

### Though the fig tree does not blossom.

This is the first line of a song, based on the last few verses of Habakkuk, that I have always enjoyed singing since I first came across it about 35 years ago. Many readers of this magazine will have visited countries such as Turkey, Greece, Portugal and Spain where fig trees are well-established, just as I have done. But have any of you ever seen a fig tree with blossom on it?

We are used to seeing fruit trees in this country with blossom on them in the spring, that later produce fruit, like the apple trees in my garden. The flowers in spring are hopefully visited by bees which collect pollen from the stamens (male) and transfer it to the stigma of the female carpel (from Gk *Karpos*, fruit) of another flower. The ovary of the carpel grows into the flesh of the fruit and the fertilised ovules (eggs) turn into the seeds (pips). So what we eat and enjoy in such fruit comes from ovary tissue.

Figs are different! I still have vivid memories of eating my first fresh fig in France about 50 years ago! But, to get back to botany, why are they different? What we call the fruit of the fig tree is in fact a pear-shaped structure enclosing a large cluster of small 'flowers', an inflorescence, which cannot be seen until you cut open the fig, and that is why fig trees don't have blossom like apple trees. The outer case, the syconium (Gk *syco*, fig) is an extension of the stem that joins the fig to a branch, and so the flesh of the fig comes from stem tissue and not ovary tissue. The fig then is in a sense an inverted 'flower', a receptacle containing multiple tiny ovaries that, in a well-ripened mature fig, form the sweet pink/red centre of the fig. The common fig, *ficus carica*, the one usually grown to be eaten, matures without pollination. Other varieties are pollinated by wasps which enter the fig via a small hole, called the ostiole or 'eye', at the end of the fig opposite the stem.

Fig trees generally have squat, thick trunks and wide spreading branches which, with their large leaves, produce plenty of shade, which is why they are often planted near to houses to produce a cool place to sit during the day. Was that why Nathanael was under a fig tree when Philip spoke to him and took him to meet Jesus (John 1:48)? Sitting under one's vine and one's own fig tree becomes a symbol of peace, safety and blessing (1 K 4:25; Mic 4:4; Zc 3:10). It is almost certain that the sycamore tree that Zacchaeus climbed (Luke 19:4), perhaps one outside his own house, was not the sycamore maple with which we are familiar in this country but the *Ficus sycomorus* (*sukon* fig *moron* mulberry), a fig tree, all of which belong to the mulberry family.

Enough of botany! Habakkuk obviously knew all about figs as he ends his short book with a song referring to them. Perhaps, like me, he thought they were delicious and as such were a good symbol of God's gracious gifts and blessings. Did he know that they have a high fibre content, a mild laxative effect, a high content of vitamins C and B, a high mineral content including Ca, P, Fe, K, and Mn, and could be used as a poultice to treat boils, (2 K 20:7)? Maybe not, but he certainly knew they would be missed if they did not appear when expected, as his song at the end of his short book makes clear:

Even though the fig trees have no fruit  
and no grapes grow on the vines,  
even though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no grain,  
even though the sheep all die  
and the cattle stalls are empty,  
I will still be joyful and glad,  
because the Lord God is my saviour.  
The Sovereign Lord gives me strength.  
He makes me sure-footed as a deer

and keeps me safe on the mountains.  
(Hab 3:17-19 GNB)

Note that where the AV has blossom, the GNB has fruit, and the REB and NIV refer to buds, all making my botany lesson unnecessary, although I hope that it was of some interest.

I understand that Habakkuk means ‘embrace’ or even perhaps embrace in the sense of ‘wrestle with’ and both meanings are appropriate to the content of this little book. Habakkuk is wrestling with the problem of evil and what he considers to be the injustices suffered by many of his people and others, but also is engaged himself in a struggle with God. He certainly does not act as a sycophant, a flatterer or toady, in relation to God. Sycophant means literally ‘to show the fig’ (*syc*o fig, *phaino* show). If you make a fist and then put your thumb between your first two fingers you will get an overall shape that to some degree resembles a fig. This, I understand, was an insulting gesture used in making an accusation. In doing so the person was thereby informing someone else about the accused, someone who the accuser wanted to impress or flatter, perhaps seeking from them a reward of some kind. Hence a sycophant is a flatterer or a parasite.

Our prophet, probably living around the time of Nebuchadnezzar, c. 600 BC, takes God seriously to task over the way God seems to be dealing with people. He is concerned particularly about the violence he sees around him and how the wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted. He asks God why He allows this and how long it will be before He does something about it. Habakkuk is clearly distressed about the fact that God seems to be using evil and wicked people to punish His people for their sins and he challenges God for keeping silent while this is going on. God seems to have made men, he suggests, like fish and creeping creatures that the rich and powerful can kill off at their pleasure and Habakkuk asks; ‘Are they to draw the sword every day to slaughter the nations pitilessly?’ (1:17)

The prophet then decides to wait to see how God will respond (2:1). Something like an answer comes in the form of a vision suggesting that God has things in hand but it may take some time to develop. Nevertheless, Habakkuk gathers that though there will be delays, he is to wait for God’s action, for it will surely come before too long. The reckless will lack an assured future, he is told, while the righteous will live by being faithful. (2:2-4) This verse is used in the NT, twice by Paul (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11) and once in Hebrews 10:38-9, so becoming a central part of the early preaching of the gospel.

Having chided God for keeping silent, Habakkuk later (2:20) says ‘The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silent in his presence.’ In spite of all the difficulties he has in understanding God and His purpose, he lays great stress on being faithful to God, by trusting Him to bring about the salvation of mankind from the injustices which were so apparent to Habakkuk in the world of his day. In some respects, the world is still much the same and can we do better than join Habakkuk in his firm intention to continue to rejoice in God even when we experience want, violence and injustice in our lives? Even though we may wrestle with God and the injustices of this world, can we still, like Habakkuk, embrace God!? and pray and sing:

Though the fig tree does not blossom

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Yet will I rejoice in the Lord, the God of my salvation!

May the next fig you eat be a joy to you!

**Les Boddy**

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## **Tribute to Brother Wilfred George Lambert (1926-2011)**

Wilfred was a unique individual, a brilliant scholar and highly acclaimed in academic circles throughout the world. Throughout his life he remained a faithful Christadelphian, never seeking promotion but responding when requested to invitations to share his expertise for the enlightenment of others, both in Biblical exposition and Ancient History, and always willing to serve when requested, as for example in musical skill.

A member of Birmingham Central Ecclesia in his teens, he went up to Cambridge in 1943 to study Classics, and returned in 1948 to study Ancient Middle Eastern languages including Hebrew, Sumerian and Assyrian. It was there that he and Brother John Weaving became friends. After University, he taught Latin and Greek at Westminster Under School and joined Croydon Ecclesia. From there he advanced into more specialist study of the languages, especially Assyrian, and progressed to University teaching in Canada and America for several years. He returned in 1964 to lecture at Birmingham University where he was eventually appointed Professor of Assyriology and remained there until his retirement. During this time and after retirement, he continued his research into ancient records especially the decipherment of inscriptions on clay tablets, of which there are thousands in the British Museum, where Wilfred studied regularly right up to a few weeks before his death. His own substantial collection of artefacts have now been transferred to the British Museum and to London University.

In the course of his research he travelled widely, and in private conversation he had many fascinating stories to tell of visits to Museums all over the world, including a crossing from East to West Berlin when the Wall was standing, and visits to Iran and Iraq, the homeland of his source material.

A member of the Endeavour Committee from 1961, he advocated reformation and re-thinking within the community, presenting exposition with thoughtful and well substantiated evidence. When consulted about a Biblical interpretation he would always reply slowly and in a clearly defined voice, 'Well it does depend upon what you mean by it'.

Although he appeared reclusive, he was in fact an interesting man to those who appreciated his scholarship and I much enjoyed entertaining him when he came to speak at my ecclesia, including a visit only 6 months ago.

**Sheila Harris**

**Wilfred** edited The Endeavour Magazine from 1967 to 1970 and he presented studies at The Christadelphian Summer School at Fircroft College every year since 1966. His contributions are remembered with thanks to God for his talented service and we look forward by God's grace to meeting again at the resurrection, as he did.

Early in 2010, Wilfred and a British Museum colleague were involved in a significant discovery. The British Museum has a vast collection of 130,000 cuneiform tablets and fragments from Mesopotamia that were acquired in the 19th century. Wilfred has been a regular visitor to the Museum where, for many years, he has been translating the cuneiform writing on these tablets. He recognised what he saw on two of these as part of something he had seen before on the famous Cyrus Cylinder.

