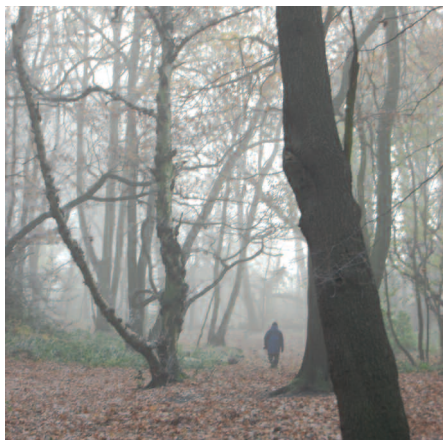
I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savour your sacred assemblies. Though you offer me burnt offerings

and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments (Amos 5:21–23).

There were even Jewish false prophets who flatly contradicted the true word of God, preaching what the people wanted to hear as opposed to the truth spoken by His true prophets (Jeremiah 14:14). Jesus himself warned about false prophets (Matthew 7:15), and this warning was repeated by his apostles (2 Peter 2:1, 1 John 4:1).

It seems natural to think that we instinctively know best and can discern right from wrong. Guides can help, but only if they are right. Our teachers and leaders have a great responsibility (James 3:1), but we all bear the consequences of our own decisions and actions. We cannot blame those who we follow. Jesus said this of a very zealous but misguided group of religious leaders:

They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch (Matthew 15:14).



The guides in our story perished with their clients. If we follow false spiritual guides we shall join them permanently in the grave, just as blind followers join blind guides in the ditch.

Make the Bible Your Guide

It is vital that we all read the Bible for ourselves to find out what God has actually said, and what He asks of us. The prophet Micah explains that God has laid out His wishes and instructions very clearly.

He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

When Jesus was on trial Pilate asked “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Decades ago people believed in absolute truth as revealed in the Bible. Nowadays many consider this old-fashioned and naïve, believing that many things are ‘relative’, that ‘we are all going to the same place’, that there is ‘truth in every religion’, and essentially that it does not really matter what we believe or do as long as we have good motives.

The guides on Everest had positive motives and gave attractive, but fatal, advice. A life without the God of the Bible is as perilous as being on Everest without warm clothes or oxygen. The Bible claims to be the only source of truth that can save us from destruction. Following anything or anyone else is simply suicidal.

Anna Hart

The Great Purpose of Jesus

Jesus is described as being sent by God, the Son of God who spoke the Father's words. He was sent for a purpose and he declared he came to make a future life possible. This purpose filled his thoughts throughout his ministry from the very start when John the Baptist pointed to him as *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29). We can see what this purpose is when we look at some of Jesus' sayings.

Born to Die

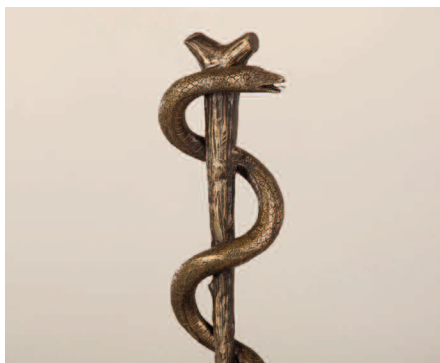
Towards the end of his ministry we read that Jesus *"steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:51). He was fully aware that he would die there after he had been scorned and crucified. But this same determination marks his whole life and work, and shows that from the start he had that end in view. He recognized that he was born to that end. The expressions he used would make no sense from anyone else's lips, but belong to him distinctively.

Jesus began to show to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day (Matthew 16:21).

The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10: 45).

This is the key to his work. He would lay down his life to save us from death.

In a conversation which reveals how our needs are met in Jesus' death on the cross, John chapter 3 looks back to an incident in the early days of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness. A plague of serpents was sent to punish their disobedience to God, and many of them died. God told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole, and that those people who were bitten should look at it. For those who performed this simple act of faith, healing and life would follow.



Jesus' belief in the Old Testament as God's word shines out in all he says. This event is used as a parable of what he would do for all men and women, because they are suffering from sin and its effects – death. A parallel is drawn between the serpent lifted up on a pole, whereby those Israelites could be saved from death by serpent bite, and Jesus' crucifixion through which mankind as a whole can find everlasting life.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of

Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:14–17).

