

The Herald Of Christ's Kingdom

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Perspectives of the Nativity

EDITOR'S JOURNAL

“Whom say ye that I am?”—Matthew 16:15

On December 25 the Christian world will celebrate the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth. Despite the fact that the date chosen is arbitrary and out of accord with the gospel records, we rejoice that so many still desire to honor in some way the one who came to save men from their sins. Although the holiday has become polluted by crass commercialism, it remains aday set aside by the sincere to acknowledge that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. Therefore we are glad, in keeping with the spirit of the holiday, to join in this celebration by dedicating this issue of **THE HERALD** to this marvelous and miraculous birth.

Even though the parents of Jesus were of the poorer working class, the birth of Christ was witnessed by a surprising number of quite different individuals. Each one had his own unique perspective of the significance of that birth. In this issue of the journal we will examine the different impressions of these witnesses.

No two people see the same event exactly alike. It may be their physical angle of sight or some personal bias or prejudice that brings them to different conclusions on the details of what they saw. This phenomenon occurs in courtrooms when jurors listen to witnesses reporting their impressions of the case in hand. We will be examining the viewpoints of eight individuals or groups in the articles that follow.

No viewpoint is more important or more precisely accurate than that of God himself. In *God's Journey to Bethlehem* the author seeks to enter into the mind of the Almighty Creator of the universe and establish his particular viewpoint of the nativity. God, the giver of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17), “gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). It is almost presumptuous to attempt to enter into the mind and heart of God, but it is good to

contemplate the feelings of a loving parent who voluntarily submitted his dearest possession to experiences he knew Jesus would undergo.

Among the first to be aware of the birth of the Lord, even before the event, were his relatives Elizabeth and Zacharias. Elizabeth prophesied of the coming event to Mary, while Zacharias referred to it on the occasion of the naming of his only son, John the Baptist. Their unique perspective is treated in the article entitled *The Torah of Humanity*.

Naturally, no one on earth was more acutely aware of the blessed event than the parents themselves, particularly Mary. In *Blessed Among Women*, the perspective of Mary and Joseph is reviewed—the angelic announcements, the trip to visit Elizabeth, and the final journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.

The witnesses to the birth of Jesus were not only Hebrews, but also wise men, or magi, who came from the east. They were following a guiding star. They warned the family in Bethlehem of impending danger and their precious gifts may have provided sustenance for the family while in Egypt. Their visit is analyzed in the article *The Guiding Star*.

Not all were thrilled at the prospect of a newborn king. Those in positions of power never relish the thought of their power being threatened. A prime example of this is the Edomite King in Judea, Herod the Great. *The Jealous Monarch* seeks the perspective Herod may have had when he heard from the wise men that a new king was born in Israel.

The birth of the Messiah had been long anticipated. There was an expectation for his birth at the time (Luke 3:15). Two faithful elderly people in Jerusalem frequented the temple in anticipation of the Messiah, praying for the “consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25). Their names were Simeon and Anna and their story is narrated in the treatise, *Jesus Presented at the Temple*.

Two regular features are included in our celebration of the birth of Jesus. The “Echoes from the Past” is a reprint of *The Question Box* from 1962 by Bro. P. L. Read, a former editor of this journal. The concluding treatise is our verse by verse study in Isaiah 53 entitled *Despised and Rejected*.

The Perspective of God

God's Journey to Bethlehem

"The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice; and he that begets a wise child shall have joy of him."—Proverbs 23:24

Richard Kindig

The same night that Joseph and Mary were searching for a place for the birth of the Messiah, the heavenly Father was on a journey too. It was an emotional journey that God embarked upon before time began; one that led our Creator to walk with his Son along dark paths: through places like Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Golgotha. The nativity is a story that contains elements of heroic love, saving faith, and untarnished victory; yet its twists and turns give evidence of a God who, in choosing a pathway of humility for his Son, was not seeking the development of any character qualities he did not already possess himself. (See Psa. 113.)

The Father is Greater than Jesus

God and Jesus are not equal; they are indeed a Father and a Son, who shared in a profoundly satisfying and evolving two-way relationship. Though Jesus emphatically stated that "the Father is greater than I," the dominant school of thought in Christian circles today is that God and Jesus are not only one in spirit, methods, and purposes but they are one and the same: "co-equal and co-eternal." The Bible differs with this Trinity concept. It is true that all the fullness—the effulgence and imprimatur—of deity dwelt upon Jesus (Col. 2:9; 1:19; Eph. 3:19) and that he proceeded forth and came from God (John 8:42). But Jesus is not God. He stated that he is inferior (John 10:29; 14:28); he worshiped God; he prayed to God (John 11:41, 42; 17:1-26); he submitted to God; he called upon God for help with things he could not do himself; he accepted God's will as his own; he affirmed that God heard his prayers; and unlike God, who must by definition be perfect in every way, Jesus was made complete as a high priest through sufferings, and learned deeper levels of obedience by the things which he suffered (Heb. 2:10; 5:8, 9). Jesus of Nazareth was just what the scriptures style him: the Only-Begotten, the Son of the Highest, the First-Born of all Creation (John 1:18; Luke 1:32; Rev. 3:14). As the son, Jesus had a tender, warm, and loving relationship with his heavenly Father (John 17). And the Bible indicates Jesus' obedience during his human experience was a pivotal ingredient in the ultimate success of that relationship (John 10:17; Heb. 1:9).

The Human Experience Changed Jesus

The very first recorded words from Jesus' lips affirm his relationship to his heavenly Father: "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (See Luke 2:42-52.) His pre-occupation with his Father's words, plans, and business discomfited his human parents and astonished the sages.

There is an amazing singleness of purpose in a boy of only twelve. But perhaps we sense more; a faint hint of surprise at the limitations of his new domain. We see an intellect far beyond a lad his age, as well as a resolute submission to the imperfect leaders and guides of his life (note verse 51); yet perhaps even his gentle questions seemed threatening to his elders. If the young Jesus felt occasional surprise or disappointment with his parents and rabbis, he gradually gained gracefulness in his manner of dealing with the people around him, for the account states that as Jesus grew to maturity, he grew not only in stature but also in wisdom; and he grew in favor, not only with men but even with God (verse 52).

On the day of Jesus' death, the second thing Jesus said while on the cross was: "Madame, behold thy son" [referring to John]; and then to John, "Behold thy mother." To nurture the troubled faith of Mary and to provide her with true comfort at a time when a sword was piercing her soul (see Luke 2:35), Jesus arranged for her comfort and peace before he completed his Father's business on the cross (cf. John 19:28-30).

During Jesus' earthly life, a profound tenderness and care of others perfumes his every word and deed. Though the above references indicate conflict with his kinsfolk and a measure of opposition, he bore their ambivalence graciously. He wisely used every opportunity to increase their faith and waited for the outworking of events and the heavenly Father's time to prove himself in their eyes. (See John 2:4; 7:3-10; Mark 3:21, 31; 6:1-6; 1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 9:5 for insights into Jesus' dealings with his kin.)

When Jesus cried, "It is finished," and then, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," we see more patience, more trust, more obedient reliance upon God—a riper, fuller fruit—than we glimpsed when Jesus was a boy. If so, then perhaps we can comprehend the explicit statement of the scriptures, that Jesus learned the meaning of obedience by the things which he suffered. He was made perfect along spiritual lines by experiences developing character. Even as the glorious Logos, it had not been possible to attain such perfection or obedience (Heb. 2:10).

If we thus see progression in the character of Jesus, the increasing attainment of a depth of perfect obedience throughout his walk, we can understand what it means to be in the "likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3), yet engaged in a relationship as a Son of the Highest.

From that vantage point, we can take comfort in our own walk as sons of God through Christ; and we can better understand what it meant to God that fateful night as he saw his Only-Begotten Son lying in a manger: so small, so weak, and so incomplete.

What It Means to be a Father

The most exalted relationship, the one most like God's relationship with his creatures, is the parent/child relationship. It is the only relationship in which the first person brings the second person into existence. It is the blend of different relationships at various times reflecting elements of master/slave, doctor/patient, teacher/student, and finally, fellow-to-fellow.

The benefits that come to parents are subtle and philosophical. They include the ability to pass along to the child intelligence and manners, to oversee the progress of the child in character and powers, and the development of a lifelong fellowship.

In the nature of things, a parent must take the longer view, must lead in love and commitment, must be the truly selfless one, and must wait. Parents must be patient. They must let go if they want the object of their love to return. They must postpone many personal goals and give a high priority to the meeting of their children's needs.

All Things are by Jesus and for Jesus

We are emphatically and repeatedly told in such texts as Colossians 1:16, 17 that our Lord Jesus existed from before the material creation. Jesus is to be recognized as the agent of creation: the world was made by him (John 1:10). God prepared the ages "by means of" him (Heb. 1:2). There is "one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things" (1 Cor. 8:6). Jesus is also to be recognized as the heir of creation: "all things were made for him" (Col. 1:16). "He is the heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2). "God has graciously given him a name above every name" (Phil. 2:9). "It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell" (Col. 2:9). God desired the pleasure of seeing his only son deserve and receive the praise of the entire intelligent universe. Thus God developed and tested his son to prove his worthiness of such an exaltation.

Simply providing a perfect environment is not enough. The fall of Satan proves that even a knowledge of God and enjoying perfection of being and perfection of surroundings does not shield anyone from the sprouting of sin from within. (See Ezek. 28:12-19.) We must conclude that if Satan—apparently the third being in the universe—had the freedom and potential to sin, the second being did too.

Before the Beginning

Jesus has, from the beginning of time, been the personification of God's wisdom. (Cf. Matt. 23:34 with Luke 11:49. See also 1 Cor. 1:24, 30.) As the Only Begotten, he came to know the mind of God long before he saw the actual creative operations of God.

The psalmist (103:7) records that Moses was let in on God's "ways"—his plans, character and principles that constitute the reason for his acts—while the nation saw the acts alone. The Bible describes the Logos' intimate fellowship with God in similar terms: "Jehovah created me in the beginning of his ways, before his works of old" (Prov. 8:22). Since the

son was brought into being "in the beginning of his ways," we surmise that there was a significant time spent in consultation on the ways themselves.

Goals, objectives, principles, imaginings, methodologies, strategies—all were worked out in counsel together, Father and Son. And just as in earthly parenting, the finest rewards spring from those moments of inspiration, when the child leaps to a realization, internalizes a principle, reflects a value we hold dear, so with the heavenly Father. The pre-human Jesus was God's daily delight; and the son rejoiced too —always (Prov. 8:30).

Among the many issues to be discussed, before the works began, would have been the specific creatures slated for creation. How would they be designed; what characteristics would each species demonstrate? We can imagine scenes in which the weighty moral lessons that need to be taught to all intelligent creatures were discussed and embodied in the design of specific creatures, such as lambs and goats, eagles and doves, lions and serpents.

The nature of freedom among the moral beings was surely the topic of many a discussion. What shall we do when sin arises? How shall we respond? Where shall we contain the rebellion?

Whatever the process by which these early decisions were made, it is clear from God's word that the main details were settled before the first hammer of creative work was raised. They agreed there would need to be a perfect human sacrifice and therefore he must come from the heavenly courts to earth and pay the ultimate price; since that servant of universal redemption could not be the immortal God himself, it would have to be his Son. (See Isaiah 6.)

Armed with this knowledge and braced by this commitment, the mortar-bags of matter were broken, the ingredients were stirred, and the construction began.

First to be created, even before the material construction, were the infrastructure of heavenly messengers. Lucifer was among the first, if not the very first, of these.

Long before Lucifer set up his rebellion in Eden, however, there were eons of creative work, in which the Logos was groomed for his future role of sharing the divine throne. No doubt the angels, including Lucifer, were given a prominent role in carrying out the material creation under the guidance of the Father/Son team; we know they sang for joy when in the course of time the foundations of the earth were laid (Job 38:4-7).

When the "heavens and earth were finished" (Gen. 2:1), a new phase began: the moral development of all intelligent creatures. For the angels, the excitement of creation gave way to the routine of administration, and apparently politics and pride led to the fall of Satan and many other angels. The time for the planned sacrifice loomed closer. And with it, the pain that God himself would have to experience drew near as well.

God's Sacrifice Typified by Abraham

We catch a glimpse of the heavenly Father's outlook in the allegory God arranged through the life of Abraham. We can be sure that after waiting 100 years to have a son of promise, Abraham lavished love and attention upon the boy. Isaac was the apple of his eye, and the aged father must have relished every minute. Abraham's son, like God's, was a daily delight.

Then came the shattering realization that the boy would need to be offered. The boy knew that a sacrifice was to be made. The father walked for three days, carrying his own deeper knowledge of what that meant in his soul. His grieving had already begun, because in his mind he saw the boy slain already.