The Cyrus Cylinder was discovered in 1879 during excavations at Babylon. It was written in Babylonian cuneiform on the orders of the Persian king Cyrus the Great, after his conquest of Babylon in 539 BC. It has acquired iconic status because it authorises the return of deported peoples to their homelands and implies that there would be freedom of religious

expression throughout the Persian Empire. This is consistent with the Biblical account which portrays Cyrus as a tolerant and enlightened ruler.

Remarkably, the two new pieces apparently assist with the reading of passages on the Cylinder that are either missing or are obscure, and therefore help to improve the understanding of this iconic document. In addition, they show that the 'declaration' on the Cylinder is much more than a standard Babylonian building inscription. It was probably an imperial decree that was distributed around the Persian Empire, and it may have been pronouncements of this sort that the author of the Biblical book of Ezra was able to draw upon when writing about Cyrus.

One of Wilfred's international colleagues announced Wilfred's death as follows: 'Wilfred Lambert, the greatest Assyriologist of the late 20th century, has died. Unfailingly charming and lively, he combined intimate knowledge of a huge spectrum of texts with an abiding care for how they would have come together in real life.' Another said: 'Even though he has left us his work will continue to inform and inspire for generations to come.'

**Editor**

### **Strength through Weakness**

As disciples of the Lord Jesus we have the privilege of being able both to look back and to look forward. Through the Scriptures we can look back to the long ages of God's purpose which laid the foundation of all that we believe in, events which found their culmination in the life, the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Through the same Scriptures we can look forward also to the future culmination of God's purpose. What the Lord Jesus accomplished in the past establishes the pattern for the future. The power of God which was active in bringing His Son back from the dead is the same power that will one day be active again in bringing His people from the grave. It is a source of strength and encouragement to us to look back and to look forward to the consummation of God's purpose when He will restore all things and replace faith with sight and mortality with life.

Yet when we emphasise the past and the future in this way we are left, I sometimes think, with a feeling that God was active in the distant past and will be active again in the future; but in the present He has left us in a sort of limbo, waiting for Him to exercise His power again. When we talk about our faith, it often seems that we do so either in the past tense or the future tense. If we do see God at work in the present then it concerns nations, governments and political events in the Middle East.

This however, was not the way the Apostle Paul wrote about his faith. Certainly, no one was more aware of the foundations that had been laid in the past and no one looked forward with greater eagerness than he to the consummation of God's purpose, yet he also saw the power of God as a transforming influence already active in his own life and in the lives of his fellow disciples. In II Corinthians 4 he describes two processes: the forces ranged against him and which threatened to weaken and destroy him – and the power of God and of His Son which sustained and strengthened him. In verse 8 he describes the tribulations he had to endure as a missionary:

We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (II Cor 4:8).

Now Paul did not regard these troubles that came upon him merely as setbacks that he must put up with for a while and which eventually, in God's good time, will be reversed. It was not a matter of experiencing sorrow, trial and death today and joy and glory resurrection in the future. Rather he experienced a present joy which works through sorrow; a glory

found in hardship and trial, a wholeness which comes through suffering and a life which emerges through dying.

Paul could have interpreted persecution and hardship as dying with Christ and success on the mission field as sharing in Christ's triumph, or the bad things in his life with the death of Jesus, and the good things with his resurrection. But he did not make that distinction. He recognised the power of God even in his own weakness. He continues in verse 10: 'Always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.' The point that he is making throughout this chapter and elsewhere is that he shares in the victory of Christ even while he is experiencing apparent defeat. He experiences life and death simultaneously. He is speaking not only of his own experience; he includes all believers in what he is describing: 'For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh' (v.11). It is significant that he uses the term 'flesh' in this context, a term that elsewhere in his writings signifies corruption and sinfulness, the opposite of that which is 'spiritual.' By using that term he is saying that even his present, mortal existence is already subject to the transforming power of the Risen Lord. The full and perfect manifestation of the life of Jesus will be revealed at the end, but it is already begun and shines through the sin and suffering of the present.

A recurring feature of the Apostle's writings is the tension between what we might call the 'here and now' and the 'not yet' of salvation. It is as though Paul's vision of future glory was so intense that he lived as though it were already here. From this perspective it is not so much that the future follows the present and replaces it, but that the future throws light on the present and enables Christ's people to live as though it were already here.

Paul knew that if God had once revealed Himself supremely in the degradation of the cross, then there is no human situation in which He may not be found. Paul therefore shared Christ's death in order that he might share in his life. Experiences which by normal standards stand opposite to each other are found in Christ to overlap: the glory of God is found in shame, His power in weakness, His wisdom is revealed in what to the view of the world is foolishness.

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (II Cor 4:16-18).

Here is one of those paradoxical phrases which Paul delights to use. How do we look at it if it is 'unseen'? In one sense because it lies in the future, it is seen only by the eye of faith. But in another sense we can look at it because the age to come is by faith already present. And Paul could regard the troubles of the present as 'light affliction' because they will be overshadowed by the exceeding and eternal weight of glory that will be revealed in the future and which shines through the sin and the suffering of the present. Sometimes it is not clear whether he is talking of the future resurrection of believers or of their present transformation. The two events seem to merge into one another, or he uses the language of one to describe the other. For example:

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Rom 8:11).

Is Paul describing the general resurrection at the end of the age? No, he speaks of the bringing to life of your 'mortal bodies', not immortal. The pattern that was established by Jesus, of humiliation and death followed by resurrection, is the same pattern that he bids his people not only to look forward to in the future but also to conform to in this life. The

power that restored him to life is active in giving new life to his disciples. The end is here, but not yet here; the future is pressing into the present.

This present experience of redemption is symbolized supremely in baptism. That symbolic event looks back to the death of Jesus as something that happened long ago; it is a symbolic dying with Christ. At the same time it looks forward also to the future resurrection. Thus we identify with our Lord's death and resurrection in the past, we follow the same pattern in our daily lives as we die to sin and rise to newness of life, thus anticipating the resurrection in the future. The dying and rising are one event enacted in the present, the believer's experience here and now.

Paul several times distinguishes between what he calls 'the outward man' and the 'inward man': 'Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day' (v.16). The outward man is the natural body, which belongs to this present age. The inward man is the transformed body of the age to come, the spiritual body. The outward can only decay, not only because of his afflictions as an apostle, but because he shares in the mortality of a world which is passing away. Yet the two exist side by side, in this age. The inward man is already being formed; he does not need to wait until the resurrection of the dead – he already exists. The forces ranged against Paul and which made his life so difficult were in fact part of the means by which God was moulding his character, transforming him into a new man who reflected the character of Christ. In this way he is enacting in his own experience the dying and rising of his Lord. And that is why he speaks in chapter 12 of God's power being perfected in weakness:

And he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (II Cor 12:9f).

From a worldly point of view, the life that Paul chose to lead as a missionary of Christ was something that weakened him and shortened his natural life. Yet as his human powers waned, so he felt a new power coming into him enabling him to make another of his paradoxical declarations: 'when I am weak, then I am strong'. And Paul experienced that power from above, not despite weakness, but in weakness itself. He did not merely put up with his infirmities; he gloried in them. He viewed all the setbacks and calamities that came upon him not as obstacles, but as stepping stones to knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Paul did not sit back and let Christ take over. Christ was working through him giving him the strength to do things that he could not have done in his own resources. He often writes in terms of a co-operation between himself and his Lord: 'I laboured more abundantly than them all, yet not I, but Christ' (I Cor 15:10). 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me' Phil 4:13). 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' he counsels the Philippians (2:12), emphasising the human side of the process, and then adds 'For it is God who works in you, both to will and to do for his good pleasure.'

It is easy to think that Paul's experience of the living Lord was unique; he was after all a chosen Apostle. Yet is that power not extended to us also? We may not face the trials that faced Paul, or bear the burdens and responsibilities of an Apostle, but the grace that was extended to him is surely given to us if we open our hearts to the influence of the Lord Jesus and put our lives at his disposal.

There must be many times when we feel inadequate to the tasks laid upon us, when we are conscious of our own weakness. Yet it is precisely in those times when we lack self-

confidence that Christ is willing to offer us strength to continue the work he has set us. It does not come to us if we give up, if we refuse to use the opportunities presented to us or if we do not attempt to translate our faith into action. Nevertheless, if we labour on his behalf and try to continue the work that he once began and which he bids his people to continue, then he will surely extend to us that power that is found in weakness.