These are some of the best known and best loved words in the Bible and are precious to Jesus' followers as being the very heart of the gospel. God's love and human need; the given Son who died; the promise that dying mortals might not perish but have everlasting life. We must stress the contrast between perishing and having everlasting life. The one describes our present state: we now have only this life and then we cease to be. Apart from God's love and the gift of His son, that would be the whole story. But a sequel is now possible, for everlasting life is promised to those who believe God and try to please Him.

Life-Giving Work

God loved the world and gave His Son; and this work of Father and Son is the subject of many sayings of Jesus, showing that in him God was providing for us to share the divine life.

As we continue in John's Gospel, Jesus further explains his work. He declares that he is like the life-giving manna during Israel's life in the wilderness. He is the bread from heaven that people might share him and have life.

As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on me will live because of me (John 6:57).

He also describes the bread as his flesh, which he will give for the life of the world, indicating that life will become possible for men and women through his own sacrifice.

Of the many statements which show that he would die for humankind's sake, perhaps none is more clear than when he compares himself to the shepherd who cares for his sheep.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep... Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again (John 10:11, 17).

Beyond his death he could see a new life. Death on the cross and burial in the tomb was not to be the end; he would be raised from death by the power of the Father. He claimed to be "*the resurrection and the life*", and at the tomb of Lazarus he showed what he meant by the 'resurrection' by restoring to life a man who had been buried for four days. But Jesus himself was both 'resurrection' and 'life' because when God raised him from death, He gave him endless life, and power to raise the dead and give them everlasting life.

That Sacrifice Memorialised

Jesus made it very clear that he had a special mission which would culminate in his sacrifice. Unsurprisingly, the four gospels devote much space to the events that surrounded his trial and death.

The evening before his death he shared with his closest followers the Jewish Passover meal, by which the Jews celebrated the liberation from Egypt under Moses. At this supper he declared that part of the meal, the

bread and wine, would now have a new significance for them. They would share the bread and wine henceforth as a means of keeping him in memory.



Throughout the centuries since then, Christian believers have carried this out to remember Jesus' work. But why should he set up this rite? No one else has ever done such a thing. The reason is found in his explanation:

He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Likewise he also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19-20).

That was the reason for his death: to provide the means whereby sins may be forgiven.

Purpose Under Trial

This awareness of his high purpose was a driving force throughout Jesus' mortal life. It serves also to explain the extraordinary self-possession and fortitude he showed throughout his trials. These were a disgrace to both Jewish and Roman law, in that every rule to

safeguard a fair trial was ignored. False witness, hatred, intimidation; all played a part with one or other of his judges, while the man accused met the ordeal with a resilience and courage which dismayed his opponents and showed his determination to endure it all.

Jesus' reply to Pontius Pilate shows his confidence that his death was not the end.

Pilate therefore said to him, "Are you a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18:37).

They are calm words, spoken in such circumstances, which show an invincible faith that his work would go on. His voice was not to be silenced by death and it has been heard through the ages. He was raised on the third day and after forty days ascended to heaven. Soon he will return, to set up the Kingdom of God, and to grant immortality to those who have believed in him.

John Carter

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God Revealed in the Old Testament

The popular image of the Lord God in the Old Testament is that of a remote and austere deity, finding fault and sending dreadful retribution on those who transgress His laws. This is a travesty of the truth. The Almighty is shown in the Old Testament as a God of awesome majesty who must be approached with respect, but also desiring to be close to His creation, wanting them to love and worship Him.

God Seen in the Law

In the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, God sets down principles which are eternal.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:2-3).

This is hardly surprising. Since God created everything, why should people worship anything other than Him? The commandments continue logically.

I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments (v5-6).

Those who are critical of the God of the Old Testament forget that as Creator He has a right to expect that His creation will love and worship Him.

We should take careful note of that little word 'love'. This is the Bible concept of love, a practical quality which is demonstrated through the actions which it prompts. God shows amazing love to those who love Him, He would not wish them any harm at all, and He expects them to show that love in response.

Pursuing the idea of the awesome character of God, this is how He revealed himself to Moses a little later:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:5-7).

This gives a much more balanced perspective on the Lord God. He does not clear the guilty, but He is merciful to those who fear and love Him. He is abundant in steadfast love, or mercy, and He forgives those who love Him.