In Abraham's case, only his reasoned hope of a resurrection allowed him to be obedient to God's strange request. The allegory cannot demonstrate God's inherent poise and confidence, as the one who knew the end from the beginning and has the power to work all things after the counsel of his own will. But we believe it is significant that God caused it to be written twice that as Abraham and Isaac approached the altar, "they went both of them together" (Gen. 22:6, 8). God was Jesus' companion in creation, in Bethlehem, and at Golgotha.

We know that Jesus, who was not spared as Isaac was, suffered to the ultimate degree. Like Isaac, he had to carry the wood. Yet God suffered together with his son, for he held in his own hands, in symbolic terms, the fire and the knife.

Jesus said that his Father had expressly told him that no one could take his life; if it was to be sacrificed, it would have to be Jesus' own choice. "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to receive it again" (John 10:17, 18). So when Jesus allowed himself to be crucified, his righteousness placed him into God's hands. It was separation from God that provoked Jesus' anguished cry, "My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken me?"* And it was God who, like Abraham, wielded the knife which shed Jesus' earthly life. (See Psa. 39:9. Compare also God's claim of responsibility for Job's afflictions: Job 1:12; 2:3). No other power could have taken the innocent life of the spotless Lamb.

Though in one sense it was men and demons who took Jesus' life, in another very important sense it was God who "spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). And "together with" God at the altar, it was Jesus who also "delivered up" his own soul (John 19:30). They were partners in creation, they were partners in life; and in order to be partners in redemption, they became partners at the altar of Jesus' death.

God's Sacrifice at Bethlehem

It is humbling indeed to realize that the child of a King was born into poverty, in relatively unsanitary conditions and forced to flee for his life while still an infant. Jesus' sacrifice to come here as a baby was awe-inspiring.

God made enormous sacrifices also. For the first time God lost the companionship of his son. God was alone before his son was created and now he was personally apart from his son for the 30 plus years of Jesus' earthly life.

God also sacrificed in the sense that while legions of angels might shadow Jesus, the divine program was that these angels should not be called upon; if no food was available, Jesus would have to go hungry; and whatever man suffered Jesus would have to suffer. (See John 4:6.)

God undoubtedly suffered most at the arrogance of the wicked who encountered Jesus and the slowness of heart of his friends (cf. Acts 9:5). God looks for opportunities to show himself strong on behalf of those with perfect hearts (2 Chron. 16:9). Here was a righteous one who went for years with little outward evidence of the favor of God.

The sacrifice of God which looms largest, however, was the piercing pain when, to bring Jesus' work to completion, he allowed his son to die. We cannot agree with our evangelical friends who claim that God consumed Jesus on the cross with "the anger of a billion Hells"! No, God did not show hate toward Jesus and no scriptural logic would indicate such a frightful idea. God simply hid his face from Jesus, just as he did from Adam when he sinned in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8). It was necessary for Jesus to experience alienation in order to become an "offering for sin" and to be tempted in all points, just as we are.* But for the holy, righteous God, who loved Jesus more than poet can describe or mind can imagine, to turn his face away while his son hung, naked and suffering, on a cross—well, the universe might as well have been turned upside-down.

To give us just a glimpse of how he felt, God sent darkness across the land; he caused the earth itself to quake; he totally disrupted the feverish slaying of lambs that was in process at the temple; and he brought dead bodies out of the tombs as a witness to the returning crowds. (See Matthew 27:51-54. Carefully analyzed, the original language reveals that the bodies in the tombs were not resurrected or reanimated but simply exposed to the view of the returning crowds.)

The other great work of God occurred just three days later, before the laughter of God's demonic enemies had even died down. God, who had created the billions of galaxies, now used his mighty power and raised his son from the dead—to a nature equal with his own (cf. Psa. 8:3 with Eph. 1:19, 20).

Glory to God in the Highest

Sometimes as we contemplate the greatness of God we envision a being with little emotion and with such grand superfluous power that every action would be easy and every plan would be the result of cold calculation. The story of Jesus' life on earth paints a different picture. It shows us that when God undertook to create, teach, redeem, and restore the human race he was not attempting something easy; not easy for us, not easy for his son, and not easy for himself.

The scriptures reveal an emotional God, committed in love, with a willingness to allow his most precious possession to be born in a manger, to be crucified, and to show his sacrificial love for the lowly and undeserving human race. The sacrifices of God and Jesus must never be minimized; our very life depends on our appreciation of these divine gifts and benefits. God's grace and love, expressed by himself and by Christ, will always outweigh the praise and obedience the Father and Son will one day receive from God's family in heaven and in earth (Eph. 1:3-10).

* Editors' Note: The application of this text is open to two interpretations. Some take it just as written, implying a withdrawal of God's communication with his son for a short time on the cross. Others interpret it merely as an identification with the twenty-second Psalm, from whence it is quoted. The editors of this journal are divided in their opinions and leave it to the readers to determine the correct thought for themselves.

The Perspective of Elizabeth and Zacharias

The Torah of Humanity

For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost.—Luke 19:10 ASV

R. E. Evans

During the season set aside by the Christian world to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ our thoughts usually turn toward the experiences of Mary, Joseph, and the child. We reflect on the events and people closely related to them, and that is as it should be. Just a few months before those auspicious events, however, there had been another visit by the angel Gabriel to another couple blessed with a child brought forth by a miracle—Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist.

Zacharias and Gabriel

Luke 1:5-24

Their experience with a messenger of God no doubt brought to their minds similar events in the lives of others whom God had blessed— Abraham and Sarah, Manoah and his wife (the parents of Samson), as well as Hannah (the mother of Samuel). Luke's description of this faithful couple is one shared by only a few of God's earthly creation: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6 ASV).

Despite such credentials as these, however, Gabriel found it necessary to react sternly to Zacharias' hesitation in accepting his message. Some 400 years had passed since there had been direct communication between God and his people; that, coupled with the fact that the couple had long passed the age when they could normally have a child, it is not difficult to understand Zacharias' hesitation; yet, this messenger of God did not allow it to pass unnoticed.

Gabriel's reaction speaks loudly to the necessity for us to maintain faith. As Paul wrote of Abraham: "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision; that he might be the father of all them that believe" (Rom 4:11 ASV, author's emphasis). The true seed of Abraham must believe without hesitation. Only those that so believe will be with the Lord: "And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him" (Heb 11:6 ASV).

Mary and Gabriel

Luke 1:26-38

In Luke's account of these momentous events, he next placed Mary center stage. He turned his attention to the story that is our usual focus of the season. With the similarity of their circumstances, it was natural for Mary to go to Elizabeth. Not only had there been an angelic visit, she was an older and more experienced kinswoman. Also, Elizabeth was a "daughter of Aaron" and the wife of a priest. She occupied a position of considerable honor in Israel and, undoubtedly, was a woman of wisdom.

Luke's record of the first encounter of these two divinely appointed women who had been so highly favored by God is filled with great emotion and meaning. He gave a glimpse of what has to be one of the most sublime conversations ever engaged in by two human beings.

"And Mary arose in these days and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah; and entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elizabeth. And it came to pass, when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the holy spirit; and she lifted up her voice with a loud cry, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come unto me? For behold, when the voice of thy salutation came into mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord" (Luke 1:39-45 ASV).

The course of Elizabeth's salutation is first of all for Mary and her son (vs. 42); next for herself and her son (vss. 43, 44); lastly, Mary and her happiness (vs. 45). In calling Mary "the mother of my Lord" Elizabeth declared herself a servant of Mary's son. What an insight into her character! This woman of great standing and prestige declared herself the servant of the son of the lowly maiden. One cannot help but compare her conduct to that of Jonathan, who willingly stepped aside, giving up his claim to the throne for the much younger David.

The emotion which possessed Elizabeth was communicated to the child whose life was yet one with her own. The leaping of John was a sign to her of the truth of all that had been told them by Gabriel.

By her statement, "blessed is she that believed," Elizabeth seems to have contrasted Mary's faith with Zacharias' doubt. Because of his affliction, both she and her husband had probably thought often of that moment of hesitation in the Temple. Inspired by the holy Spirit, Elizabeth encouraged the younger woman's faith with the promise of certain fulfillment of God's promise brought by Gabriel.

Mary's response to this magnanimous salutation (Luke 1:46-55) affirms that the moment was as thrilling to her as to Elizabeth. Just as John's leap was a sign to Elizabeth, the spontaneous joy and approval of this older woman of consequence was a sign to Mary of

the truth of all she had heard. The jubilant reaction by Elizabeth was, no doubt, much more than Mary had expected or hoped for.

"And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned unto her house (Luke 1:56 ASV).

The Song of Zacharias

Luke 1:57-80

Later, when speech was restored to Zacharias, a song burst forth as the rush of a geyser—a song he had probably composed in his mind during the previous months of silence. First, this man of God gave thanks for the arrival of the times of the Messiah (vss. 68-75); then, in a parenthesis his paternal feeling came out—the father expressed his joy at the glorious part given his son in the divine plan (vs. 76, 77); lastly, an emotional overflow of thanksgiving for God's plan of salvation closed this song of a priest who delighted to serve his God.

The term "visited" (v. 68) alluded to the silence of God during the previous four centuries—a silence that had been broken by the events that were then occurring, events that would result in "redemption" for God's people, Israel (vs. 68, 69). Zacharias declared that following its deliverance Israel will serve God "without fear." This union of political freedom with religious service is founded on the Old Testament ideal of a perfected theocracy like that pictured in Ezekiel's temple vision. It is doubtful he realized it would be two millennia before this promise would be fulfilled. Just as with the apostles three decades later (Acts 1:6), his hope was for deliverance in his day.

Nevertheless, Zacharias realized that in that deliverance—a deliverance he directly linked to the divine covenants made with Abraham and David—God will show mercy not only to the living but to the dead (vs. 72). Also, as he proclaimed in his exuberant closing, deliverance would be for all of God's earthly creation. The "sun of righteousness" (Mal 4:2) shall "shine upon them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death" (vs. 79). Thus, Zacharias not only indicated resurrection as being an integral part of God's salvation, but a salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike.

The image of a "horn," as used by Zacharias (vs. 69), is often found in the Bible and points to the horns of a bull, in which resides its power.

"If [*im*, Strong's #518, "When"]* thy children will keep my covenant And my testimony that I shall teach them, Their children also shall sit upon thy throne for evermore. For Jehovah hath chosen Zion; He hath desired it for his habitation. This is my resting-place for ever: Here will I dwell; for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread. Her priests also will I clothe with salvation; And her saints shall shout aloud for joy. There will I make the horn of David to bud" (Psa 132:12-17 ASV, author's emphasis).

Just as the strength of the bull is concentrated in its horn, so all the power and authority promised David will be concentrated in the Messiah, David's seed. When the horn of David buds it will be a "horn of salvation" for the nation of Israel—God's people will be delivered from their enemies.

The *Torah* of Humanity

This demonstration of God's mercy prophesied and praised by Zacharias was called "the torah of humanity" by David. "Who am I, O Lord Jehovah, and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far? And this was yet a small thing in thine eyes, O Lord Jehovah; but thou hast spoken also of thy servant's house for a great while to come; and this too after the manner [torah] of men [humanity], O Lord Jehovah!" (2 Sam 7:18, 19 ASV)

Unfortunately, the key thought, "this is the *torah* of humanity," is obscured in most translations. In the simplest and most literal sense, it denotes David's understanding God's promise to him as a restatement of the promise to Abraham. He saw a continuity to the covenants. In both, God promised to bring blessing to all the earthly creation—"this is the *torah* of humanity."

It was this torah Zacharias celebrated in his song. Some years later James picked up the refrain. "After these things [after first taking out of the Gentiles a people, the church] I will return, And I will build again the tabernacle [tent] of David [Israel], which is fallen; And I will build again the ruins thereof, And I will set it up: That the residue of men [the rest of humanity] may seek after the Lord" (Acts 15:16,17 ASV).

A rebuilt tent of David—a restored Israel will be God's agent to return his earthly creation to its original glory, the mercy God promised David. "Incline your ear, and come unto me; hear, and your soul shall live: and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David" (Isa 55:3 ASV).

The rebuilding of the tent of David will be the maturation of the mercies set forth in God's covenant with David—the "sure mercies of David," the torah of humanity.

"Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; for Jehovah hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. Jehovah hath made bare his holy arm [the Messiah] in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (Isa 52:9, 10 ASV).

Israel is to be the example that will bring all of humankind back to their Creator! The Jews' return of favor will demonstrate God's mercy and benevolence to all his earthly creation.

"And they [the Gentile nations] shall say, This land that was desolate is become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are fortified and inhabited. Then the nations that are left round about you [Israel] shall know that I, Jehovah, have

built the ruined places, and planted that which was desolate: I, Jehovah, have spoken it, and I will do it" (Ezek. 36:35 ,36 ASV).