His strength comes to us when we strive to resist temptation, when we seek insight into his purpose and when we need help to grow into the maturity and fullness of his character. It comes to us in the practical side of service: proclaiming the Gospel, ministering to his people, fulfilling the responsibilities of the ecclesia or giving an answer to those who question us about our beliefs; all these things are the arena of Christ's activity through us. And, if we are aware of his continuing presence among us and are willing to open our hearts to his influence, allowing him to work through us, then we also will be able to say with the Apostle Paul: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us' (II Cor 4:7).

(All Bible quotations from The New King James Version)

**Mark Robertson**

Nothing is so strong as gentleness,  
nothing so gentle as real strength.

Francois de Sales

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## **Meeting the Lord**

### **The voice of God**

As we read the Bible we are listening to the voice of God, conveyed to us by His spirit, His breath, through human channels of language, culture and history and above all through Jesus the living Word. We read of the encounters of the Lord with patriarchs, prophets, sinners, the blind, the lame, the leper and we see the transformations, the changed lives, new visions, new aspirations, 'Whereas I was blind, now I see.'

### **Transformation**

Some are conversions of mind and of character not only of body. We think of the forgiven paralytic who rises from his pallet, Legion who seeks to follow Jesus and the Samaritan woman who draws the people of her village to believe in Him. We think also of Zacchaeus, converted from extortion to beneficence, of Peter, who by humbly acknowledging that he could no longer boast of his love, was accepted for his loyalty, and of Thomas who changed from doubt to worship. But above all we think of Paul. His encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road led to an experience of transformation, a rejection of the past, a breaking down of prejudice and a call to a lifetime commission of service and sacrifice.

Dramatic as these scenes may appear, it is the same Lord who meets us at the Mercy Seat as we open our hearts in prayer. If we listen to Him as we journey through life, knowing that He understands, He can change us now, as Paul declares: 'We all, with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to

glory, even as by the spirit of the Lord.’ And He will change us now if we come in prayer with empty hands.

### **Guidance**

But it does not stop there. He will also guide us, as many have experienced when surprising opportunities are presented, unknown doors open and unexpected paths appear, if we have eyes to see and faith to believe. The Lord is our Shepherd who will lead us on the way of life, sometimes requiring sacrifice but ultimately leading to joy and fulfilment, so that with confidence we may sing:

Things deemed impossible I dare, Thine is the call  
and Thine the care;  
Thy wisdom shall the way prepare;  
Thy will be done.

As we go on our journey of faith, we are sometimes uplifted by a word, a thought from the Bible, or a hymn, from a brother or sister, from a book or a passing remark, which can ring a bell in our own heart, as a message from the Lord, helping us on our way, providing for our need for vision and direction, as we follow our daily path of life and encouraging us by the knowledge that He is there, the risen Lord, accessible and attentive to our call.

### **Presence**

Above all we know that the risen Lord is alive and as he promised He is with us always. We are never alone, in difficulties, on journeys, in trials and tribulations He is here and we may talk to and listen to Him at any time. He is our Comforter. And this is the work of the Spirit through Jesus in us.

**He meets us where we are  
To lift us up  
To what we may become  
Infused by him.  
Empowered by Spirit grace  
To see the light  
Of God’s own glory shine  
In Jesus’ face.**

**Thank you Lord.**

**Sheila Harris**

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The entire New Testament is witness that the real presence of Christ was not withdrawn when the Resurrection ‘appearances’ ceased.

The unique and evanescent meetings with the risen Lord triggered off a new kind of relation which proved permanent.

C H Dodd

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**Greek Gems**

**12 Koinonia** in Greek means sharing, having things in common, fellowship, a relationship with others in Christ and above all in the Lord, not just united by an acceptance of basic beliefs. This may provide a foundation, but these humanly devised creeds must lead to deeper understanding as we grow in faith and knowledge and explore the further riches of God's revelation. Such shared and mutually exchanged thoughts further enhance the richness of true fellowship. Above all, we are bound in unity through baptism in the body of Christ and unite with him in the Breaking of Bread. As Paul so clearly shows us in 1 Corinthians 12, we need each other with all our different gifts to enable the body to work. The church at Corinth was bitterly divided by racial, social and intellectual divisions, but Paul does not counsel separation but much rather, working together with mutual respect. But above all it is the bond of love which unites us in Christ: 'The greatest is love.'

'By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples  
if ye have love one to another.' John 13:35.

**Sheila Harris**

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### **Treasurer and Subscriptions Secretary for *The Endeavour Magazine***

After over 15 years of voluntary service, Ruth would like to retire. We thank her for the invaluable work she has done in keeping the venture financially viable and for dealing so efficiently with subscriptions and distribution. So the Committee is looking for someone to fill the above post and the work involved is detailed below:

- 1). Keeping the financial records and producing the annual accounts.
- 2). Producing an agenda for the AGM and the minutes.
- 3). Arranging for printing of the magazine in May and November.
- 4). Mailing the magazine in June and December.
- 5). Keeping a database of subscribers, at present kept in Excel.
- 6). Reminders for payment for the current year are sent out with the June issue with an option to pay for two years. A second reminder is sent with the December issue to those who have not paid.

Anyone who is willing to volunteer should contact (Mrs) Ruth Marsters for more information. Tel. 01366 500030 email. [end@marstersvoice.co.uk](mailto:end@marstersvoice.co.uk)

### **My Lord Delayeth His Coming**

#### **The Great Disappointment**

On October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1844, thousands of the religious followers of the Reverend William Miller climbed various mountain tops in New England. At midnight, that night, they were expecting to be caught up in a 'great heavenly rapture.' Many of the reverend's loyal followers had sold all their worldly goods, some were dressed in ascension clothes and others sat patiently in metal bath tubs.

Of course nothing happened. They all trudged back home in great humiliation having become the subject of great ridicule. The event was called the 'Great Disappointment.' Miller's church rapidly fell apart though it did later reform with a new leader. A great number of believers down the centuries have embraced the hope of the Lord's return and have perhaps experienced some form of disappointment, (though less spectacular) .

### **Imminent eschatology – the *end* is near**

Jesus encouraged the apocalyptic worldview which suggested that his current age was about to end. John the Baptist declared – ‘the kingdom of heaven has come nigh’ (Mat 3:2), and he warned of imminent judgment as ‘*now* also the axe is laid at the root of the trees’ (Mat 3:10).

Imminent eschatology is apparent in the writings of Paul. Exhorting believers to love, he warns – ‘And do this, understanding the present time: *The hour has already come* for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here’ (Rom 13:11-12). He provides a wonderful vision of resurrection to come soon – ‘Listen, I tell you a mystery: *We will not all sleep*, but we will all be changed . . .’ (1 Cor 15:51). ‘According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that *we* (not those) *who are still alive*, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. . . . *we who are still alive and are left* will be caught up together with them in the clouds’ (1 Thess 4:15-17). The time is so short and it affects everything: ‘From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them’ (1 Cor 7:29-31).

Paul warned that the ‘*culmination of the ages has come*’ (1 Cor 10:11).

This eschatological imminence is particularly apparent in Mark’s Gospel. Here, Jesus declared – ‘the time is fulfilled (has expired) . . . the kingdom of God has drawn near’ (1:15). ‘Truly, I say to you there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God *after it has come with power*’ (9:1 ESV). The Greek verb implies that they should not see it ‘coming,’ but as having actually ‘come in its completeness’.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus warns his disciples of persecution and encourages them to endure it to the end. He sends them out to preach giving them a comforting prophecy; ‘. . . you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel *before the Son of Man comes*’ (Matt 10:23). At his trial Jesus tells the High Priest – ‘. . . *you will see* the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven’ (Mark 14:62).<sup>2</sup>

In the prophecy given on the Mount of Olives Jesus describes a number of events leading to the Jewish tribulation of AD 70. Interestingly Mark only gives three verses for events beyond this time. ‘But in *those days*, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened . . . *they will see* the Son . . . coming in clouds . . . he will send out the angels to gather his elect . . .’ (13:24-27). His warning to the High Priest is further confirmed when he assures *this generation* it ‘will not pass away until all these things take place.’ The new age is dawning, indeed, with earthquakes and famines will be ‘the beginning of the birth pains’ (13:8). Therefore it is bound to come soon. The warning in Mark then is ‘be on your guard;’ ‘stay awake . . . the master . . . will come in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep . . . stay awake.’

### **Eschatological fervour is curtailed**

Paul’s writings were written before the four gospels. Many scholars believe that Mark’s Gospel was written in the war period – AD 66-70. Many of them are convinced that Matthew and Luke’s Gospels were written in the decades after that time.<sup>3</sup> Matthew and Luke then, had time to reflect on the issue of Christ’s return. They confirm all the events in the first part of the prophecy at the Mount of Olives leading up to AD 70 but dramatically

transform the second part which deals with events leading up to the Second Advent.