Majesty and Awe

In the book of Isaiah we have a similar picture of the respect which God should instil in those who approach Him. The prophet had a vision of God's glory in the temple at Jerusalem.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple (Isaiah 6:1).

The vision continues like this: *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for 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!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (v5–7).*

This vision emphasises the holiness and majesty of the Lord God, contrasted with Isaiah's humble recognition of his (and the people's) uncleanness in comparison. But the prophet's desire for cleansing was met with a positive response: an angel was sent to cleanse him. This is a graphic picture of God's generosity in meeting humankind's needs.

Father-like

In other places in the Old Testament we are shown God as a loving Father. At least three of the Psalms use this idea.

As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:13–14).

This is a lovely idea, the Lord God who made us wishes to be seen as a father. Fathers do sometimes need to be stern and severe, to discipline their

children and to deal with wrongdoing and misbehaviour. Of course that is only part of what a father does. He also cares and provides for his children, looks for the best in them and helps them achieve their potential.



Having made us, the Lord God 'knows our frame' better than anyone else possibly could. He really does know what is best for us. It is an idea which comes again towards the end of the Old Testament:

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Malachi 2:10).

So the myth of the Lord God in the Old Testament being harsh and repressive is far from the truth. There is a severity to His character, where it is necessary, but that is not the whole picture. The truth is that the Old Testament presents the Lord God as a God of love, concerned for the well-being of His people and desperately saddened when they go against His wishes.

Mark Sheppard

*Bible Quotations from the English
Standard Version*

Rahab's Faith in Action

It is easy to think that all the people in the Bible are either really holy, or great leaders, but Rahab does not seem to fit either category. In fact, she is referred to as '*the harlot Rahab*'. However, she appears in the New Testament with this accolade:

By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace (Hebrews 11:31).

The lesson of Rahab is this: it is not what we are, but what we may become, that is all-important.

An Imminent Attack

We take up the story in Joshua chapter 2. The people of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, having crossed the river Jordan. The first city they were to attack was Jericho, with its encircling wall to keep out invaders. Forty years previously, Joshua had been one of two spies who had encouraged Israel to take the land of Canaan. Now he sent out two men to spy out the defences of the city of Jericho.

How was Joshua to go about taking the land? The people of Jericho would surely be expecting spies, or even an immediate attack. As soon as they set foot in the city they would be recognised. So, what could they do? Maybe having walked the ten miles to Jericho from Shittim, they met Rahab outside the city and went with her through the city gates to her home on the city wall.

Excavations have discovered that the wall of Jericho actually consisted of two thick walls, with further walls at

right angles to these, making houses within, or upon the wall, and Rahab's seems to have been one of these.

Making a Clear Choice

The people of Jericho would have been on full alert: they knew that Israel was outside their border. Rahab had already made up her mind whose side she was on. When we look at how the word '*harlot*' is used in the Bible, it seems clear that it means just that: a prostitute. Yet Rahab is included in the people of God: she married into the chief family of the chief tribe, in the ancestry of Jesus (see Matthew 1:5). This is why we say that it is not what we are, but what we do and what we may become, that is all-important.

Rahab was risking everything to help Israel. The spies needed to go to a house where they would attract the least attention, and Rahab's, being on the wall, would be ideal. She hid the spies before the king's messengers reached her house. How long were they in Rahab's house? Was she already under suspicion? Was she being watched? Either way, it would be a very frightening time for her, but she had made her choice. Once Rahab hid the men, the die was cast: there was no going back. She had made her choice. If Israel failed, or the spies deserted her, then she was dead – probably all her family as well!

Maybe someone saw something suspicious, and informed on her. Messengers came to Rahab's house, telling her to bring the spies out and face the music. Instead, Rahab hid the men on the flat roof of her house,

Modern-day Jericho



amongst the one-metre-tall stalks of flax which were laid out on the roof to dry in the sun. She told the king's men that the spies had gone and she didn't know where. The soldiers went off in a fruitless pursuit.

Faith Based on Evidence

When the soldiers had gone, Rahab explained the reasons for her allegiance to the spies from Israel:

We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites... whom you utterly destroyed (Joshua 2:10).

The drying up of the Red Sea was 40 years previously, and the destruction of the two kings of the Amorites was under Moses, a long time ago. But still Rahab chose to believe the evidence

of what she had heard, and confessed her faith in the God of Israel and of Joshua.