Both Elizabeth and Zacharias realized the fulfillment of this salvation, these "sure mercies," as having its beginning with their son. Their son was to "go before the face of the Lord [the Messiah, Mary's son] to make ready his ways."

Though it has taken much longer than either of these faithful and "blameless" ones anticipated, today we see the fulfillment of their expectation developing before our eyes. Our joy at seeing its conclusion should be as great as was theirs' in seeing its beginning.

"Because of the tender mercy of our God, Whereby the dayspring from on high shall visit us, To shine upon them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death; To guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78, 79 ASV).

This torah of humanity was the source of their joy and is the real spirit of Christmas. When we come to appreciate the great love and mercy made evident by that torah, we can do little but repeat the words of Zacharias, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel."

* See *Choosing a Special People*, July-August 1997, for a discussion on "when" this will be fulfilled.

God Remembers His Oath

Zacharias [Strong's 2197] is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Zechariah* [2148]. *Zechariah* is from the Hebrew *zakar* [2142], which according to Strong's dictionary means "to remember," and *Yah* [3050], a contraction of the sacred name *Yehovah* [3068]; hence *Zechariah* conveys the thought "God remembers."

Elizabeth [1665] is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Elisheba* [472]. *Elisheba*, the name of the wife of Aaron, is from the Hebrew *El* [410], meaning "god" or "mighty one," and *shaba* [7650], which means "oath;" hence "God's oath."

It is interesting that the joining of *Zacharias* with *Elizabeth* gives the thought "God remembers his oath" (Luke 1:72, 73).

The Perspective of Mary and Joseph

Blessed Among Women

" And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. "—Luke 1:42

Aaron Kuehmichel

The hope of the promised Messiah was real to some of the Jewish people. It was something for which they longed. Imagine how Jewish mothers yearned within their hearts, hope against hope, that they would be the mother of Israel's Savior. Think of the honor it would bring to them if their son was the Messiah.

A pure, chaste, unmarried virgin was selected to be the mother and keeper of the one who had been the first creation of God. Her name was Mary. A simple unlearned woman, in contrast to the educated priestly class, was chosen. Who would ever have thought that such a one could be so honored by God. One should not even have been a candidate for such a son.

The Annunciation

The honor of foretelling the birth of Jesus to the young Galilean woman named Mary was given to the angel Gabriel. The scripture connects the time of the announcement to Mary with another event, one that already occurred: the conception of John the Baptist. This connection is found in the first chapter of Luke, for it was Gabriel that also announced the birth of John the Baptist. In the sixth month of development Gabriel came to Mary. "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth" (Luke 1:26).

In all other accounts of angelic appearances unto man, the person receiving the angel recognizes them as such and is immediately fearful upon the realization. But not so with Mary. Instead of fear, she wondered at the strange greeting. "How am I so highly favored? Why am I so blessed among women?" was her initial reaction. Upon the pronouncement that she was to have a child, she replied, "How shall this be, seeing I have no husband?"

What audacity to speak back to an angel. To even question the angel's message was unthinkable, or was it? Mary did question, but the intent was not from a doubting mind looking for proof. Her question was for clarification, so she could comprehend how she could have a child not having a husband.

Gabriel honored her request and gave her proof this would come true by telling her of her barren cousin Elizabeth's conception and reminding her that nothing is impossible with

God. The answer was sufficient. Believing that this unbelievable announcement could come true, she acquiesced, "Be it unto me according to thy word."

The Visit with Elizabeth

Mary then traveled from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea, a distance of approximately 120 miles over rough and dangerous ground to see her cousin Elizabeth. By this action she demonstrated that she believed the angel's message. When she greeted Elizabeth, her cousin confirmed what Gabriel already had told her and that she was indeed favored. God then, through Elizabeth, honored Mary because of her faith.

Mary spent three months with Elizabeth and then returned to her home. How she traveled to and fro is not stated. She could have traveled alone, but what husband to be would let her do that? Regardless, Mary was showing her pregnancy upon her return and Joseph was not sure how to deal with her seeming unfaithfulness. He pondered this and concluded to deal with her according to the law; quietly putting Mary aside so as to not draw too much attention to her (Deut. 24:1).

Nothing is stated in the scriptures regarding Joseph's character, but much is implied. Here was a man that God entrusted with the care of the Messiah and his mother. He would have a significant influence upon the upbringing of the boy Jesus and he surely must have been a noble character. We get a glimpse of this nobility in his handling of the situation. Instead of accusing Mary of unfaithfulness and taking care of his own reputation, he thought first of hers. Then God revealed to Joseph that Mary was with child by divine intervention and that he should take her for his wife. This is the first recorded encounter Joseph had with God in connection with this child.

Joseph and Mary married and the remaining months of her pregnancy passed, but the stigma of being unmarried with child had already attached itself to Mary. They made their way to Bethlehem, the city of their birth in accordance with the decree of Caesar Augustus. Mary went into labor and she and Joseph delivered the child. Later that evening, the shepherds came and worshipped. In explanation of their visit they revealed of the angelic message and singing. This was the fourth encounter, though indirect, that Mary or Joseph had with God.

"But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart . . . And Joseph and his [the babe's] mother marveled at those things which were spoken of him" (Luke 2:19, 33).

A Transition of the Ages

Zacharias, being educated, trained and serving as a priest should have believed Gabriel's message and did not. Mary, who had every reason to doubt, believed. Zacharias and Elizabeth were honored because of their faith by being the parents of one of the greatest prophets on the earth. Mary was honored for her faith by becoming the mother of the Messiah, the greatest in heaven. Instead of believing, the educated and priestly class held fast to their traditions and teachings. As Zacharias could not believe without a proof, so also the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day did not accept the signs given by God.

The time had come and the transition was taking place, as beautifully portrayed in the events announcing the offsprings of Zacharias and of Mary. The Jewish Law arrangement was coming to an end and the age of the gospel was beginning. John, being the offspring of the Law, could not enter into the kingdom of heaven because Jesus, the offspring of faith, had not yet opened the way. He that is least in the kingdom of heaven (faith) is greater than he of the Law (Matt. 11:11).

Jesus demonstrated his humility in his accepting the innuendoes and taunts of the scribes and Pharisees that implied he was illegitimate. "We have Abraham for our Father" (John 8:39). Imagine how those taunts must also have hurt Mary. They were also a jibe at her apparent unfaithfulness. But Mary was faithful, both to God and to her husband Joseph! In that knowledge she drew strength and though the scriptures do not say so, as a mother she was able to comfort Jesus because of this experience.

Joseph and Mary probably had a small quiet wedding. Not at all the large, joyous feast that most women desire on their wedding day. Assuming that she never realized this simple womanly desire, could this have been the reason for initiating the miracle at the wedding in Cana. Perhaps she understood what it would mean to the bride and groom to have a wedding feast spoiled because they ran out of provisions. So to prevent that marriage feast from being ruined, she hinted to Jesus to take care of the problem (John 2:1-11).

Yes, Mary had much to ponder in her heart. Her experiences during her pregnancy and with the strange series of visitors that followed the child's birth helped prepare her for the tumultuous days that lay ahead.

In Summary

We note on ten occasions Mary and Joseph encountered messengers from God:

1. The angel Gabriel announced she was to be with child (Luke 1:26-37).
2. Elizabeth prophesied to Mary, confirming what Gabriel said and commending her belief (Luke 1:41-55).
3. Joseph, in vision, was told that Mary was with child from God (Matt. 1:20-23).
4. The visitation by the shepherds (Luke 2:8-18).
5. Simeon's proclamation on Jesus circumcision ritual on the eighth day (Luke 2:25-35).
6. Anna's speaking of this child and the redemption of Israel (Luke 2:36-38).
7. The visit of the wise men (Matt. 2:1-12).
8. The vision telling them to go to Egypt (Matt. 2:13).
9. The vision telling them to come back from Egypt (Matt. 2:19-21).
10. A dream telling them to go to Galilee, and settle in Nazareth (Matt. 2:22, 23).

Perspective of the Wise Men

The Guiding Star

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."—Matthew 2:1, 2

David Rice

The visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus is recorded only by Matthew, just as the visit of the shepherds is recorded only by Luke. The two episodes were on two distinct occasions, the wise men viewing our Savior some days or weeks after his birth rather than the evening of his birth, as with the shepherds. As our Lord was born in the fall of 2 B.C., and Herod died in the first month or two of 1 B.C., the entire episode recorded in Matthew 2:1-18 must have taken place in this interval.

The familiar Christmas carol which opens "We three kings of Orient are . . ." is based on this passage. Matthew does not affirm that these wise men were actually kings, nor that they were three in number. But probably they were men of rank and nobility, as their costly gifts and their reception in Jerusalem imply, and their number may have been three if each bore one of the gifts mentioned in verse 11.

The term "wise men" is from the Greek *magoi*, plural form of *magos* (Strong's number 3097), and includes those studied in the Eastern sciences, a blend of astronomy and astrology. Daniel and his friends were counted among the "wise men" of Babylon in Nebuchadnezzar's day (Dan. 2:13), and in fact they were "in all matters of wisdom and understanding . . . ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers" of Babylon (Dan. 1:20).

The Star of Bethlehem

As far back as the prophecy of Balaam in Numbers 24:17-19, the appearance of Israel's King was associated with the symbol of a "star." That prophecy had a remarkably precise fulfillment with the advent of Israel's king David, but he was typical of the eternal king of Israel, Jesus. Clearly it pleased God to mark the advent of his son, "born King of the Jews" (Matt. 2:2), with a heavenly portent, a "star" which these wise men, trained in the symbolic meanings of their day, associated with a royal birth in Israel.

What was that luminary which guided the wise men? If it were a miraculous, super-bright star or a natural super nova, or even a bright comet, probably Herod would not have asked the wise men about it. It would have been in the discussions of all the people and common knowledge. The suggestion which most appeals to us is that this "star" was the

planet Jupiter, whose transit through the heavens in the two years preceding the visit of the wise men (Matt. 2:16) involved a number of remarkable incidents.

The Conjunctions* of Jupiter

August 1, 3 B.C.—Jupiter becomes a morning star
August 12, 3 B.C.—Jupiter/Venus conjunction (0.23°)
September 1, 3 B.C.—Venus/Mercury conjunction (0.36°)
September 14, 3 B.C.—Jupiter/Regulus conjunction (0.63°)
February 17, 2 B.C.—Jupiter/Regulus conjunction (1.19°)
May 8, 2 B.C.—Jupiter/Regulus conjunction (1.06°)
June 17, 2 B.C.—Jupiter/Venus conjunction (0.02°)
August 27, 2 B.C.—Jupiter/Mars conjunction (0.14°)

* A conjunction is when the orbits of two stars or planets cross paths.

The list below and this view, appear in an article by Ernest Martin, "The Celestial Pageantry Dating Christ's Birth" *Christianity Today*, [December 2, 1976, pp. 16-22.] Noting that the planet Jupiter was often associated with the birth of kings, Martin gives detailed suggestions on the probable meanings the other heavenly bodies Jupiter joined with would have had to the wise men of the East. Then he adds: "When [the wise men] reached Jerusalem, the Magi were told to look toward Bethlehem for the newborn king. This happened at a time when the New Testament says the star came to a definite halt in the heavens—it 'stood over where the young child was' (Matt. 2:9). And indeed, the planet Jupiter [the other planets as well] does become stationary in its motion through the fixed stars. This happens at its times of retrogression and progression. It could well be that Matthew was referring to such a thing . . . [in late December] . . . at the ordinary time of the Magi's predawn observations, Jupiter would have been seen in meridian position (directly over Bethlehem) sixty-five degrees above the southern horizon . . . Jupiter was then situated in the constellation of Virgo the Virgin."

The Three Gifts

As the wise men approached Bethlehem and located the proper house, they "opened their treasures, [and] presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11). All of these are precious gifts of costly value. Perhaps it was by the subsequent disposition of these gifts that this poor family was able to meet its expenses in their flight to Egypt soon to follow. But for the moment, they must have been amazed at the generous tokens these strangers laid at the feet of their little child.

Each of these gifts had a meaning. The gold identified his royalty, frankincense his priestly service, and myrrh, the costly but bitter herb, portended a life of suffering for him who would be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3).

The Flight to Egypt

Herod had asked the wise men to return word to him on the location of the child, with the secret intent of killing him. But they were warned by God in a dream and returned home another way. Then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream instructing him to take the child to Egypt for safety. This he did immediately. "When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt." This subsequently served to fulfill the prediction of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Matt. 2:15).

When Herod realized his plan had been thwarted, he was "exceeding wrath" and issued his infamous decree for the death of all the babes in and around Bethlehem two years old and under. It reminds us of a similar decree by Pharaoh which threatened the life of baby Moses and forms a parallel between Moses and the "prophet like unto me," the Messiah that Moses predicted God would send someday (Deut. 18:15, 18).