‘If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them.’ This verse in Mark (13:20) has a strong suggestion of an imminent *end*. Luke omits it. Matthew includes it but makes a subtle change. It is placed between references to the ‘great tribulation’ and ‘the coming of the Son of Man.’ He alters the tense of the verb *shorten*, so that ‘he shortened’ in Mark, now becomes ‘he will shorten’ (24:22).

Matthew takes his readers away from the war zone of Judea to a time of easy living. He warns against complacency – of ‘eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage.’ Believers are now aware that *the master is delayed*, so they may, regrettably, begin to beat the fellow servants and eat and drink with the drunkards.<sup>4</sup>

Luke’s version is seriously revamped. He doesn’t repeat the enigmatic reference to an ‘abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be.’ Writing after the event, he gives a historical interpretation: ‘But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near.’

Mark writes of ‘such affliction’ the like of which has never been known before. Luke is able to give an interpretation of this tribulation. It is not limited to the events of AD 70. The affliction like no other, before or since, is described as continuing from the Temple’s destruction for a very long period of time. ‘They will fall by the edge of the sword and will be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, *until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*.’ Only then will believers ‘*see the Son of Man coming* in the cloud with power.’ It will be at that time when signs in the sun, moon and stars . . . distress of nations . . . sea and waves roaring will take place. ‘When these things begin to take place . . . our redemption is drawing near.’ It is in the context of the termination of the times of the Gentiles that we are told: ‘this generation will not pass away until all has taken place.’ This verse has been reinterpreted for a later time. The imminence of Christ’s return is subdued; Luke prepares his readers for the long haul.

### **That day will not come until the rebellion occurs**

Both the first and second letters to the Thessalonians are absorbed with the return of Jesus. They do however appear to contradict one another, so much so, that many scholars are convinced that the second letter is written somewhat later, and not by Paul. In the first letter Paul gives a clear impression that the return of Jesus would be in his lifetime. He reminds them that they are aware of ‘the times and the seasons’, and that ‘the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night.’ He praises them – ‘but you are not in darkness brothers, for that day to surprise *you* like a thief.’

In the second letter, the writer confronts false ideas about the coming of the Lord. He asks them not to be alarmed about a rogue letter sent to them ‘seeming to be from us’ (2:2). This letter suggested that ‘the day of the Lord is at hand.’ Modern translations put it stronger. Its imminence is so tangible that in some sense ‘the day of the Lord has come’ (ESV). The writer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter dispels the sense of imminence. That final moment in history is delayed. A lawless one must first be revealed. Even before that, a power, already at work restraining the lawless one, must be removed. The writer of this letter points out that he has already given them this information (2:5). No! The Lord’s coming is not around the corner – we must expect a deferment as further contrary developments must first take place. A similar process seems to be working here as earlier explained in Luke’s version of the Olivet Prophecy.

The Book of Revelation has a vision of the new heaven and earth. Whereas 2 Thessalonians devoted ten verses to the coming of the 'lawless one,' the Revelation devotes the best part of 20 chapters. With this prophecy, events leading up to the coming of Jesus have become mightily complex.

Many scholars are of the opinion that the second letter of Peter was written late (early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century) and not by Peter. The early Church was coming under pressure because of the Lord's delay. There were many scoffers asking – 'where is the promise of his coming? . . . all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.' The writer's response to this criticism shows that thinking on this issue had evolved. God is actually now being patient and merciful, giving time and opportunity for the numbers of the faithful to increase and be complete. Reference is made to a divine calendar ' . . . with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day.' Here we get a strong hint that the coming of Jesus could be thousands of years away.

### **Signs of the times**

'Signs of the Times' features regularly in our preaching and it has regular space devoted to it in our magazines. Looking back and reflecting on what we've had to say on this topic is quite instructive. It would take a long time to reflect on all that has been said or written so I'll just give a few examples. The 'peace and safety cry,' has been fruitlessly identified with the Papal Encyclical of 1971 and the UN 'International Year of Peace' in 1986. Under a 'Signs of the Times' section for *The Christadelphian* going back as far as 1890, any number of events have been highlighted including, the Turko-Greek Imbroglia (whatever that was), the Boer War and the war between the USA and Spain over Cuba. I'd imagine that none of the above will feature in a talk at a Christadelphian Hall near you any time soon.

Looking further back to the Apostolic Advocate for 1834, John Thomas (for whom I have the utmost respect), wrote on the subject of the 'time, times and dividing of time' from Daniel. On p. 23-24 he wrote — ' . . . 1260 years . . . which, dating from the Heading up of the new order of things under Pelagius 2<sup>nd</sup>, AD 587, gives us the year 1847, for the dissolution of the existing ecclesiastico-gubernatorial harlotry of the Nations.' I'm sure that made perfect sense at the time but it sounds like gobbledygook to me.

I recently found a chart in my possession showing a prophetic jubilee cycle. I've no idea when it was produced but it showed three dates: 1897, was noted for the 1<sup>st</sup> Zionist Congress and 50 years later 1947/8 was noted for the formation of the State of Israel. The chart then goes on to unsuccessfully predict that 1997/8 would be momentous. It reads –'Year of Release, Dramatic fulfilment of Bible Prophecy.'

All these examples highlight the problem and perhaps futility of constructing an eschatological timetable. Whatever apocalyptic structure to current world events our imagination favours, it will invariably prove irrelevant with the passage of time.

### **Perilous times will come – literally, 'will be at hand.'**

2 Timothy 3:1-5 crops up frequently in our discussions on signs of the return of Jesus. In the Jan/Feb 2007 edition of the 'Teacher', a publication that looks closely at the behaviour of young people, I found the following quote; 'The world is passing through troublous times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they know everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them.'

This may seem like an apt quote for the sort of ungodly behaviour which the writer to

Timothy predicted. However, it is actually a quote from Peter the Hermit writing over seven hundred years ago. This evidence suggests that what those 5 verses are describing may be true of every generation. The passage in 2 Timothy describes a host of ungodly qualities which people have been displaying for a very long time. The reader is warned, in verse 5, to 'avoid such people'. **It appears then, that these words were meant to be a warning to believers not to succumb to the influences of the wicked and corrupt society in which they lived. This puts the onus on us.**

**The days of Noah and Sodom (forget the state of the world – get yourselves sorted)**  
In Luke 17 Jesus describes conditions just as it will be 'in the days of the Son of Man.' Surprisingly, he doesn't refer to the gross sins of those former times, like violence, depravity or corrupting his way in the earth. Actually, the sins that are listed are scarcely sins at all; eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building, marrying and being given in marriage. 'What's wrong with these things?' – many would ask. The answer is, maybe, that Jesus isn't looking without to the sins of society. He is looking within to the household of faith, and its engrossment with the cares of this life. Jesus puts the onus on us.

At the end of the Olivet Prophecy (including Ch. 25), Matthew includes five exhortational parables to the household of faith to be prepared. Two emphasise the need 'to be ready and awake.' The other three parables underline the direct connection between what *we do* and one's fate at the final judgement. Those who beat the other slaves, waste the master's resources, and fail to respond to the needs of the hungry, the sick, and the prisoners will be cast 'into outer darkness.' While we have the day of opportunity then (based on these parables), those who wish to go 'into eternal life', are encouraged to do their duty, making imaginative use of the resources entrusted to them, and to minister to the needs of the poor and needy.

### Conclusion

Trying to put a time frame to the return of Jesus will prove as futile as it proved for the writers of the New Testament. Promoting putative signs of his near return have now a long and undistinguished history (as the Reverend Miller episode illustrated). Our Lord, putting a dampener on sign watching, pointed out to the Pharisees that 'the Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed . . . for behold, the Kingdom of God is within your grasp' (Luke 17:20-21).<sup>5</sup>

I (humbly) suggest therefore, that we spend much less time using biblical prophecy to highlight what is wrong with the world, and in pointing the finger at the evils of society (on a regular basis). Scripture suggests that we should expend our energy much more fruitfully on *preparing ourselves* for the Lord's return. Scripture definitely puts the onus on us to get our act together.