She asked the spies to show her the same kindness that she had shown them, in not giving them away to the king's messengers. The spies agreed to save everyone who was sheltering in Rahab's house when the attack on Jericho came. Then Rahab lowered the spies down the wall on the outside of the city. The spies said that if she tied a scarlet cord in her window when Israel attacked Jericho, then she and everyone in her house would be saved.

Saved By Her Faith

The spies went and hid in the mountains for three days, before returning to Joshua. When Jericho was attacked, the walls famously fell down flat, and the Israelites could run straight into the city. Only Rahab's household survived, and the spies ran to rescue her and her family.

Rahab became part of Israel, and is an ancestor of the Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament explains that she was justified by what she did, in hiding the spies.

Was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? (James 2:25).

Her actions were counted as faith, as belief in God. So we must show our faith by the things that we do, and the lesson from the life of Rahab remains the same: it is not what we are, but what we may become, that is all-important.

Peter Hale

The Reliability of the Gospels - 2

Historical Background

To understand the writing of the Gospels it is a good idea to have a picture of the history of the period in which they were written. This detailed review helps us to see that the Gospels were set in a real context, against the background of real events and real people.

Jesus worked and taught in Galilee and Judea, at a time when Judea was governed by the Romans and Galilee was governed by a minor king from the Herodian dynasty.

Romans and Jews

While the Roman governor Pontius Pilate nominally ruled Judea, there were only a handful of Romans in the province and much of the real power lay with the priests and scribes of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. In Galilee the king was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who managed to balance Roman power with his own authority.

Both of these rulers had to keep the Romans happy, but as long as they could do this they had considerable autonomy.

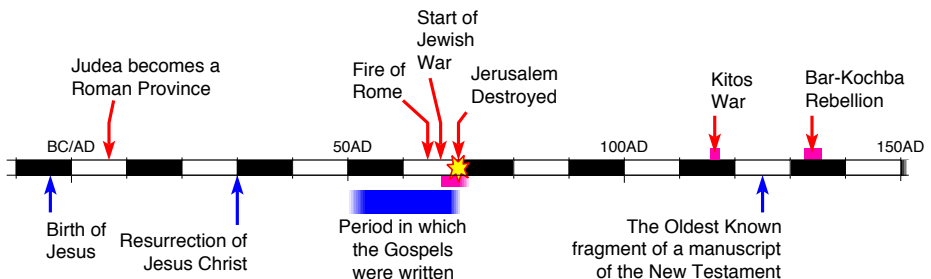
However, as time went on relations between Romans and the local Jewish authorities grew worse. Both Judea and Galilee had considerable non-Jewish populations who spoke Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic and who were highly antagonistic to the Jewish religion.

Conflict

As matters grew worse, violence increased until in 66AD a war broke out between Jewish irregular forces and the Romans. The course of this war was recorded by the historian Flavius Josephus, a Jewish commander who was captured by the Romans and changed sides. Josephus called this "The Jewish War".

The war found its climax in the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD; the destruction of Jerusalem at this time was so severe that, according to Josephus, those who passed by could not tell that there had been a city there at all. The temple was destroyed and most of the inhabitants were killed. The survivors, along with the population of more rural areas of Judea, Samaria and Galilee,

Time Chart of the New Testament Period



were taken out of the land as captives and sold as slaves throughout the Roman Empire. From then on the area was settled by a new population of Greek-speaking people from other places. The language changed and the cities were rebuilt to new designs.

Even so there was still friction between Jews in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Romans. Two more wars followed. In the “Kitos” war (115-116 AD) the Jewish populations of cities all over the Eastern empire rose in support of the Parthians who lived in what is now Iraq and Iran. This was put down with great severity by the Romans. In 132 AD Hadrian started to rebuild Jerusalem as a pagan city with a temple to the pagan god Jupiter on the Temple mount. This caused another revolt, this time among Jews who had crept back into Judea since the Jewish War. The Jewish leader was known as “bar Kochba”, and so this is known as the “Bar Kochba rebellion”. The Romans again devastated Palestine, which became a paganised area of the Roman province of Syria.

This disaster for the Jews was matched by a similar crisis for Christians. In 64 AD, during the reign of Nero, Rome suffered a great fire which destroyed much of the city. To divert suspicion from himself, Nero blamed the Christians and ordered their persecution. This persecution spread throughout the empire and continued for two and a half centuries. The relationship between Christians and the Roman Empire was greatly changed.