Herod's devilish scheme was overruled for a testimony on behalf of Jesus in yet another way. When the dispute was raised years later over the authenticity of Jesus as the Christ, one of the points of contention was that "Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem" (John 7:42), whereas to all appearances, Jesus had come from Galilee. For those few who in the intensity of debate thought to humbly investigate the facts, the uniqueness of Jesus must have shone starkly. How many others of his age and up to two years older, could claim Bethlehem as their birthplace?

Return to Nazareth

Though not apparent from Matthew, Luke (2:4) affirms that Nazareth was the point of departure of Joseph and Mary before coming to Jerusalem for the enrollment. When Herod was dead, an angel appeared again to Joseph in a dream advising him to return to Israel, but when Joseph heard Herod's son Archelaus reigned in Judaea, he made his way back north, directed by yet another dream (his fourth such experience), "and he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth" (Matt. 2:23).

Archelaus was one of three sons of Herod the Great to whom was divided Herod's domain, Antipas and Phillip being the other two. Archelaus seems to have inherited his father's demeanor. Josephus says that he put to death 3000 Jews in and around the temple not long after his ascension (Ant. xvii, 9, 3). Nazareth, in Galilee, was "in the domain of his gentler brother Antipas" (*Smith's Bible Dictionary*, "Archelaus").

Matthew next adds a statement which has puzzled many, ". . . that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matt. 2:23). No direct prophecy mentioned this city, so some have supposed Matthew meant simply that he would be of humble home and upbringing. Others point to a more precise fulfillment. "The best explanation of the origin of this name [Nazareth, or Nazarene] appears to be that which traces it to the word *netzer* in Isaiah 11:1, the small twig, sprout, or sucker, which the prophet there says shall come forth from the stem (or rather, stump) of Jesse" (*Jamieson, Fausset, Brown Commentary* on Matthew 2:23).

Modern Wise Men

Noting that the second advent of Christ parallels the first advent of Christ, and that the wise men looked for Jesus thirty years before he became the Messiah at Jordan, we observe a parallel to our day. As the Lord's people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took heed to the pages of prophecy "as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19), they began to see in the light of Daniel's prophecies that the King's advent was near.

Prominent among these was William Miller, whose deductions from prophecy were accepted by many. They realized the 1260 years of Papal dominion had closed about 1798 when the Pope was taken prisoner from Rome, but assumed the 1290 years of Daniel terminated at the same location. For this reason they began the 1290 years thirty years earlier than the 1260, and the 1335 years at the same point as the 1290. As a result, they understood the 1335 years of Daniel 12:12 would terminate about the year 1843, and subsequently adjusted their estimate by one year to 1844.

Thus it is that thirty years before our Lord returned to become the new King of earth, "the wise" who were examining the prophecies discerned his approach through the star of prophecy. They did not understand all the issues clearly, just as the wise men in Jesus' day did not see clearly all the issues regarding the royal child. But they were being led in the right direction. Already the prediction was coming true, "the wise shall understand" (Dan. 12:10). And clearer light was on the way. "Blessed is he that waiteth, and cometh to the 1335 days" (Daniel 12:12), "Blessed are those servants whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching" (Luke 12:37). That blessed time has come. And soon earth's new King, already invisibly present, shall make his authority evident to all humanity.

The Perspective of Herod

The Jealous Monarch

"Jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame."—Song of Solomon 8:6

Carl Hagensick

Lord Acton of England once wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." His is a particularly apt description of King Herod, the Edomite ruler who reigned over Judea at the time of the birth of Jesus.

It is not that Herod was the embodiment of evil. Like most of humanity, he possessed a mixture of good and bad traits. He was called Herod the Great with good reason. He was masterful at building both structures and cities. He expanded the area of Judea to its largest boundaries since the Babylonian captivity. He secured the most favorable of terms for Judea as a vassal state of Rome.

On the other hand, he was a cruel monarch, murdering all that were in his way to the attaining of personal power. He even killed his own wife and two of her sons in fits of jealous rage. He slaughtered all but two of the Jewish Sanhedrin and ordered the mass extermination of prominent Jewish citizens who were under arrest at the time of his own death so his funeral would not lack for mourners. As Augustus Caesar stated, "It is better to be Herod's hog (Greek, *hus*) than his son (Greek, *huios*)."

The Herodian dynasty began in the middle of the first century before Christ with the appointment of Antipater, the founder of the dynasty, to be procurator, or governor, of Idumea (Edom). Judea at the time, was governed by the Hasmonean dynasty, successors to the Maccabees. The two dynasties ran parallel until 37 B.C. when Herod the Great, the third of six generations of rulers, overturned and executed the last of the Hasmonean rulers. Herod united the two dynasties by marrying Mariamne, a direct descendant of the Hasmoneans. Though emotionally in love with the beautiful Mariamne, Herod had both her and her sons killed in a fit of jealous rage. This heinous act haunted him all the days of his life.

At Jesus' Birth

This, then, is the man who figured so prominently in the story of Jesus' birth. The time was in the last year of his reign. It was only five years since he had killed Mariamne and her sons. His mind was set upon retaining power at all costs. Having incurred the enmity of the Jewish population by the slaughter of Mariamne, a Jewess, he sat insecure on his throne.

It was at this juncture that the group of "wise men from the east" came to Jerusalem looking for the child whose birth was portended by the strange star that they had seen. These "magi" may have been sages educated in the ancient Babylonian and Persian schools headed by the Rabmag, or chief magi (Jer. 39:3, 13). This position, filled by one of the two Nergalsharezers in the days of Jeremiah, may have been later taken by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 2:48). Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks (9:24-27) may have become part of the lore of this school and given rise to the journey of the wise men.

Either losing sight of the star for a season, or being directed in a more general way to Judea, these magi did not go immediately to Bethlehem, their real destination, but to Jerusalem, the capital city. Being men of prominence, they were promptly granted an audience by Herod. The priests (descendants of the old Hasmonean royal dynasty) correctly directed them by the prophetic word to Bethlehem. At this time Herod became intensely interested in the inquiry. The king was particularly interested in the time they had first spotted the guiding star (Matt. 2:7). He then sought to enlist their aid as spies to report back to him where the new king was to be born.

Slaughter of the Innocents

When they failed to bring back a report, Herod ran true to form and ordered his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all potential candidates for the Jewish throne. He ordered the death of all infants of two years of age and under "according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men" (Matt. 2:16). The implication is that the wise men had seen the star two years before the slaughter of the innocents by Herod. This would either mean that the wise men saw the star two years prior to the birth of Jesus or that Jesus was two years old at the time of their visit. The fact that Herod died around the Passover time in 1 B.C. is a strong indication that they had seen the star two years prior to the nativity. (See following article, *The Year of Herod's Death.*)

The extent of the slaughter is not given. The tradition of the Greek church is that there were 14,000 children slain. This does not appear reasonable for a village the size of Bethlehem. If the number were that large it could hardly have escaped a mention in the writings of such contemporaneous historians as Josephus. Whatever the number, it was tragic enough. It may seem odd that the birth of the life-giver of the entire human race should be marked by such an onslaught of death. On the other hand it points out the sharp contrast between death and life; that the children here gave their life for him who would later give his life for them.

On the other hand, the killing could not have been too small, for the edict included not only the children of the village of Bethlehem but those in "all the coasts thereof" (Matt. 2:16). How broad this term is to be interpreted is uncertain. Probably it meant only the immediate environs that were sparsely populated.

However, the gospel writer quotes a prophecy from Jeremiah 31:15 in verse 18, "In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not."

While Jeremiah's prophecy undoubtedly had its immediate fulfillment in the literal city of Rama (see Jer. 40), Matthew's quotation of the prophetic words assures us that we are on safe ground in making a larger application of the prediction at the time of Jesus' birth.

Rama is not near Bethlehem. While Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem, Rama is about the same distance to the north, at the border of the land allotted to the tribe of Judah and that of Benjamin. Apparently the tomb of Rachel at Zelzah was in the near proximity of Rama (Cf. Jer. 31:15 with 1 Sam. 10:2). We suggest that the usage of Rama was to illustrate the lack of safety for the child in any of the territory under Herod, that is, throughout all Judea.

Also worthy of note is that the biblical description of the fate of these children is: "they were not." Nothing is suggested about their being in heaven or hell. "They were not." Like all the dead, they had gone into oblivion, awaiting the future resurrection of the dead. It is then that the second half of Jeremiah's prophecy will find its reality, not only for the babes of Bethlehem but for all of dead and dying humanity: "Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy" (Jer. 31:16). What a time that will be!

The Prophecy of Balaam

There is an obscure prophecy in the Old Testament by Balaam that bears investigation in our study. It is found in Numbers 24:17-19, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: There shall come forth a star out of Jacob, And a scepter shall rise out of Israel, And shall smite through the corners of Moab, And break down all the sons of tumult. And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession, (who were) his enemies; While Israel doeth valiantly. And out of Jacob shall one have dominion, And shall destroy the remnant from the city" (ASV).

The connection of the "scepter" and the "star" is indicative that this may be a Messianic prophecy. If so, there is either a time gap of over 2,000 years in the middle of the prophecy or the prediction applies not to the literal appearance of the star, but the full significance of that event when Jesus shall assume his royal power.

The contrast is sharp. When the literal star appeared heralding forth the one who was to wield the kingly scepter, the Edomite immediately oppressed him. When Christ returns with regal authority, however, all Edom, with Seir its capital, shall be his possession. Then he will be victorious not only over such surrounding enemies as Edom, but over all "the sons of tumult" (mistranslated "sons of Sheth" in many versions).

The narrative of Herod is reminiscent of that of another Edomite, Doeg, the chief herdsman of King Saul as told in 1 Samuel 22:9-22. David, the ancestor of Jesus, had been in flight from Saul. He and his men stopped at the home of the High Priest, Abimelech, in the Jerusalem suburb of Nob on the top of Mt. Scopus, to ask for food for their journey. The only food available was sacred bread taken from the table of

shewbread in the Tabernacle. The High Priest gave to David this bread, along with the sword of Goliath. However the entire transaction was observed by Doeg, an Edomite and the chief herdsman of King Saul. He, unlike the wise men at the time of Jesus' birth, reported the incident to Saul and the king ordered the death of 86 priests, including Abimelech.

The Wrath of Man

"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain" (Psa. 76:10).

The brief narratives of both Herod and Doeg illustrate the truth of this text. No measures, regardless of their severity, can stop the stately progress of God's designs. While tragic for the moment, the ultimate outcome of these tragedies, after the resurrection, will result in a full acquittal of justice. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after" (1 Tim. 5:24).

The Year of Herod's Death

The primary source of information about King Herod, other than the New Testament, is Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century. From him we learn the following:

1. Herod died shortly after a lunar eclipse, but before passover.
2. Herod reigned 37 years from his appointment to the kingship (by Marc Antony).
3. Herod reigned 34 years from his actual accession after deposing his predecessor Antigonus.
(*Ant. XVII* vi 4 - ix 3, viii 1, *Wars I* xxxiii 8)

Eclipses which could be the one referred to occurred on 12/13 March 4 B.C. and 9 January 1 B.C., but none in 3 or 2 B.C. The German scholar Emil Schurer favored the former date in his book *Geschichte des Judischen Volkes* (1901), though he mentions an earlier work by one F. Riess, *Das Geburtsjahr Christi* (1880) who favored the latter date, because "the numerous events that took place between the eclipse and the Passover could not be squeezed into the four weeks available in 4 B.C." (Filmer, p. 284, see reference below).

Emil Schurer opted for the earlier eclipse because of points (2) and (3) above, which he dated beginning with the years 40 and 37 B.C. respectively. These dates are inconsistent with the later eclipse. His choice required him to suppose Josephus (a) used the non-accession year reckoning, and (b) counted Herod's regnal years from Nisan (so that the few days Herod lived past Nisan 1 in his last year counted as a separate regnal year). His conclusions are reflected in many commentaries and Bible dictionaries extant today.

However, a more recent study by William Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," published in *Oxford's Journal of Theological Studies*, October, 1966, argues persuasively that the actual dates beginning Herod's 37 and 34 years were 39 and 36 B.C., and that Josephus used an accession year reckoning (so the initial year was an "accession year," and "year one" was the next year). These conclusions are consistent only with accepting the 9 January 1 B.C. eclipse as the one mentioned as just preceding Herod's death and are equally valid whether Josephus used Nisan or Tishri regnal years.

Filmer augments his thesis with evidence respecting Herod's age, deducing that Herod would have been (as Josephus stipulated) about 70 years old in 2 or 1 B.C., and a suggestion that 2 Shebat, listed in the first century Jewish text *Megillat Ta'anit* as a celebrated day, marked the day of Herod's death. Filmer's conclusions have been widely followed since.