Keith Lowe

### Notes

- 1) Ellicott. Luke omits the words 'with power.' This is a subtle omission. In his version Jesus doesn't refer to the imminent coming of the Kingdom in power but just that in some sense they will see the Kingdom. As one scholar (Ehrman, *Apocalyptic Prophet* p. 130) puts it – 'to deal with the "delay of the end", he made the appropriate changes in Jesus' prediction.' (Jesus of Nazareth – Paula Fredriksen is also a useful study to read).
- 2) Luke, in his Gospel, omits the part where Jesus tells the High Priest 'you will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven. He just has Jesus tell the High Priest – 'But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God' – with no reference to the priest *seeing* Jesus come.
- 3) Even the conservative scholar F.F. Bruce concedes that Matthew was written after AD 70 –

The New Testament Documents p. 49

4) Matthew 25:5 – the bridegroom of the Parable of the 10 Virgins is ‘delayed.’ 25:19 – the return of the master who entrusted the talents to his servants takes place ‘after a long time.’

5) The writer of Ecclesiastes has some apt words. In 10:14 he writes; ‘. . . no man knows what is to be, and who will tell him what will be after him?’

Alone with none but thee, my God  
I journey on my way;  
What need I fear if thou art near,  
O King of night and day?  
More safe am I within thy hand,  
Than if a host did round me stand.

St Columba

### **Holy Ground**

I was a great fan of the classic 80s TV cartoon ‘Spiderman and His Amazing Friends’ when I was growing up, but there was one of the characters that I particularly aspired to be - ‘Ice Man’. Spiderman was pretty cool with all his swinging on his webs, though I struggled to see what the other ends stuck to, and tangling up the bad guys ready for the police to pick them up, but ‘Ice Man’ was the persona I assumed in the school yard at break time. Very much like ‘Frozone’, from the 2004 movie ‘The Incredibles’, ‘Ice Man’ was able to produce a constant stream of frozen water from his outstretched hands upon which to skate from place to place, slipping up criminals and blocking the pathway or projectiles of the evil nemesis of the week. It was this ability to provide his own personal path that attracted me to ‘Ice Man’ and eventually, inevitably, I began my habit of discovering the spiritual within the ‘secular’.

In Exodus 3, God calls to Moses from the middle of a burning bush. It should probably be noted that it was effectively a non-burning bush, the bush was on fire but was not burned up. However, God calls Moses over and then says to him ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.’

Moses was probably fairly surprised. Firstly, there was a voice coming from a bush that was on fire but not being consumed. Secondly, the voice knew his name and thirdly, It told him that the ground on which he was standing, ground he had probably passed over many hundreds of times over the forty years he spent as a shepherd, was ‘holy’. Moses, at this time in his life was a failure. He was a prince-turned-shepherd, the very antithesis of upwards social mobility. It was the equivalent of Moses playing caste snakes and ladders and stumbling onto the snake at square 99 that took him right back to the beginning. Shepherds were, culturally, in this historical context, not far from the vagrants or homeless of our contemporary society. If you spotted a shepherd you might have crossed the track because they spent their time with smelly sheep, sleeping in the dust and dirt, tramping through dung and whatever else to take the sheep to the next pasture or waterhole.

Yet still, the voice spoke to Moses, called him by name and said: ‘Take off your shoes, you stand on holy ground.’ Moses knew he wasn’t holy, he knew he was a murderer and a

coward, he knew he was a traitor and a runaway. Moses ran to Midian to escape punishment from either Egyptian or Israelite sources, that's not the actions of a 'Holy' man.

Yet still, the voice spoke to Moses, called him by name and said: 'Take off your shoes, you stand on holy ground.' The Hebrew for 'holy' - *qodesh* –literally means 'separate' or 'sacred' or 'set apart', which wouldn't have made much sense to poor Moses. Moses knew the ground wasn't 'holy', he had walked it many times with his sheep and ground is far from 'holy' once sheep have trodden it down. Moses knew that this dust, mud, scrubland - wilderness was, aside of the asbestos bush, essentially, completely ordinary, very different to 'holy'.

Yet still, the voice spoke to Moses, called him by name and said: 'Take off your shoes, you stand on holy ground.'

What was God teaching Moses in this experience?

The ground on which Moses was standing was made holy not by the presence of Moses. It was not made holy because of the place it was, because of the particular area of Midian or because of some special attributes. Moses stood on ground made Holy because of the presence of God.

The very special thing about Moses' experience was that God came to meet him, not the other way round. When God presented himself to Moses, he asked him to connect to the ground on which he stood there and then, by removing his shoes. God wanted Moses to appreciate the ordinariness of the ground on which he stood, the ground on which he walked and worked, the ground he was accustomed to, familiar with, comfortable on and to connect it to the place to which God was calling him.

God was asking Moses to connect with God in the place he stood and connect that place with where God was calling him to be.

The same call comes to us too, not just echoing through the centuries and the scriptures but clearly, boldly in the here and now of our everyday lives. God calls to us in our lives and in our places of work, rest or play and speaks the same sobering, yet vibrant and exciting words.

Do you constantly feel or have you been constantly told that you are 'too old' or 'too young' or 'too worldly' or 'too spiritual' or 'too clever' or 'too thick' or 'too good' or 'too bad' or 'too liberal' or 'too conservative' to be connected to the mission of God?

To each of you, God says: 'Holy Ground' The ground on which you stand is made holy not by your presence, not because of where it is, but by God's presence as he comes to you to meet you where you are.

If God was looking for something in your life to hide in, like he hid in the bush for Moses, what could he set fire to, to get your attention? What's your position or place now and where do you think you are heading? What is your whole life circumstance in which God comes to you and says: 'Holy Ground'? What can you see now that can connect to somewhere God might be calling you to? Can you hear the love call of God saying: 'Take off your shoes, you stand on holy ground'? How could you find ways to listen out more carefully in your life to God's call?

Whilst it could easily be argued that the whole world is 'holy' as 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it' (Psalm 24:1), the personal, intimate presence of God does make a

profound difference.

I like to imagine my life journey with God as a constant walk through a continuous stretch of 'holy ground' being laid out in front of me. In much the same way that 'Ice Man' created a frozen pathway for his feet, God paves the way ahead of me with his footsteps and says: 'walk in my footprints, take off your shoes, you walk, with me on holy ground.'

**Alex Green**

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Holiness is not something we do or attain;  
it is the communication of the divine life,  
the inbreathing of the divine nature;  
the power of the divine presence  
resting on us.

Andrew Murray

### **Who fathoms the eternal thought?**

Who fathoms the eternal thought?  
Who talks of scheme and plan?  
The Lord is God! He needeth not  
The poor device of man.

Here in the maddening maze of things,  
When tossed by storm and flood,  
To one fixed ground my spirit clings:  
I know that God is good.

I long for household voices gone,  
For vanished smiles I long;  
But God hath led my dear ones on,  
And He can do no wrong.

I know not what the future hath  
Of marvel or surprise,  
Assured alone that life and death  
His mercy underlies.

And if my heart and flesh are weak  
To bear an untried pain,  
The bruised reed He will not break,  
But strengthen and sustain.

And so beside the silent sea  
I wait the muffled oar;  
No harm from Him can come to me  
On ocean or on shore

I know not where His islands lift  
Their fronded palms in air;  
I only know I cannot drift  
Beyond His love and care.

**John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-92)**

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### **The Creation–Evolution Controversy.** Some biblical considerations.

It is generally conceded, and was insisted upon by our pioneers, that the Bible should be understood literally unless there are good reasons for thinking otherwise. With this the present writer concurs. Problems arise, however, when there is failure to agree on what constitutes ‘good reason’. The purpose of the present article is to examine some of the scriptures that are relevant to our understanding of the natural world and, especially, the creation–evolution controversy.

We take it as certain and fundamental that the scriptures are given to us that we might be saved (2 Tim 3:15-16), that all humans are sinners, astray from God (Rom 3:23-24) and that Christ died for us (John 3:16) and will soon return to raise the dead and rule in righteousness. We are saved by faith in him. All else is secondary to these prime considerations.

Attempts have often been made to find absolute science in scripture. Many are examined and dismissed in Ramm, ch. 4. Thus Pro 8:27 says that God ‘drew a circle upon the face of the deep’ and Isa 40:22: ‘He sits above the circle of the earth’. These are taken to refer to the sphericity of the earth, notwithstanding that the first speaks of the ‘skies made firm above’ (v 28) and the second of ‘the heavens stretched out like a curtain’. Job 26:7: ‘he hangs the earth upon nothing’ is taken to show that the earth is suspended in space, though verse 11 refers to the ‘pillars of the heavens’. At one time it was thought that the earth was fixed and rigid and that it was the sun that moved, circling round the earth. This view of the universe is plainly taught in scripture (Jos 10:13; Job 9:6-7; 38:4-6; Psa 19:1-6; 93:1; 96:10; 104:5; Ecc 1:5). We now recognise that these verses simply describe things natural as they appear to the observer.