The New Testament in Context

The great changes in the circumstances of both Jews and Christians in the first and second centuries AD make it much easier to place the

Gospels and letters (called the “Epistles”) of the New Testament in context. If nothing had changed it would have been much more difficult to work out the time and place in which the events described in the Gospels took place. As matters stand it is relatively easy for archaeologists to date remains in that century and for linguists to show how the culture and speech of the locals underwent revolutionary change. All this will appear in this series, as we look at the way the Gospels were written and make a proper assessment of their reliability.

Other Accounts

During this period a considerable number of documents were written which had a bearing on the origins of Christianity. Various Roman historians make mention of the new Christianity including Josephus, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and Suetonius, and there are also Jewish sources. Some documents were written by Christians; these were after the completion of the New Testament and must be treated cautiously, but the earliest of them were written by people who had met Apostles and spoken with them; these are called the “Apostolic Fathers”. Later writers are known as the “Early Church Fathers”; these are still less reliable, but nevertheless they provide some evidence.

The historical background to the New Testament helps us to put the Gospels and Epistles in context and hence to see when they were written and what problems the writers might have had to deal with. The result is to improve our confidence in the reliability of the New Testament in general and especially the Gospels.

John Thorpe

Jesus and Samuel

There are clear similarities between Jesus and Samuel, who lived a thousand years before. Both had remarkable mothers, both had spiritually mature childhoods, both grew in wisdom and both were men of prayer. Both were loved by God. Many of these similarities can be identified from the Gospel of Luke. They teach us that Samuel had much in common with Jesus, which gives us hope that we too can be Christ-like if we learn from his example.

Faithful Mothers

Samuel's mother was Hannah. She was a woman of prayer who showed great humility and described herself as the 'maidservant of the Lord':

She made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head" (1 Samuel 1:11).

Hannah was truly thankful for her son as her wonderful prayer demonstrates: *"My heart rejoices in the Lord...Because I rejoice in Your salvation" (1 Samuel 2:1).*

These themes of humility and rejoicing which can be found in Hannah's prayer are also clearly reflected in Mary's reaction when the angel Gabriel gave her the news that she would give birth to Jesus:

Mary said: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:46–48).

Like Hannah, Mary saw herself as a servant of God and remembered to rejoice and be thankful for the blessings He had given to her. Hannah and Mary are excellent examples of prayer, thankfulness and joy, and therefore must have made wonderful mothers.

Spiritual Maturity

The record emphasizes to us that Samuel was still young when he began to undertake his work in the tabernacle. For example:

Samuel ministered before the LORD, even as a child, wearing a linen ephod. Moreover his mother used to make him a little robe, and bring it to him year by year when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice (1 Samuel 2:18–19).

Now the boy Samuel ministered to the LORD before Eli (1 Samuel 3:1).

This demonstrates Samuel's early spiritual maturity, which far exceeded those around him such as Eli's own sons, Hophni and Phinehas (see 1 Samuel 2:22).

The spiritual maturity of 'the boy Jesus' (Luke 2:43) was likewise outstanding. At the age of 12 he was in Jerusalem, talking to the religious leaders:

Now so it was that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers (Luke 2:46–47).

Neither Samuel nor Christ were content to stand still, however. Both appreciated the need for spiritual growth as the following passages demonstrate:

The child Samuel grew before the LORD... And the child Samuel grew in stature, and in favour both with the LORD and men (1 Samuel 2:21, 26).

The child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him... And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men (Luke 2:40, 52).

It is obvious that Luke's Gospel is drawing a comparison between Jesus and Samuel – Jesus is presented as a spiritually mature boy who is growing and will perfect the attributes which Samuel practised in his life centuries before.

Dedicated to Prayer

A further similarity between these two men can be seen in their dedication to prayer:

It grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the LORD all night (1 Samuel 15:11).

Now it came to pass in those days that he [Jesus] went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God (Luke 6:12).



It is essential that godly men and women engage in prayer to God; Samuel and Jesus are extraordinary examples in this regard. Their examples also prove that long prayers are not intrinsically displeasing to God (a mistaken conclusion drawn from passages such as Luke 20:47 and Ecclesiastes 5:2). Drawn out prayers for show are certainly wrong, but at particular times in our lives, spending a long time in prayer is surely beneficial for us and pleasing to God, provided it is made with the right mind-set.