The Perspective of Simeon and Anna

Jesus Presented at the Temple

***" And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord."
—Luke 2:22***

Contributed

Every event connected with Jesus would come to Mary as a fresh discovery and a new surprise. She knew the beginning and she would live to see the end of Jesus' life, but the daily experiences filling the gap in days and years would have to be taken one day at a time. Mary had no idea what turn of events awaited each day. A soberness developed in this young woman's mind. She focused on watching to see just what was required of her, a mother blessed and entrusted with this little life she held in her arms. One thing was certain; the responsibility was great. The privilege was an honor never to be bestowed upon another. Determination gripped her very being like never before. She was determined to try her best to do what the Lord expected of her.

"Mary treasured all this in her memory and wondered in her mind what it all meant" (Luke 2:19, 51). She pieced together each event, each experience, each miracle, each over-ruling providence, each message. They might have come in different and unusual ways, but each took on a special meaning. Mary listened closely with an intensity few could imagine. Every detail was important. She was determined that the God of the universe would be pleased with the servant he chose to bear the Messiah.

It was eight days since the first cry was heard from baby Jesus. Joseph and Mary tried to follow every step of the Law closely—now more than ever. Under the Law the first requirement for every new born male was that he be circumcised. Circumcision was the sign of voluntary subjection to the conditions of the Law and acceptance of its obligations. Circumcision also represented the privileges that came from the Covenant made between God and Abraham and extended to all his seed. At this time the baby was given the name, Jesus, the name given him by the angel to Mary (Luke 2:21).

Under the Law, the firstborn son of every household was to be "redeemed" from the priest at the price of five shekels of the sanctuary (Num. 18:16). Closely tied in with this is the purification of the mother described in Leviticus 12. Forty-one days after giving birth to a son, the mother was to offer before the Lord a burnt offering and a sin offering. The Talmud did not require the woman to be personally present at the temple to make such an offering (*Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Edersheim, p. 136). The offering could be made any time later, notably when attendance at any of the great feasts brought a family to Jerusalem. Bethlehem was conveniently close to Jerusalem. Mary was earnest and naturally journeyed to Jerusalem and the temple to provide the offerings necessary

for the redemption of the firstborn and the purification requirements. No detail was to be left out. The days were counted precisely. The journey taken.

As Mary came close to the temple, she entered by the eastern gate of the court called Nicanor's Gate. The door was 40 cubits high. It was richly adorned with thick layers of silver and gold. The gate was an awesome sight to behold close up. In that gate sat a council of 23 elders. Here they made the suspected wife drink bitter waters, cleansed the lepers, and purified women after child-birth. Women that were to be purified were sprinkled with blood. There stood Mary holding baby Jesus close to her as the crowds pressed around as she waited her turn.

The Rite of Purification

As regards the rite of purification of the mother, a pair of turtledoves was offered (Luke 2:24). The sin offering was always a turtledove or young pigeon. The wealthy brought a lamb for the burnt offering, but the poor might substitute a turtledove (Lev. 12:8). And so this young family, poor in this world's goods but rich in faith, carried out the requirements of the Law by offering two turtledoves.

The ceremony at the redemption of a first-born son was, no doubt, more simple than is presently observed. It consisted of the formal presentation of the child to the priest, accompanied by two short benedictions. One was for the Law of Redemption and the other for the gift of a first-born son. After this the redemption money was paid. It was a time to remember God's claim over each family in Israel. The words which fell upon the ears of Joseph and Mary were given keen attention, for they knew that this child was like no other first born child ever presented to a priest in the temple.

Simeon

Amid the hustle and bustle of the crowds at the temple there stood out one man whose name was Simeon. He meticulously observed the Law and devoutly revered God. He was waiting for the comforting of Israel. Some commentators are of the opinion that he was the son of Hillel (*Clark's Commentary*, Adam Clark, Vol. 3, p. 374), one of the most celebrated doctors and philosophers which had ever appeared in the Jewish nation since the time of Moses. He is also supposed to have been the president of the Sanhedrin. He steadily regulated his conduct by the law of his God. He was fully consecrated to God. He had a pious heart, or in the original it means a person of good report, one well received by the people. He was cautious and circumspect in matters of religion, so when Simeon spoke, people listened. His words carried much weight.

Day after day Simeon watched at the temple to see if maybe this was the day he would see the Lord's Christ. Day after day he would go home in disappointment. The holy spirit was upon Simeon, though, and he would always return, for it had been revealed to him by the holy spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ (Luke 2:26).

In Expectation

The Jews that had studied the prophecies and the Law knew that the time for Messiah was near. They expected a mighty warrior to conquer and subdue the enemies of Israel (Psa. 2:6-9), i.e., the Roman Empire. It was universally accepted that the Messiah would be a prophet like unto Moses (Deut. 18:15-19). The Messiah would be a mighty king restoring the glory of the past once again to Israel. The kingdom of this Messiah would never go to another and would last forever (Dan. 2:44). The prophecies of Daniel gave a time feature which every student of the Law calculated meticulously (9:25-27). The time was due for their hopes to be fulfilled. Before a man could become a mighty warrior, before Messiah could claim his rightful place on the throne of the Kingdom, before the prophet likened unto Moses could lead the people to freedom once again, he first had to be a child, raised faithfully under the Law. Simeon realized this and his faith kept him close to the temple watching the events of each day. What better place to wait for that child than the temple in Jerusalem?

Simeon would listen closely as parents would come into the temple area to offer the proper sacrifices for the firstborn. He would listen closely to hear which tribe they came from. He would compare the criteria of each candidate with the prophecies and the Law. Did the lineage of the parents both go back through the house of David? Was the child born in Bethlehem? Did the child have any blemishes which would disqualify him?

Simeon, led by the spirit, came into the temple just when Mary and Joseph brought in the child Jesus, to carry out the custom of the Law. This day was different for Simeon. His long awaited search for a child fitting the description of the Messiah was not in vain.

"Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.—Luke 2:28-32

Simeon was an old man and probably would not live to witness this child grow to manhood to begin his mission. He was content to wait with the fathers of Israel in the grave until the resurrection. Messiah's rising would lighten the darkness of the heathen and restore the glory of Israel. With the infant in his arms it was as if Simeon stood upon the mountain-height of prophetic vision and watched the golden beams of sunrise reach out to the ends of the earth, healing and enlightening all within its reach and then gathering their full glow over his beloved land and people, Israel.

To Joseph and Mary these words were totally unexpected. They marveled that such a devout man at the temple would notice Jesus and place such meaning to his life. It must have been a moment filled with reassurance, but the words which followed were quite sobering.

"Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also.) that

the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). That Mary understood the meaning of these words is highly unlikely. Whether Simeon understood the full meaning is just as unlikely. The utterance of these words came under the power of the spirit through Simeon. Each was important and not until the holy spirit would be poured out at Pentecost could any expect to understand them fully. Thirty-three years later these words would strike Mary's heart as she would stand in the shadow of the cross on Calvary and realize their meaning with sorrow and tears.

A Rejected Messiah

The ministry of Jesus would not be accepted by the Jews. To many he would be a "stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" (Rom. 9:33). The period of Israel's disfavor would leave the nation blinded to the true Messiah, a blindness that would last until "the fullness of the Gentiles" had come in (Rom. 11:25).

This is a mixed prophecy, blending not only the falling but the rising again of Israel. The damage is not permanent. Not only was it foretold that the Jews would reject Jesus but their recovery was also anticipated. If we see the fulfillment of the first part of this prophecy, it should encourage us that the rest will also be fulfilled. The return of favor and the acceptance by those that have pierced the Messiah will come about (Rev. 1:7). William Barclay's translation of the New Testament renders the end of Luke 2:34, "and to be a message from God which men will reject." New English Bible says, "and a sign which men reject," while the translation of the New Testament by O. M. Norlie reads, "and to be a controversial figure."

The ministry of Jesus met opposition. Not only did the religious rulers object to his teachings, but some of his sayings were too hard for his disciples to accept and some just walked away. Even disciples who followed him for awhile, turned away: "Many of his disciples who had been listening said, this is a very difficult message. Who can listen to this? . . . From that time on many of his disciples turned back and no longer remained with him" (John 6:60-66, Barclay).

Possibly Simeon recalled the prophecy in Isaiah 11:1, 10, which tied the idea of Messiah with the lineage of Jesse and that he would be a sign which the Gentiles would seek, implying the Jews as a whole would not.

"And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots . . . And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious."—Isaiah 11:1, 10

The gospel message offers suffering and death to its messengers. It is a narrow way that leads to life and few there be that find it (Matt. 7:14).

Anna the Prophetess

In the temple that day was Anna, a prophetess from the tribe of Asher. She devoted her life full-time in service doing what she could in the temple. Her service mainly consisted of fasting and prayers, night and day. Her age limited her physical ability from carrying out the heavier chores which younger women could perform, but that did not hold her back from finding a useful service in the temple. The heavenly Father blessed Anna's devotion that day as she gave thanks to the Lord. She witnessed the Messiah as a babe.

"Redemption" was a key message of Anna. As a widow she felt the emptiness of going home alone each night. She was married as a young woman in her teens, but after seven years her husband died. Being a widow for 84 years she was over 100 by the time Mary brought Jesus into the temple. The sorrows and suffering she witnessed as the multitudes of devout Jews faithfully came to the priests developed in her a sympathy for their plight.

Though Rabbinic tradition often ignored those like Anna, she represented a number of Israelites who were the salt which preserved the mass from festering corruption. She was a friend, an example and advisor of such. While described as a "prophetess," it may be more along the lines described in 1 Corinthians 14:3: "He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation and comfort."

Unlike Simeon, who waited for the consolation of Israel as a nation, Anna longed for the redemption of the people from their personal suffering. There were many in Israel of a similar mind. Followers of John the Baptist recognized the sinfulness of sin and the need of cleansing. It was this same element of Israel that Anna found listening. They sought redemption in Jerusalem and heard her words directed to Jesus. Day by day she would speak of him whom her eyes had seen, though it must be in whispers and with bated breath. The young babe already had many enemies, for they were in the city of Herod.

Like Simeon, Anna's age precluded her from experiencing Jesus' ministry. Many that would hear her words would forget and go their own way in time, but Mary would remember this day. Mary "kept all these sayings in her heart." (Luke 2:51)

The Question Box

"Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name, Immanuel."—Isaiah 7:14

P. L. Read

Question: What is the lesson from this text?

Answer: Some prophecies have more than one fulfillment. Isaiah 7:14 is one such. Failure to recognize this constitutes one of the main difficulties confronting the student of prophecy. One school of thought notes an early application, but is not able to see a later (usually a higher) fulfillment. This is particularly true of orthodox Jews—and perhaps especially in their understanding of Isaiah 7:14. Another school of thought, Christian in concept, sees the higher fulfillment but is not always able to recognize any earlier application.

In the study of any prophecy having, or which appears to possess, a predictive character it is important to obtain first an understanding of the immediate application; in other words, it is necessary to ascertain what it meant to the writer and those to whom he wrote. What was its meaning to them? Only after this question has been satisfactorily answered are we in a position to properly grasp the later application (or applications).

Let us look at a few illustrations of this. Consider, for example, Hosea 11:1. There we read: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt." Quite obviously, this has reference to the infant nation of Israel and its deliverance from the hand of Pharaoh. No orthodox Jew could fail to recognize this. Yet Christians, under the guidance of the New Testament, see that it has reference not only to the coming of Israel out of Egypt, but also to the coming of Jesus out of Egypt centuries later (Matt. 2:15, 19, 20). Moreover, guided by the holy spirit, the passage is seen by Christians to have yet another fulfillment—the calling out of spiritual Israel (the Gospel age church) from that which Egypt typifies, namely, the world (its aims, ambitions, associations, spirit).

Again, when David in Psalm 22, wrote, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" he was without doubt writing concerning himself. Most people unacquainted with the New Testament could come to no other conclusion. Yet we know that the Lord was overruling David's choice of words so as to make him speak prophetically of the Messiah who was to come (Matt. 27:46).

Take the words of Isaiah 61:1, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings." Here Isaiah, of course, could refer only to himself and his ministry. But he was a prophet through whom God spoke (2 Peter 1:21). Consequently his words could also be prophetic in nature; Jesus showed they were

predictive, when in Luke 4:21, he applied them to himself and his ministry, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." While, therefore, we know that there was a measure of fulfillment with Isaiah and his ministry, it is not difficult for us to recognize that only with Jesus are the words completely fulfilled.