A number of different scenarios have been suggested as alternatives to the view that the whole universe was created in 4004 BC. One was the view put forward by John Thomas in *Elpis Israel*, that there is a gap between verses one and two of Genesis 1, of as many thousands of years that geology might require, occupied by a pre-Adamic creation. Another view is that of Whitcomb and Morris in *The Genesis Flood*, that the whole of the geological strata were laid down following the Noahic flood. Of particular interest is their treatment of genealogies, considering their highly literal approach to biblical interpretation. Gaps and inconsistencies in the genealogies are highlighted so as to extend the total time required to a creation of Adam and Eve about 10,000 BC.

Other interpretations include the age-day view – that each of the six days of Genesis 1 comprise long periods of geological time. Or, that the six days were days of revelation (Filby) or, possibly, of dramatic presentation (Fowler). A difficulty with the ‘age-day’ view is that there is an inconsistency in the sequence. In Genesis plants were created on day 3 and fish on day 5, whereas according to the geological record the appearance of fish preceded

that of land plants.

In attempting to work out how we may interpret the Bible in the light of present day views we need to consider how the biblical writers viewed the natural world. This is especially important since, as noted above, a number of more recent writers have attempted to demonstrate modern science in the Bible. However, it appears to the present writer that, as with references to the earth as fixed and immovable and a sun that moves, the Bible simply speaks of things as they appear and as they were viewed at the time.

Thus, in Bible times the seat of mind, will, evil desires, etc was thought to be the heart (Psa 4:7; Mat 5:8; 15:19; Rom 10:10). Today we know that the heart pumps blood; we think in our brain. Today, when we look up into the sky we know we are looking into millions of light years of distance with stars that are suns, mostly much larger than ours. To Isaiah and John heaven was a scroll of parchment or cloth with stars like little lamps that can easily fall off, like figs from a tree (Isa 34:4; Rev 6:13-14). Interestingly, insects are described as four-footed creatures like any other animal (Lev 11:20-23)! Plainly, the Bible writers described the natural world they knew as commonly believed at the time. No doubt there was wisdom in this since, if the Bible had set out absolute scientific truth it would, very likely, have provided a barrier to acceptance of the Bible's message of salvation.

So, what view of God's activity in the natural world is spoken of in scripture?

In a number of places it is made plain that God is actively and immanently at work everywhere in all that is going on. The supply of rainwater is in his hands, making grass grow for cattle and plants for humans (Psa 104:10-15). He provides food for all (Psa 104:27-30). Wind and rain are of his providing (Jer 10:12-13; Mat 5:45). He is active in feeding and clothing birds and people (Mat 6:26-30; Lk 12:24). God answers prayer and heals diseases. Clearly, some answers to prayer are speedy and miraculous. Often, however, God operates through what seem to us natural processes – and often the miracle is in the timing rather than the process.

The question then arises, do these things take place because God has his finger on everything and directly controls every event as it happens, or do they happen because of a natural system in place so that they follow naturally occurring processes? Is it possible that for creation God set in place a system in which the natural world would grow and develop? It would seem that God not only made all things but made them so that they would make themselves.

It is sometimes argued that, since the Hebrew word *bara*, 'create', means to cause to exist, evolutionary processes are thereby excluded. It is difficult to see, however, how 'causing to exist' tells us anything about what method or length of time may be involved. In fact, other occurrences of *bara* indicate this.

The Psalmist prayed 'Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me' (Psa 51:10). Now, how might this prayer have been answered? By an instantaneous miracle requiring no effort on his part? Or, much more likely, by a process of growth involving meditation, pondering the words of scripture and interaction with the conversations and support of others?

The other places where *bara* occurs are in Isaiah where the reference is to the 'creation' of the people of Israel (Isa 43:1,7,15). Again, how was Israel created? Was it not by the call of Abraham, the births of Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's sons, the captivity in Egypt, desert wandering and conquest of the Holy Land. A lengthy process, not an instantaneous *fait*

*accompli.*

There is another Hebrew word that is used in a remarkable way. It is *pala*, translated wonders, wondrous works, wonderful deeds, miracles, amazing things. Rain, clouds, storms & childbirth (Job 5:9; 37:14; Psa 107:24; 139:14) are spoken of in the same way as the plagues of Egypt & crossing the Red Sea (Ex 3:20; Jos 3:5; Psa 106:7).

From the above we can understand that it is entirely possible that God's work in creation may have involved long-drawn-out and slow natural processes. Clearly, God can if he chooses to do so create in seven literal days or in a fraction of a millisecond. He often, however, chooses to use much more lengthy processes.

The questions at issue are not *whether* God created all things but *how* and *when* he did so.

**Bob Burr**

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### **Flower in the Crannied Wall**

Flower in the crannied wall,  
I pluck you out of the crannies,  
I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
Little flower – but *if* I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and man is.

**Alfred Tennyson**

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### **Science, Time and God**

Christian believers have something of a love-hate relationship with science. Science reveals the wonder and beauty of the natural world: yet science is also seen as 'making God redundant', encouraging a purely materialistic view of the universe. The clash has become all the louder in recent years, with the vocal 'new atheists' demanding that you make a choice between science and God – and religious fundamentalists making the same demand, insisting that the Bible be taken literally and that, for example, – to quote the usual flashpoint – the evidence for evolution be rejected out of hand.

It's also a clash that's unnecessary and misconceived. Both the atheists and the Biblical literalists are trying to foist a false dichotomy on anyone willing to listen – while more rational voices are attacked from both sides. But those voices need to be heard, and heard more loudly and confidently: not least in a community with a high regard for the Bible and for commonsense, such as the one with which many of the readers of this article are associated. Both extremes are sadly, fundamentally wrong – and tragically wrong, because by trying to force people to choose, they drive the scientifically literate away from faith, starting from the earliest school biology lessons where evolution is a foundation principle, or geography where the study of landforms is based on simple geology, including the geological timescale. They bring religion into disrepute and expose Christianity to ridicule (and discredit science too, which upsets me as a scientist – but that's another story). That alone is reason enough to push back against the literalists. Keeping quiet for the sake of peace is a common response, but it ceases to be the right one when we lose much of a generation because we allow faith to be deprived of credibility.

Moreover, the literalists are contradicted by the Bible itself. If their assertions were correct, one would have to conclude that the evidence of the natural world – evidence of the great age of the earth and of long ages of gradual change and development – has a tendency to mislead the believer and should be treated with great caution. But Paul's words in Romans chapter 1 take a very different line. Paul points his readers *to* the natural world for evidence of a creator God:

*. . . what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, **being understood from what has been made**, so that people are without excuse.*  
(Romans 1:19-20, NIV)

– hardly advice he'd have given if studying the natural world would lead to unbelief.

Similarly, Psalm 19 asserts:

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*  
(Psalm 19:1-4, NIV)

The writer of Psalm 111 had a very positive point of view too:

*Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them.*  
(Psalm 111:2, NIV)

Those words represent the right spirit of scientific inquiry, and it's uncannily apt that verse 2 was written above the entrance to Cambridge's Cavendish Laboratory, one of the most prestigious physics labs in the world. And, as if in compliance with the words of the Psalm, Job was challenged with looking at the world around him, a thunderstorm approaching, to perceive the greatness and power of God.

So the tone of Scripture is to see the study of the natural world – science – as something to be encouraged, something that can strengthen respect for and awe of God. The 'science v. God' dichotomy is decisively dismissed.

Taking a cue from the Bible itself therefore, Christians can and should overcome their reluctance to look to science positively, and see whether the insights of science in fact underpin faith and suggest how problems can be resolved. There are good precedents. Many believers in earlier generations found it natural to appreciate more of God through science. Sir Isaac Newton is perhaps the preeminent example, but there are countless others. They included early Christadelphians, who took a close interest in the science of

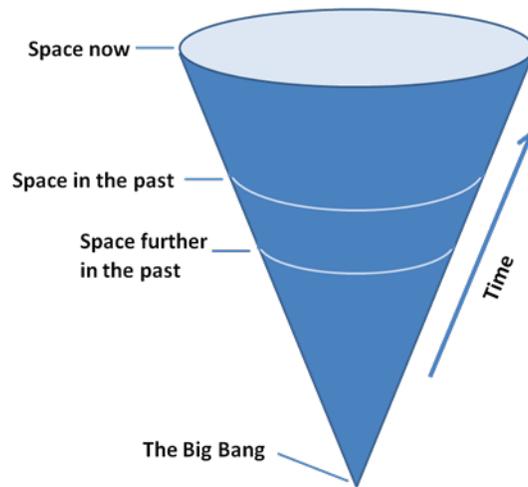
their day: some of it wasn't very good science, reflecting as it did the thinking of its time, but that's beside the point. With their desire to take a rational, logically thought-out approach to their faith, they welcomed science and used concepts from it – electricity, for example – to apply to faith and seek to understand God's work in the world.