Jesus and Samuel share many qualities which are particularly emphasized in the Gospel of Luke. They both had spiritual mothers who saw themselves as servants of God and whose souls rejoiced in His blessings. They both demonstrated spiritual attributes from a young age and continued to mature. They both spent whole nights in prayer to God.

Finally, they were both extraordinary characters who can inspire us to grow spiritually and prayerfully. The Lord Jesus Christ set the perfect standard of a life pleasing to God. Let's try to follow these examples, so that we too might grow in favour with the Lord.

Stephen Blake

Baptism

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).

This was Peter's message to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem, fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection. We have seen in this series that to 'repent' means to change our minds – to see everything in a new way, realizing how far away from God our lives have been, being truly sorry for that, and wanting to please God from now on. This was how the crowd in Jerusalem felt when Peter faced them with the fact that their nation had crucified the Son of God. They wanted to be freed from this terrible guilt, so the next step was to be baptized.

Three years or so earlier at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Jesus himself had been baptized. This was not because he needed forgiveness (he had never sinned) but because he wanted to show the us right way:

John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and are you coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he allowed him (Matthew 3:14–15).

A New Birth

Soon after Jesus was baptized, his fame began to spread because he was healing many people by the power of God. A visitor came to see him, a high-ranking scholar and teacher of the Jewish Law who could see that Jesus

was unique. He came to Jesus at night-time, making kind comments, but Jesus went straight to the point:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Even though this man, Nicodemus, was keeping God's Law, Jesus told him that without this 'rebirth' he would never see the Kingdom of God. He had to make a new start, and become a follower of Jesus. So do we.

The sign or symbol of this new birth is baptism. It is essential, Jesus continued:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5).

Being 'born of water' happens at baptism. Being 'born of the Spirit' starts when Jesus' teaching begins to change our characters.

The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life (John 6:63).

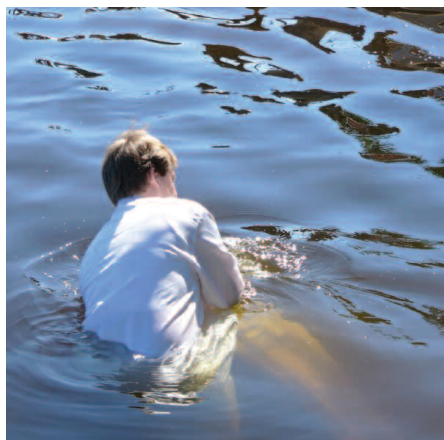
Then when Jesus returns as King, our bodies too will be changed:

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body, according to the working by which he is able even to subdue all things to himself (Philippians 3:20–21).

So if Nicodemus really wanted that blessing, he needed to be 'born of water': in other words, be baptised. It is the same for us. That is one of the things that baptism means – it is the start of a new, spiritual life.

Life Out of Death

Baptism is also a picture of us sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus. After his own baptism, Jesus tended to concentrate on teaching the crowds while his apostles did the physical act of baptizing those who believed (see John 4:2). Then, after his death and resurrection and before he ascended into heaven, Jesus told them to extend the work of preaching and baptizing worldwide (see Matthew 28:19).



The way that baptisms were done is made very clear in Acts 8:38–9: *They went down into the water...they came up out of the water.*

This happened in a desert, where all travellers would carry drinking water. If a few drops were sufficient they could have used water from their flask, but they clearly went down into the water. This is because baptism is like burying

an old life and then being raised to a new life, just as Jesus literally was. Paul says:

Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

Baptism is not a supernatural ritual that works like magic. It is a symbol of us being associated with Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

Being Washed 'Clean'

This is one more meaning of baptism. Sin is like being 'dirty' in God's sight, but He wants to forgive us, or make us 'clean'. When we ask for baptism we are telling God that we accept this, we want to be 'clean'. Before his conversion, the Apostle Paul (then called Saul) was a fierce persecutor of the followers of Jesus. But Jesus appeared to Saul in all his resurrection glory and Saul was convinced. He was sent to a Christian named Ananias who said this to him :

Now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16).

Some time after his great speech in Jerusalem, Peter wrote this:

Baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:21 ESV).

John Woodall

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