Jesus Born of a Virgin

Returning now to Isaiah 7:14: As already noted, this prophecy appears to have had a dual fulfillment. It foretold an event shortly to occur, namely the birth of a son to a woman who was then a virgin, that therefore, could be known only to God. Hence this event could be recognized by King Ahaz as a sign that God would be with him and with the nation. The words of the prophecy, however, also describe a future glorious event, even the birth of Jesus of a woman who should be appropriately called the virgin, and who would remain so at the time of his birth. If the name Immanuel (God with us) was appropriately given to the boy in Isaiah's day, how much more fittingly might it be given to Jesus! He filled the prediction to the full. At the time of his birth, Mary, his mother, was a virgin, and he had no earthly father—Joseph being his foster father. As the angel Gabriel, in answer to Mary's question as to how she could have a son and still remain a virgin, replied (RSV): "The holy spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Corroborative Scripture

When we meditate for a moment on the virgin birth of Jesus, many corroborative scriptures come rushing to mind. We recall, for example, John the Baptist's testimony recorded in John 3:31, "He that cometh from above is above all; he that is of the earth is earthly; and speaketh of the earth; he that cometh from heaven is above all." Here John the Baptist is contrasting himself with Jesus. How shall he find appropriate words? "After the flesh" he was his cousin, yet it is obvious that he recognized Jesus as a being of another order, as being unique—in his perfection, his mission, his spirit. He found no words strong enough to mark the difference between himself and Jesus. Jesus is "from above"—"from heaven." I am "of the earth" and "speak of the earth." Jesus said of John that he was a burning and shining light. John, however, knew himself to be unworthy to loose the Lord's shoe-latchet. While the Baptist is not discussing the "virgin birth," his words certainly do not conflict with that doctrine.

Let us look next at the disciples' words found in John 16:29, 30: "Lo, now speakest thou plainly, and speakest no proverb . . . now we are sure that thou camest forth from God."

These words were the response of the disciples to a very clear statement of our Lord, which he had made in the preceding verse: "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world; again I leave the world and go to the Father." Of what other member of the human race could these words be truthfully spoken?

But "the time would fail me" to list all the scriptures which come to mind. Peter's reference to "a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19)—surely this would require a virgin birth! Job's inquiry, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean" (Job 14:4)—a question which had only a negative answer in his day. The description of our Lord given in Hebrews that Jesus was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners"; the Apostle John's reference to Jesus as "the only begotten of the Father" (John 1:14); as the "Word" of God (John 1:1); "the Word made flesh" (John 1:14); Paul tells us of one who "though being in God's form yet did not meditate a usurpation to be like God" (Phil. 2:6 *Diaglott*); who "was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9)—these all mark Jesus as one different, who took our human nature, and was "in all points tempted as we (his brethren) are," and was "yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

In writing a biography, it is customary to trace a man's career "from the cradle to the grave." In the case of Jesus one must go back further than the cradle and continue on beyond the grave. One must go back to "the beginning of the creation of God" (Rev. 3:14) to find the origin of the "only begotten one" (John 1:14), the Firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15). Only from that beginning may we trace the circumstances whereby a clean thing was brought forth out of an unclean—a root out of dry ground; a perfect man out of the imperfect, contaminated race. This was accomplished by a miracle. The mighty Logos became flesh— being born of a virgin.

Why is the Doctrine of the Virgin Birth Important?

The doctrine that Jesus was born of a virgin, rightly understood, is of great importance to both the church and the world. Had Jesus derived his life from an earthly father, the quality of that life would have been no different than ours. Ours was contaminated at the fountainhead, in father Adam. So also would have been the life of Jesus. It would have been a dying one, just as ours. Receiving such a life, he would have been on his way, willy-nilly, to the grave—just as we are. His death would not have been a voluntary one, but one from which he could not escape. He would thus have been without power to save us; he would not even have the wherewithal to save himself.

But when, in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son made of a woman (Gal. 4:4), it was not a case of an earthly father passing on to him the spark of a dying life. No, indeed! It was as Jesus himself declared, "I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me" (John 8:42).

An inspired writer puts the matter succinctly: "Such an high priest became us"; that is to say, such an high priest was appropriate to the necessities of our case; namely, one who was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb. 7:26).

Emmanuel—God With Us

This is the great message of the New Testament to the church, and eventually to the world: Emmanuel, God with us. God was with his ancient people, and spoke to them often and unmistakably by the mouth of his angels and his prophets. He was there in the

burning bush, in the *Shekinah* of the tabernacle, and in the pillar of cloud and fire, as well as in the angel of Jehovah, whom many believe was the pre-human Logos. But he came into new and closer relationship when he sent his Son, and when the mighty Logos became flesh. Jesus Christ was "God made manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16); he was so true and accurate a manifestation of God, so at one with the Father (in purpose and in spirit—not in person) that he could truthfully say, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). This was a fulfillment of the prophecy, "God with us," indeed—it was the fulfillment before which the earlier one fades into relative insignificance.

"God is with us" in the life of the church, for Jesus laid its foundations in his blood, and became himself its cornerstone, and the bishop of our souls. "God is with us" in our personal experiences, or Christ Jesus is our brother and Savior, our refuge under the consciousness of sin, our strength in temptation, a very present help in trouble. Therefore with the psalmist we say, "We will not fear," whatever may be our present lot, and whatever may befall us. "God is with us" under our present burden and in the unknown events of the future. "God is with us" in life, in death, in time, and in eternity.

Perspective of a Roman Soldier

The Slaughtering Soldier

“Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.”

—Matthew 2:16-18

Joe Knapp

Question:

*If you'd been there, a soldier in the fray,
One taught to take commands and to obey,
If you'd been told to slay the smallest child
Despite the cries of mothers driven wild,
Because you're told that you and you alone
Can stop the threat against the king's own throne,
If that's the role you're told that you must play,
What trembling thoughts are in your heart today?*

Answer:

*Yes, I was there that one fateful day;
A very young soldier and new to the fray,
Seeking to show support to the king,
To put down sedition, the threat to his ring,
Eager and willing to do his request,
To secure him his kingdom and my future behest
To receive of his favor a name of renown,
A name feared by all as supporting his crown*

*Though others around me with years in the fray
Seemed quivering and weak toward their work for that day,
And even our leader, Centurion so called,
While appraising the troops, looked himself quite appalled,
I eagerly awaited to show them my nerve,
Bolstered for certain that I had better serve
And show to King Herod, and show to them all,
That I had more nerve, and more zeal, and more gall.*

*So we rode forth that day to the town of our call,
Bethlehem by name; but none rode quite as tall
As I, while I dreamt of the fame that would be
To this newest of soldiers, the fearless one, he.
Not even real danger in this type of fray,
For no child nor its mother could call into play
A challenge against one so trained and so armed;
By nerve I'd slay more, and never be harmed.*

*My sword swung by rote and did it's cruel deed;
To the blood and cries at first I gave no heed.
I charged with more haste to do more than my share,
Swinging and stabbing as pain filled the air,
Till slowly I tired from the pace I had set,
And slowly the carnage reached into my breast.
It pounded my heart and pressed tight on my air,
And I sank into blackness and fear and despair.*

*How could I have wreaked such havoc unknown?
How trade such young lives for name or for throne?
I then saw why others had quivered that day
As they faced such revulsion of cowardly fray.
And I vowed I'd learn more of the kingly young boy,
To see if 'twas his way to build or to destroy.
For surely is man to be nobler in truth,
To defend 'gainst aggression, but not against youth.*

*From the Jews over many years I came to know
Of the promised Messiah whom justice would sow;
Who even soon by prophets foreshown
Was to come any day making his kingdom known.
A man so unworthy, so blood-stained as I,
Was then graced by the Savior, who heeded my cry.
One Jesus by name, this Centurion blessed,
Bringing life to my servant who lay in death's rest.*

*Then shattered was I when I heard Christ had died,
My faith growing weaker; I faltered and I cried.
But tears turned to joy when I heard he'd arose,
And I asked that he heal me, for he all sorrow knows.
I asked his forgiveness for slaying the youths,
And praised now this king who made known all God's truths.
I prayed long to serve him, my family, all of us,
Then said Peter, "God calls thee, . . . Cornelius."*

*Praise to his name, to his glory, and his love,
That he takes from the lowest and lifts them up above.
One such as I, seeking fame and trained to kill,
Slaughtered so many doing one false king's will.
Now forgiven and blessed many times and again,
I'm serving the true king who will bless all of men.
My burden he lifted at Calvary, and my sins he has taken away.
He'll carry your burden too, if to him you sincerely pray.*

Editor's Note: The poet above assumes that Cornelius may have been one of the soldiers assigned by Herod to kill the infants in Bethlehem and environs. This is poetic license. There is nothing in the Bible to either confirm or deny that reality.

***"Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth." —
Matthew 2:16***

"No, Herod, thou art not mocked of the wise men, but of a Higher than they. "He that sitteth in the heavens doth laugh at thee; the Lord hath thee in derision." "He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise. He taketh the wise in their own craftiness, and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong" (Psa. 2:4; Job 5:12-13)."

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary

The Suffering Messiah

Despised and Rejected

"The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day."—Luke 9:22

A verse by verse study in Isaiah 53

Few chapters are more tender or touching to the Christian than the "Ode to the Suffering Messiah" in Isaiah 53. In beautiful and classical language the prophet summarizes the pathos of the Son of God taking on the sins and sufferings of a sinful and depraved world.

Chapter divisions in the Bible are not part of the inspired word but have been arbitrarily assigned by scholars. In the case of this chapter, the subject matter really begins with the last three verses of the preceding chapter, and it is there that we will commence this study.

God's Servant Isaiah 52:13-15

Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.

The object of the first advent of the Messiah is succinctly captured in this introduction to Isaiah's theme. The four sub-divisions of his topic are briefly summarized: (1) the Messiah's ultimate glorification; (2) his humiliation; (3) the purpose for it; and (4) the fact that he would not be recognized as the Messiah.

The Hebrew words used in verse thirteen are ambiguous and open to a wide variety of meanings. A permissible rendering would be, "Behold, my servant shall gain understanding, he shall be lifted up, and exalted to the highest degree." Rather than the redundancy of using three words describing the exaltation of the servant, Isaiah is describing the results of two different experiences. Instead of "exalted," the Hebrew *ruwm* (Strong's 7311) is frequently translated "lifted up."

A New Testament equivalent of the thought is given in John 3:14, 15: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." The analogy is to the brazen serpent raised on a pole by Moses so that those looking upon it would not be hurt by the plague of serpents. Rather than describing Jesus' exaltation, it refers to him

becoming a public spectacle of sin by being lifted up upon the cross, concluding a sin offering for the transgressions of fallen humanity.

As a result of his sacrifice he was exalted to the highest degree. "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:8, 9).

Our text refers to the understanding gained by these contrasting experiences. Prof. W. E. Vine expresses it well by stating that only by experiencing both the human and the divine natures "could He comprehend the claims of the one and the needs of the other."

When we consider the disfigurements which men have caused to other men, verse 14 appears to be either a hyperbole or an obvious untruth. There have been many men more marred in appearance than was Jesus. Here again the problem lies with the obscurity of the Hebrew language. There is no Hebrew equivalent for the comparative word "more," though the grammar suggests it. The Syriac version phrases it, "His visage was so changed from that of man." The thought does not appear to be a comparison in absolute terms, but considering the fact that Jesus was perfect, the amount of disfigurement was in greater ratio than that which happens to others of mankind.

In one of the Messianic Psalms we read these words as expressing Jesus' thoughts at his crucifixion, "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people" (Psa. 22:6). This phrase not only expresses the humiliation but contains a beautiful word picture of the death of Jesus. The word here translated worm refers to a specific insect, the *tola* worm. Writing of this worm one author has this to say: "When the female of the scarlet worm species is ready to give birth to her young, she attaches her body to the trunk of a tree, fixing herself so firmly and permanently that she never leaves again. The eggs deposited beneath her body are thus protected until the larvae are hatched and able to enter their own life cycle. When the mother dies, the crimson fluid stains her body and the surrounding wood. From the dead bodies of such dead scarlet worms the commercial scarlet dyes of antiquity were extracted. What a picture this gives of Christ, dying on the tree, shedding his precious blood that he might "bring many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10)! He died for us that we might live through him" (The Biblical Basis for Modern Science, by Henry Morris, [Baker Book House, 1985; page 73]).

The final verse of the chapter shows the effects of his humiliation. "So shall he sprinkle many nations." It was the result of the acts of his scourging and "marring," leading to the final sacrifice on Calvary's hill that put Jesus in the position to "sprinkle many nations." The word translated "nations," the Hebrew *goyim*, usually refers specifically (though not exclusively) to Gentile or non-Jewish peoples. Thus Isaiah gives a hint of the universality of redemption which comes through Jesus' sacrifice.

This fact gives added force to the final phrase, "that which they had not heard shall they consider." In Old Testament times, God's word had been exclusively for the Hebrew nation. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Paul writes

that it was unto them that were "committed the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). Now the Gentile nations, which had not previously heard of the offer of salvation, would be told of the redemption that would be theirs through the sacrifice of Christ.