Once one has overcome the futile battle between the literalists and the atheists, faith becomes in some instances more plausible, not less. The idea of resurrection, perhaps, gains more credibility for anyone who's seen a computer backed up and restored. If my laptop malfunctions, and I'm fortunate enough to have the services of a good IT technician, he can remove my hard disc, back up what's on it, and in due course restore the data, settings, favourite websites and so on to a new computer. Not one atom of the original laptop need be present in the new, but to all intents and purposes it's the same computer, with the same characteristics (except that it works!). And it doesn't matter if a long time has elapsed between the demise of the old laptop and the restoration on to the new one. Such an analogy doesn't in any way diminish respect for the power of God – if anything, it's enhanced. We can only speculate as to what sort of 'information transfer, backup and restore' mechanism an omnipotent God might have at His disposal: but that He might have one is surely believable.

Let's turn to physics. Contemporary physics has radically transformed the way we look at space and time. The first idea to think about is that the universe isn't infinite. That's not to say that it has an edge – a two-dimensional analogy would be the surface of a sphere, which has a finite area but no 'end': the early explorers needn't have worried about sailing too far and falling off the edge of the world. It's now well accepted that the universe started some 13.5 billion years ago in the Big Bang – a 'moment of creation' which we can scarcely begin to comprehend – and has been expanding ever since, as astronomical evidence shows it to be. Simplistically, we tend to think of the universe expanding 'into something', starting from an infinitely dense point, from the Big Bang onwards – but there wasn't a 'something' into which to expand, as space itself came into being at that moment. Moreover, so did time as we understand it – so it probably isn't possible to speak of 'before the Big Bang', because there isn't, or wasn't, a 'before' to speak of.

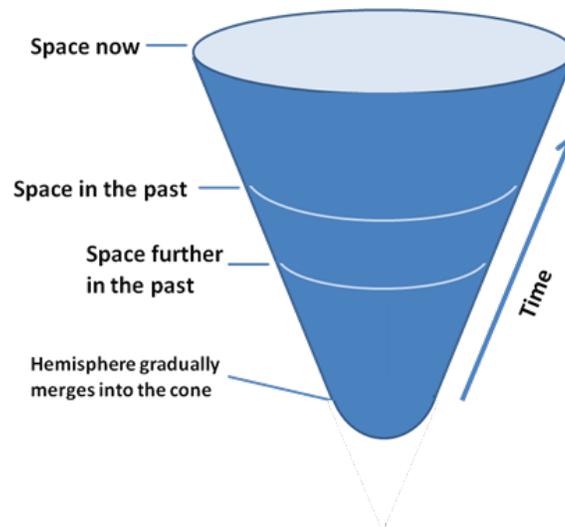
Because we're so governed by the passage of time, it's hard to imagine a 'beginning' of time itself. The physicist and philosopher Paul Davies, who explores the search for the ultimate meaning of life in the light of physics, offers a helpful explanation in his book *The Mind of God*. He explains that in normal life, we think of space and time as quite different – but things aren't so simple or so intuitive when we reach into the very small, where the effects of quantum physics<sup>1</sup> become significant.

Now it's a bit difficult to represent this on paper, so Davies takes it down to one dimension of space – a line. The line forms a circle, the one-dimensional analogue of our sphere or, in more dimensions, our finite universe. Imagine a circle that starts off infinitesimally small – a point – at the big bang, and then expands with time. Davies represents this by drawing a cone, with time increasing along the direction of the axis of the cone while its diameter represents space at a particular instant in time.



A visual model of the expanding universe (after P Davies, "The Mind of God" (Penguin, 1993), pp 65-66). In the second diagram, there is no well-defined 'beginning'.

So far, so good. Now the brain-stretching bit. When we get very near the 'big bang', and to very small dimensions – of the order of  $10^{-35}$  metres<sup>2</sup> – space and time gradually become indistinguishable and instead of a cone with one time dimension (upwards) and one space dimension (around the circle) we can think of a two-dimensional space near the bottom of the cone. In one model, Davies explains, we can represent this by rounding off the apex of the cone as space and time merge. There's no longer a specific point, a singularity, in time when the universe begins, a 'big bang' as we normally think of it: to quote Davies, 'to put it another way, one might say that time emerges gradually from space as the hemisphere curves gradually into the cone.'



### How does that help us understand more about God?

If we accept that God is the creator of the universe – we'll set aside the question of how, whether by evolution or otherwise – and time as we understand it is an aspect of the physical universe, then God is creator of space *and* time.

He is not Himself bounded by time and space – if ours were a one-dimensional universe, it'd be as if He had the whole of our cone within view.

It follows then that for God there isn't a 'before' and 'after' – we can think of God as in a 'timeless present', with all of our space and time as a present reality. That's quite a thought. It means that creation isn't, for God, something that took place a long time ago; more soberingly, it means that the sacrifice of Christ isn't a one-off event at a point in time for

God, even if it seems like that – is like that – for us. God is revealed to us in anthropomorphic terms, as acting in time, waiting patiently as it were, because we couldn't understand Him any other way (we even refer to God as 'He' with a capital 'H'): but that shouldn't lead us to think of God simply as an old man with a beard sitting on a golden throne on a cloud somewhere.

What of Jesus? Jesus, the 'word of God', the intent and action of God translated into human form? From God's perspective as it were, the mission and work of Jesus on earth is an 'is', not something He did two thousand years ago – and the same is true of his second coming and the Kingdom. And Jesus, when with God, is presumably also part of that timeless present. It's perhaps misleading to think of Jesus as a man standing by the side of God, wondering from time to time (!) when His Father will send him back to earth. What is to us a moment in time is from God's perspective a particular point on the equivalent of our cone – permanently 'now' before God.

At this stage, several things Jesus said start to make more sense. When in John 8 he said 'before Abraham was born, I am' – not – 'I was' – he was speaking the truth. Abraham's lifetime – for a one-dimensional picture, imagine a horizontal stripe round our cone with the width of the stripe representing the duration of Abraham's life – is as much 'now' for God as Jesus' ministry or His second coming. And when in that amazing chapter, John 17, Jesus said:

*And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began . . . Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*

(John 17:5, 24 NIV)

. . . we can now see what he meant.

We can go further. If God is not part of this physical universe of space and time, we can perhaps assume Jesus, in the presence of God, isn't part of it either. And if we're not thinking of two anthropomorphic beings, perhaps we shouldn't be thinking of Jesus as 'distinct' from God either – much less of the spirit of God as something, or someone, distinct from God the Father.

So perhaps the idea of Jesus and the Father being, as it were, part of the same 'substance', the same reality outside our space and time, isn't as mistaken as we sometimes think it to be. This doesn't mean accepting the un-Biblical concept of Trinity, but it does suggest that thinking of Jesus (excluding his ministry on earth) as a separate personality from God may be misleading too. The Bible describes Jesus as though he is a separate, physical being who intercedes with God to forgive sinners, and the picture is a comforting and accessible one – but perhaps that's just what it is, a picture, a metaphor, useful to us because God's reality is so 'other' that we couldn't understand it otherwise.

The insights of physics and cosmology, far from clashing with faith, encourage us to come to terms with the idea that the universe we observe has an 'origin' and that if it also has an Originator, He is outside the created universe and therefore outside space and time – equally present at what, viewed from our perspective, is all time and all space. The physics and the cosmology still leave us struggling to find the concepts and the vocabulary to try and describe God, but they also serve the useful purpose of reminding us how strange, how far beyond our full understanding the universe is – let alone its creator. The familiar concepts of three-dimensional space and the constant flow of time serve us well – but at a deeper level, at the quantum or sub-atomic level, those concepts give way to something much less intuitive. A degree of intellectual humility is in order!

In the light of this, it's no surprise that however we try and describe God, we're inevitably reduced to metaphors and mental models – that's the best we can do, bounded as we are by our physical space and time. We know no other framework in which to think. But that should be a warning. No description, no human understanding, of God can really do Him justice. It's absurd to claim we have an absolute understanding, an absolute truth. None of our mental models, even those shaped and guided by the Bible – as they should be – will be perfect, and our understanding will be a pale reflection of the way God really is. That pale reflection isn't something to get proud about; it isn't something to 'cast in stone' – and it certainly isn't a basis for dividing Christians from Christians and flouting the John 17 call for unity. Better to get on with learning from and trying to follow the values and principles of the man from Nazareth, by doing justly, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

**David Brown**

### Notes

**1** Quantum physics describes the behaviour of matter and energy at the atomic or sub-atomic scale, where the 'normal' rules of large-scale physics cease to be a good description of how things behave.