The Unrecognized One

Isaiah 53:1-3

Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

In the fifty-third chapter we have four distinct portraits of the Messiah. He is successively portrayed as (1) the unrecognized one; (2) the bearer of grief; (3) the redeemer; and (4) the benefactor. In the first three verses we receive some insight into why he was not more widely acclaimed at the first advent.

Having just stated that the nations would hear, the prophet proceeds to show that hearing alone is not the same as believing. The Apostle Paul elaborates on this principle in Romans 10:12-17, isolating faith as the necessary ingredient. Both the unbelieving Jews and the Gentiles who failed to respond to the Christian's message lacked this faith.

In the next verse the Messiah is presented in two related but distinct pictures. He was a tender plant. Strong's Concordance uses the phrase in defining the word, "a twig (of a tree felled and sprouting)." This accurately describes Jesus' relationship to the house of David, his ancestor. The royal house, or family tree of Jesus, was felled when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon deposed Zedekiah from the throne of David. Now that tree was about to sprout again, but at the first advent he was already appointed to lead that kingdom, yet his style was not as a mighty oak but as "a tender plant."

In a similar vein he was a "root" out of the "dry ground" of a lineage that had produced no heir to the throne for some 21 generations. This term "root of Jesse" is used by Paul in Romans 15:12, quoting from Isaiah 11:1, 10, "And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust." (See also Rev. 5:5 and 22:16.) As a perfect man, Jesus must have been without blemish and comely. Isaiah does not contradict this when he said that he hath neither form, comeliness, or beauty. Rather the emphasis is on his last phrase, "there is no beauty that we should desire him." It is well said that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." His was not the beauty of the conquering hero, the aggressive champion of macho manliness. Instead he was a gentle man, one who welcomed the little children, a teacher who associated with publicans and sinners, a Messiah who based his claim to that office partly on the fact that "the poor have the gospel preached unto them" (Matt. 11:5).

Rejected in the main by the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees alike, he called himself "the stone which the builders rejected" (Matt. 21:42). Instead of frequenting the halls of political, military, or religious power, we find him with the downcast of earth, acquainted with their grief. He was a physician more than a general. Therefore, his contemporaries turned their face from him, looking for a mighty deliverer instead.

The Bearer of Grief

Verses 4 to 6

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Even in the very act of associating himself with the human race in identifying with their sinful condition, he was esteemed as smitten of God. In this process of bearing our griefs, four distinct acts of the suffering Messiah are called to our attention: (1) wounded for our transgressions; (2) bruised for our iniquities; (3) chastised for our peace; and (4) beaten for our healing. These words were not haphazardly selected but are specific terms given in a specific order. The Hebrew word *chalal* (Strong's 2490), translated "wounded," appears 225 times in the Old Testament and usually carries the meaning of "to pollute" or "to profane" (Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985). In our text the thought appears to relate to the assumption of human flesh, "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3). The "bruising" (or "crushing," NASV) refers to the continuous experiences throughout his three and a half year ministry. The word is frequently translated "broken" in the Old Testament. It reminds one of Jesus' words: "And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me."

At the same time he was "breaking" his body, he was learning by experience what fallen humanity must learn to be educated in righteousness. These were the "chastisements" which will eventually bring at-one-ment, or peace, to the human family. However, harder "stripes" must often accompany "chastisements," or disciplinary experiences. "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes" (Luke 12:47, 48). In Jesus' case, we see the "stripes" literally applied in the "scourging" before Pilate (John 19:1).

The Redeemer

Verses 7 to 9

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my

people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

In contrast to the preceding verses that speak of the sufferings of his ministry these verses talk of his death. He died so that men might live; he suffered so that men might live eternally. His death provided for a release from the grave; the sympathy gained by his life with the fallen race provides the understanding necessary to help them maintain that life when resurrected.

The symbol of the lamb is not only appropriate because of its quiet submissiveness to shearing, but because it is a universal biblical symbol of the Messiah. It was the animal of the morning and evening sacrifice (Num. 28:2-8); it was the Passover sacrifice (Exod. 12:3-6); it was the sacrifice Isaac expected Abraham to offer on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:7); and it is the animal specifically identified with Jesus by the Apostle John, both in his Gospel and in the book of Revelation (John 1:29; Rev. 5:6; 13:8).

In Isaiah, it is the quiet submissiveness of the lamb that is emphasized. Thus Jesus quietly refused to rebut the accusations against him in Pilate's court (John 19:9-11). The reason for this silent acquiescence is given prophetically in Psalm 39:2, 9: "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred. . . . I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it." It was not that he did not have a good defense nor that he could not present it well, but because he recognized that it was God's will that he be sentenced and die.

So he was taken from the prison house of Caiaphas and the judgment seat of Pilate to be crucified. It is worthy of note that the Hebrew word translated prison in Isaiah (*ʿotser*, Strong's 6115) can also be translated "barren womb" and is so rendered in Proverbs 30:16. This rendering is in accord with the expression that follows in the Isaiah account, "who shall declare his generation," or as the New International Version phrases it, "who can speak of his descendants." As Adam was childless when expelled from Eden, so Christ, the second Adam, would die childless. The cause for this lack of children is specifically stated: "for he was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people was he stricken." His seed was not to come from procreation but from right of purchase as Isaiah points out in verse ten.

Alternatively, the New American Standard Bible and Rotherham's translation renders the latter part of the verse: "and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due?" Phrased this way, the text gives the thought that the prophet is predicting the unawareness of the populace to the fact that Christ was dying for their sins.

The thought of the ninth verse is well expressed in The Living Bible, "He was buried like a criminal, but in a rich man's grave; but he had done no wrong and had never spoken an evil word." Although sentenced to death as a malefactor, his body was not buried in a potter's field but in the rock-hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin. Though that council had found him guilty, Joseph raised a dissenting voice

(Luke 23:51) and showed the resoluteness of his council by donating his own tomb for the burial of Jesus. Joseph, at least, recognized the truthfulness of the prophetic word that the accused "had done no wrong and had never spoken an evil word."

The Exalted One

Verses 10 to 12

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

It seems incongruous that Jehovah was "pleased" to bruise his son. The Hebrew word is correctly translated and has the thought of "to take delight." The pleasure of God, however, was not in the bruising, but in the obedience of the son to submit to such treatment. The Father was pleased that by so doing his Son could reap the grand reward for his faithfulness and carry out the next step of the plan of redemption, the ultimate resurrection of all men from the bondage of sin and death. This thought is picked up later in the same verse when we read that, as a result of making his soul an offering for sin, the "pleasure" (same Hebrew root word) would "prosper in his hand."

Our text points out three rewards for Messiah's faithfulness in giving himself as a sin offering: (1) he would see his seed; (2) he would prolong his days; and (3) God's pleasure would prosper in his hands.

HIS SEED: Dying childless, he becomes the father of the entire human race. He secures all the rights and privileges of mankind's universal father, Adam. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). Not only a father, he becomes a better father. Adam, after his fall, became the father of a sinful and dying race. Jesus, through the education he will give his children in the kingdom, will be the father of a race that will live for ever—"the everlasting Father" (Isa. 9:6).

PROLONG HIS DAYS: Though uniquely created as the first of all of God's works, "the beginning of the creation of God" (Rev. 3:14), he was nevertheless mortal, subject to death. This fact is obvious when we consider that he died on the cross. Now, however, as a result of successfully giving the sin offering he was rewarded with eternal life. "For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26).

GOD'S PLEASURE: The pleasure or delight of God is in the accomplishment of his plans. These plans, as revealed in the Bible, are for the development of a perfect and sinless race living in full harmony with God's laws and harmoniously with each other.

These plans are in two steps: first, the development of a church, or bride for his son, to live with him in heaven and secondly, for the resurrection of mankind to live forever on a perfect and sinless earth. With both of these designs God is well pleased. Of the church, Jesus said in Luke 12:32, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We read of God's over-all pleasure in Ephesians 1:9, 10: "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him."

Verse eleven can be viewed in two different ways, both expressing a truth. The King James Version divides the verse into three thoughts: (1) the satisfaction gained by a review of his trying experiences while on earth; (2) the bringing to righteousness, justification, all of mankind by the knowledge thus gained; and (3) the removal of mankind's iniquity by substitutionary atonement. Other scholars divide the verse into only two concepts: (1) "he shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied by his knowledge [thus gained]; and (2) "he shall justify many for he shall bear their iniquities." The first concept calls attention to the justification of mankind based on Jesus' sin offering and the resulting application of Jesus' knowledge to humanity in Christ's kingdom, while the second emphasizes that their justification is a direct result of his sacrifice, through which he bore their iniquities.

In the final verse of our study another great biblical theme is introduced: the concept of the "spoil" which was originally taken from Adam and his race by the serpent through the introduction of sin. By that act the human race was "spoiled" or looted of its right to everlasting life, for that right was conditional upon perfect obedience to God's commands.

The return of this spoil is a three-step process. First, Christ recovers the "spoil" from Satan. "How can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house [plunder his goods (RSV)]" (Matt. 12:29). Second, as our text in Isaiah states, this "spoil" he will "divide" with "the strong," his church. Finally, they in turn will return the spoil to humanity, as recorded in Isaiah 33:23, "then is the prey of a great spoil divided; the lame take the prey."

Finally the prophet summarizes the four qualifications of the suffering Redeemer:

"He poured out his soul unto death"—Throughout his ministry on earth, he daily bore the sufferings of others, healing their diseases by "virtue" going out of him (Mark 5:30).

"He was numbered with the transgressors"—Not only did he assume "the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3), but dying the death of the worst of criminals, esteemed by others as cursed by God as well as man, for "cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal. 3:13).

"He bare the sin of many"—This was accomplished on Calvary's cross. "So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28).

"Made intercession for the transgressors"—Although the sacrifice at Calvary was sufficient to accomplish the redemption of all, there remained the matter of presenting it to the Father and making intercession for all. Thus Paul writes in Romans 4:25, "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." Intercession on behalf of the church, however, is not a one-time matter, but, as an Advocate, "he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

Though unrecognized by the majority at his first advent, what joy we have today to comprehend more and more the depth of the mercies of God in presenting us with the Son who has proved indeed to be "mighty to save."

"Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

God's Unspeakable Gift

*Of all the gifts that men have known,
There's one that stands beyond compare,
God gave his Son, his very own,
That men may live, and living, share
The glories of a perfect earth,
And life that lasts without an end.
When men shall have that second birth,
Their praise to God will then ascend.*

His Gentle Hands

*As Mary held the tiny babe so close,
She felt the joy of love that now could be expressed.
So soft the fingers curled about her own!
Tenderly she held them, and lovingly caressed
His gentle hands.*

*At twelve he sought the temple, all alone,
For now, with all the Law, he knew he must comply,
But Mary searched for him with sorrowing:
Not understanding then his need, but took him by
His gentle hands.*

*His life, though short, was spent in doing good,
And in a world so filled with pain; with simple trust,
The sick, the blind, the lame, all came to him,
In deep compassion of his soul He healed with just
His gentle hands.*

*But jealous men took counsel for his life.
A traitor `midst his own disciples they had found,
Who sold him, like a common slave, for price,
They came by night and took Him, and with cords they bound
His gentle hands.*

*Did you go with him through that fearful night;
When e`en before the first soft light of morning came,
They placed upon His head a crown of thorns,
And scourged him sore? Oh, did you see the blood that stained
His gentle hands.*

*Did you go with him to Golgotha's hill,
And see the sadness deep within his eyes so true?
And did you see those nails so cruel and cold,
As one by one they pierced his flesh, and drove them through
His gentle hands.*

*At last the hammer's dreadful sounds were stilled!
They lifted up that heavy cross against the sky,
While people passing by would mock him sore;
In agonizing grief and shame he hung there by
His gentle hands.*

*But did you see the love within his eyes,
Enduring, though his body, racked with pain, grew numb;
A love so deep, we cannot comprehend!
And did you weep to see those blood drops falling from
His gentle hands?*

*Oh did you hear him give that anguished cry?
Then suddenly the sun grew dark—the air was chilled!
“My God, Oh why hast thou forsaken me?”
’Twas finished then! Release from pain, relaxed and stilled
His gentle hands.*

* * *

*As Mary looked at him with tearful eyes,
In anguish of her heart that could not be repressed.
She thought back to the child that she had borne,
And how she’d held him close, and lovingly caressed
His gentle hands.*

Bonnie Jean Gaunt

NEWS AND VIEWS

Pastoral Bible Institute News

Internet Web Page

Today global communication has become fast and cheap. Researchers in every corner of the world can study any topic in depth using the resources of institutions large and small and a network of global communication links known as the World-wide Web. Most religious institutions maintain their own "home page" providing information on their beliefs and practices, together with fast and easy ways to ask questions or make comments.

The Pastoral Bible Institute has just brought up its own "home page" on the web so brethren and others can use our resources in their personal study. Those experienced in using the Internet should point their web browser to:

<http://www.heraldmag.org>

This is a new activity area for us and we expect to learn more as we gain experience. We begin of course by providing the content of past issues of **THE HERALD** and other publications we already have in electronic form. We also provide point-and-click access to other Bible Student "home pages" that contain material of interest to those who want to know more about Bible Students.

We invite you to visit us on the web. Send us your comments via e-mail to **ThePBI@aol.com** or use our toll-free number: **1-888-7-THE-PBI**.

New Booklets

The **PBI** continues to distribute special booklets we think may be of interest to our readers. Two new ones are now available: *When Pastor Russell Died* published by the Dawn Bible Students Association and *Comfort & Consolation* published by the Chicago Bible Students.

When Pastor Russell Died recounts the events within the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society following the death of Bro. Russell. Truths he taught were soon changed, then changed again as control over the Bible Student ecclesias became centralized at Society headquarters in Brooklyn.

Comfort & Consolation offers hope to the bereaved who may not know why we die, the state of the dead, or how God's love and mercy will heal broken hearts.

Both booklets are free and are available now.

Special Holiday Promotion

This issue we are announcing our first-ever discount policy for gift subscriptions. Send us three gift subscriptions at the usual cost of \$5 each and your own subscription will be extended one year free. Think about those who would enjoy the bi-monthly visits of **THE HERALD**. Your thoughtfulness will be remembered all through the coming year.

Letters

The articles in **THE HERALD** are sources of much encouragement and knowledge along my way. How blessed it is to know that the Kingdom is near and the promised blessings will come to the troubled world. May God bless all of you as you dispense praise to the name of our Loving God and His beloved son.

Lois Adams, Idaho

Around the World

For decades, The Middle East has been dominated by oil. But most of the excitement lately has been over natural gas. Middle East countries, some of them facing dwindling crude-oil reserves, are placing huge bets on gas-export plans to replace oil revenues. "In the 80s, we learned our lesson, not to put all our eggs in one basket," says Abdulla Al-Attiyah, Qatar's minister of energy and industry. The growing competition over gas could increase Middle East tensions. Worries include political struggles over the gas fields. Countries directly competing for financing and customers are considering multi-billion dollar projects, and they are undercutting each other by sacrificing relationships. Gas deals tightly bind selling and buying countries because it is difficult for buyer's factories and power plants to find an alternate source if supply is disrupted.

Wall Street Journal, 8/11/97

Continued violence in Kenya has threatened the stability of the currency on world markets. International Monetary Fund officials blamed the breakdown on the government's failure to take adequate measures to tackle corruption. Land shortage and ethnic rivalries have led to some of Kenya's worst political violence. In 1991, in the run-up to the country's first multi-party elections, some Kanu politicians began calling for what amounted to ethnically pure homelands and so-call Kanu zones. The result was a spate of clashes involving firearms, spears, arrows and machetes. Over 1,500 died.

Financial Times, 8/19/97

The U.S. is making inquiries in Moscow about seismic indications that Russia might have set off a nuclear device. Underground nuclear tests were banned under an international treaty. While indications suggested an underground explosions was touched off near the island of Novaya Zemiya, earthquakes or volcanic activity have not been ruled out.

Associated Press 8/28/97

Israel

The Forrest Garb Associates in Dallas, Texas, a firm of international petroleum experts which assists over 120 energy companies and governmental agencies, among them Exxon, Mobil and the U.S. Department of Justice, has determined that the Givot Olam Oil Company in Israel has discovered an area in central Israel which belongs to the same petroleum system found in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Algeria.

In an exclusive interview with **THE JEWISH PRESS** last week, the directors of Givot Olan, Shmuel Becker, an Israeli lawyer, and Mr. Tovia Luskin, a noted geologist, said that based on previous drills which produced good quality oil, and based on a comprehensive geological review of the area, "We are now going to drill a second well. We will then test the geological structure . . . [to determine how much oil and gas it contains]."

The Jewish Press, 9/18/97

Israel and Iran are conducting secret talks to reduce military tensions and to resolve Israel's debt of as much as \$1 billion to Tehran. The election of Mohammed Khatami as Iran's president has improved chances of a successful dialogue, sources say. A change is about to take place in the way the government is thinking about Israel, said a source close to Khatami. Israel would repay the funds in the form of private investment.

Jerusalem Post, 9/6/97

The founder of the radical Islamist movement Hamas, Abdel-Aziz Rantisi, defended the recent double suicide-bomb attack on a Jerusalem market which killed sixteen by saying "It was against the occupiers of our country." Mr. Rantisi's views on Israel have hardened over the years since he founded Hamas in 1987. Along with 412 other Hamas supporters, he was deported to the south Lebanese border in 1992 and later held for more than three years in Israeli administrative detention. Rantisi said, "We want to cooperate with Arafat but not under the umbrella of the Oslo accords. The Palestinian Authority are our brothers." Civil war within Palestinian controlled areas could erupt if the peace process does not produce results.

Financial Times, 8/29/97

German companies are employing historians to lay before the world their Nazi pasts in the hope of earning the kind of public relations reprieve managed by the company that was a Hitler favorite—Volkswagen. Hugo Boss was the latest company to come under scrutiny when it was forced to acknowledge that it was responsible for designing the black uniforms of Hitler's SS. Marketing analyst Thomas Niedert said that the company must acknowledge its involvement in the Third Reich if they want to avoid being associated with the Nazis. Multi-billion dollar lawsuits are being brought by Nazi victims against companies that supported and profited by the activities of the Third Reich.

Historian Hilmar Koppar said it is no coincidence that the change is coming on the heels of a \$20 billion lawsuit brought against Switzerland's biggest bank for hoarding assets taken away from Jews during World War II.

Bloomberg Business News, 9/7/97

Baruch Cohen has no interest in getting a job even though he has a wife and eight children at home. He and other men belong to the *haredim*—ultraorthodox Jews of many sects. They are the fastest-growing segment of Israel's population and its biggest class of welfare recipients. "We are serving God through study," Cohen explains. "He will provide so long as we continue to do his will. There is no reason to worry." Other Israelis do worry, however, because it's not just God who is being asked to support Cohen and his family. According to a study just released by Hebrew University, no developed nation between 1970 and 1993 had a smaller share of 25-to-54-year-old males in the work force than did Israel. The study found nearly 15 percent of Israeli children living in homes where prime-aged males did not work. Haredi growth outstrips the government's ability to help. The resentment [over welfare payments to the Haredi] is an important element in a religious-secular conflict over what kind of country Israel should be.

U.S. News & World Report, 7/28/97

Ha'aretz newspaper reported that Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli Prime Minister assassinated in 1996, agreed to negotiate a complete return to Syria of the territories Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war. The understanding would have involved Israel giving up land in exchange for full peace, and Syria's acceptance of Israeli demands on security arrangements. Talks between Israel and Syria were held in January 1996. Current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has resisted Syria's demand that talks should be resumed from the point at which they left off.

UPI 8/28/97

Islam

Demands by ethnic Albanians for greater rights erupted into conflict in July after the government sent special forces to take down flags flying outside the town hall. Police shot dead two young people and a third man was beaten and later died from injuries. The Moslem Albanians say they live in a regime of terror. Growing inter-ethnic violence create an atmosphere similar to Bosnia. "I am convinced that if what is happening in Albania today happens in Macedonia, the Balkans will go up in flames," said Kiro Gligorov, Macedonia's president.

Financial Times, 7/22/97

Attackers massacred at least 300 people in an Algerian village, slitting their throats, decapitating them and burning their bodies in the worst such attack since an Islamic insurgency began five years ago. The attackers were described as hooded and armed with

knives and axes, and spent five hours in the village of Rais in the Sidi Moussa region. They placed the decapitated heads of some of the victims on the doorsteps of their homes. Authorities have attributed such attacks in the past to the Armed Islamic Group, the most violent of the Muslim militant factions. The group is seeking to establish an Islamic regime in Algeria. Since then, about 1,500 people have been slain.

Bloomberg News, 8/29/97

Hundreds of Bosnian Muslims who had returned to their prewar homes in the town of Jajce were forced to flee again as Croatian crowds threatened violence. Although the leaders of the two factions have attempted to stop ethnic violence, little success has been achieved.

Bloomberg News, 8/7/97

Christendom

The Supreme Court struck down a federal law intended to protect religious practices from government interference. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act, passed with broad bipartisan support and the backing of the President, said governments can infringe on religious practices only if they have a health, safety or other interest in doing so. Since its passage, the law has been invoked in a broad range of emotional disputes. Within hours of the ruling, congressional and religious leaders vowed to fight the decision. The law could have impact on minority faiths. People could be prohibited from praying Arabic, Kikh Little League players could be required to remove their turbans, evangelical students could be obliged to attend classes on evolution. "It'll first start happening to minority faiths," said Oliver Thomas, counsel on religious liberty for the National Council of Churches. Before the act was passed, Hmong families in Rhode Island were unable to prevent autopsies of dead relatives, although they believe such a procedure destroys the possibility of everlasting life.

Washington Post, 6/26/97

The nation's largest Lutheran church lifted Reformation-era condemnations against the Roman Catholic Church, and decided to try again to establish closer ties with the Episcopal Church. Delegates to the biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to approve a statement declaring that both Catholics and Lutherans agree all persons depend on the grace of God—and not human merit—for their salvation. The church overwhelmingly endorsed a Lutheran-Catholic declaration on justification by faith alone. The church said 16th century condemnations of Catholic teachings in Lutheran confessions no longer apply. Delegates voted against a pact that would closely link the Episcopal Church. They decided to pursue a two-year process of discussion instead.

Washington Post, 8/20/97

Science

Experts fear floods and drought will make its way across the globe this coming year. The disastrous recent flooding in central Europe and the worsening drought in North Korea and central China may both be due to what scientists are calling the "climate event of the century." Climate experts attending a three day international conference on climate research said that the "El Nino" phenomenon that began in early summer could surpass that of 1982-83 which claimed nearly 2,000 lives and damaged crops and property worth \$20 billion dollars. "El Nino" is a term given to the Christ Child, and now refers to the irregular appearance of warm surface water in the pacific off the western coast of South America that affects global wind and rainfall patterns. In July, the water temperature was 4 to 5 degrees above normal. Although scientists have made huge strides in predicting the occurrence and climatic effects of El Nino, they still do not know what triggers its appearance, or influences its strength. However, it appears to be increasing in frequency and dimension, raising suspicions that they may be related to global warming.

Financial Times, 8/28/97

Leading scientists are being pressured to pin down the threat of climate change to specific parts of the world. Scientific uncertainty is the crux of an international dispute over what should be done to tackle the problem. Scientists fear that increasing emissions of gases including carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels are causing damaging changes in temperature and rainfall. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has estimated that temperatures could rise by 1 to 3.5 degrees centigrade over the next century if the world carries on emitting greenhouse gases at the current rate. Consequences could range from increased drought in some countries to increased flooding in others.

Environmental News, August, 1997

Book Review

The Bible Code, Michael Drosnin, Simon & Schuster, 1997

[Note: Most book reviews that appear here are from the News & Views editor. However, because of the popularity of this book even among Bible Students, we thought it appropriate to publish this extract from reviews by Ronald S. Hendel and Shlomo Sternberg published in the August 1997 *Bible Review*.]

This book is based on a paper published in the journal *Statistical Science* describing a computer program to search for words hidden in the traditional Hebrew text of Genesis. What would happen if the text was considered as a string of letters with no breaks between words? Would the names of famous medieval rabbis be spelled out by letters an equal number of letters apart? In fact they were. The authors claimed that the number of matches found was much greater than what could be expected by chance alone.

Drosnin takes this work further by expanding his search to all five books of Moses. He attempts to show that by this system one can see predictions of future events. Featured on the cover is one of these: the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzak Rabin. In this example the computer found that if you take every 4772nd letter in the Hebrew text, the name Yitzak Rabin can be found. The letters appear in Deuteronomy. Drosnin claims that Rabin's name is crossed with the words "assassin that will assassinate" but in fact the verse says nothing about assassins or assassinations. It deals with cities of refuge where those guilty of accidental manslaughter may flee. Drosnin mistranslates Deuteronomy 4:41,42, which reads, "a slayer who happens to have killed" as "assassin that will assassinate." With this method, it is pretty clear you can predict anything.

The claim is made that the biblical text being used is "the original Hebrew version of the Old Testament, the Bible as it was first written." More than this, Drosnin states that "all Bibles in the original Hebrew language that now exist are the same letter for letter." This statement is false. We do not have the original Hebrew version of the Old Testament and all ancient manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible that we do have differ in the number of letters. This is a fatal problem for a computer program that relies on the manipulation of exact numerical sequences of letters. Which manuscript or edition should be used?

Because the Bible in Drosnin's computer is not the original text, is not in "God's own handwriting," these claims are based on false assumptions and are, in short, a hoax.