**2** One part in  $10^{35}$  – that's like a hundred-thousandth of a cubic millimetre compared to the volume of the Earth.

*(The author is grateful to Laurence Kimpton for helpful comments on a draft of this article.)*

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I am not careful for what may be a hundred years hence.  
He who governed the world before I was born shall take care of it,  
likewise when I am dead.  
My part is to improve the present moment.

John Wesley

### Bible Translations – Some Issues

With attention being given to the fact that the King James Version of the English Bible has now been available for 400 years, there is renewed discussion within the Christadelphian community about the use of this Bible especially since there are now such a variety of newer translations available.

Theological conservatives (an unfortunate term taken over from political usage) may prefer 'literal' translations – such as the KJV – because they insist on 'verbal' inspiration rather than 'scriptural' inspiration, the implication being that the very words themselves are sacrosanct.

The key text which is usually used when one speaks about 'inspiration'<sup>1</sup> is II Tim 3:16 which is translated from the Greek into English in various ways:

'Every scripture (is) God-breathed and profitable . . . ' (Interlinear Greek-English NT)

'All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God and *is* profitable . . . ' (KJV and NKJV)

'All scripture is inspired by God and profitable . . . ' (RSV)

'All Scripture is God breathed and is useful . . . ' (NIV)

'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable . . . ' (ESV)

It may be noted that while the primary reference here is to the Old Testament, it would appear that some New Testament writings were already regarded as being equal in authority to those of the Old Testament. It should also be recognized that it is not the manner of the inspiration, but its source that is important. This is clearly brought out in the English Standard Version, which stresses God being the initiator and man being the recipient. In other words, it is God who acts and it is man who responds.

The foundation clause of our Statement of Faith states that the Scriptures ‘were wholly given by inspiration of God in the writers, and are consequently without error in all parts of them, except such as may be due to errors of transcription or translation.’ Note that this does not state that the actual written words were inspired, for we do not possess the autographs, the original writings.

Interestingly, the BASF draws our attention to two types of error: transcription and translation. For more than a century many scholars have been engaged in the process of finding transcription errors – those made by copyists of either Hebrew or Greek Scriptures. It is only after text critics have compared many manuscripts that better translations can be made. Finally, commentaries may be written.

The question which arises then, is how does an individual choose his or her version of the Bible? A familiar version, such as the KJV, will always have its adherents, either because it is the translation they have always used, have a concordance tied to it, or believe that it is the only one which gives the correct translation. ‘If, as I believe, the KJV is the best translation and has served us well, then we in the brotherhood ought to use nothing else either as a basis for worship or, moreover, in ecclesial prayers.’<sup>2</sup>

**An interlinear Bible** is adequate for those who wish to see how an original Hebrew or Greek word is translated. It is also a useful tool for those who wish to learn a language. But, it is not a sufficient basis from which to make unsubstantiated assertions about the ‘true meaning’ of words or phrases. For example, this approach leads some to state dogmatically that the two nouns *Yahweh elohim* (Lord God) mean ‘He who will be mighty ones.’ The learner of a language such as Hebrew or Greek will find it easier to translate into English, but a lot more understanding is required to translate an English sentence into idiomatic Hebrew or Greek.

**Literal translations** may use grammatical patterns, which seem strange in English and may lead to the reader grasping the wrong meaning. For example in Genesis 2:17, the warning is literally stated as ‘for in the day you eat of it you dying shall die.’ This is correctly translated ‘you shall surely die’ (ESV).

Some verses may start every sentence with ‘and’ which is contrary to normal English usage.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly so in the Hebrew Bible, where we find that in Genesis chapter 1 all verses except the first verse begin in the Hebrew ‘and’ so giving a consecutive narrative of past events. Thus, literal versions such as the KJV follow the Hebrew use of the conjunction ‘and,’ whereas the ESV uses other English conjunctions such as ‘then,’ ‘so.’ Other joining words that we often use are ‘when,’ ‘thus,’ ‘which,’ ‘though.’

A number of English words have changed their meanings since 1611. I well remember in Sunday School puzzling over why publicans should be vilified. Was it because they were the cause of people over-indulging in beer? Now I know that the reference was to tax-gatherers. Note the two ways in which I Co 10:25 is translated: ‘Whatever is sold in the **shambles**, *that* eat.’ (KJV)

‘Eat whatever is sold in the **meat market.**’ (ESV)

In the KJV no distinction is made between prose and poetry. This is rectified in later versions. Along with this change, recent versions have paragraph headings, which assist the reader to more easily follow the sense. The poetic passages now ‘hit the reader in the eye’ and so we can now see that two important features of Hebrew poetry are parallelism and contrast.

### **Errors in scribal copying.**

As an example we can compare the way in which the second part of Psalm 19:4 is variously translated.

‘Their **line** has gone out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.’ (KJV)

‘Their **voice** goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.’ (RSV)

Both the RSV and the ESV follow the Greek Septuagint rather than the Masoretic Text.

### **Errors in translation.**

Since most Christadelphians are not proficient in the original languages, we do not have the ability to make informed decisions as to the merits of the various versions. Hence, it is not for me to recommend a particular translation. However, we recognize that in the past 400 years knowledge of the Biblical languages, and those related to them, is greater than that held by those who gave us the KJV. Hence, in the recent versions, we find translation errors corrected. Footnotes are a valuable tool when they are used to explain the meaning of a word or when there is doubt over the meaning. However, beware of footnotes which are of a devotional nature.

### **Conclusion.**

In my opinion, the criterion of a good translation is that it is as meaningful to readers of the first century as it is meaningful to us in the twenty-first. Often we are able to grasp the original meaning in a translation that expresses the original *meaning* of figures of speech rather than the original words.

The Christadelphian community consists of ecclesias each being autonomous in its method of worship. I believe this is how it should be, and hence which translation one uses for either worship or study should be an individual decision. We are not like the Jehovah’s Witnesses or the Exclusive Brethren who are dictated to by Headquarters as to which version of the Bible is to be used. In the Wanganui (NZ) ecclesia various versions are used in our worship and in our Bible classes. This does not result in confusion but leads to fruitful discussion on the reasons for differences in translation.

The first record of translation is found in Neh 8:8 when the Law was translated from Hebrew for Aramaic speaking Jews in the fifth century BC:

‘They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,  
and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.’

We might wonder how the sense was given. Was it by a literal translation or was there paraphrase involved? An accurate translation would have been given to the Aramaic speakers because it would have expressed the same meaning found in the Hebrew.

Being so far removed from the original Hebrew and Greek languages and cultures, let us be thankful for those who helped make God’s message, not only available to us, but also more understandable.

**John Stephenson (NZ)**

**Notes**

- 1) ‘This is hardly a biblical word (only at II Tim 3:16 in AV, and that is altered in RV; the meaning is that God breathes life into the dead letter of scripture.)’ *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* ed Alan Richardson SCM Press, London, 1969, p 173.
  - 2) Paul Danks in *Logos Magazine* Vol 77 # 9 June 2011
  - 3) I am sure others remember being told in English classes ‘Never start a sentence with “and”.’
  - 4) For background to English translations of the Bible see *The Books and the Parchments* F. F. Bruce, Pickering & Inglis, 1984.
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## The Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn’t.

Vance Havner

### Progressions

#### **Life as a Journey**

Our present life, in many ways, can be likened to a journey. In it we progress through all the usual stages from helpless babyhood and up to old age, meeting many vicissitudes on the way. At the start we greatly depend on those caring for us, to nurture our physical, mental and emotional growth and also for the beginnings of our learning processes. As the journey progresses we reach the stage where we can take over more and more responsibility for these things ourselves.

The influence of our families and the increasing contacts with others, the numerous experiences we meet on our road – and how we react to them – all have their inputs towards the forming of our characters and the kind of persons we will become. It is the way in which we deal with the challenges of life which has a great influence on whether our characters are affected for good or ill. If asked as to the desired destination of our journey, as Christians we would answer: ‘the Kingdom of God’. However, have you, like me, at times felt that you were on the wrong road – pushed and buffeted along by circumstances beyond your control?

It cannot be denied of course that sometimes life presents us with some big problems, ones for which we need the loving help of those who care for us. But it is also possible, like Martha, to allow our various lesser concerns to affect our sense of proportion:

*Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is best; it shall not be taken away from her.* ( Luke10:41 REB).

The lesson may have seemed rather harsh to Martha, but Jesus indicated that there are higher things for us to consider in life than the numerous minor concerns we allow to bog us down.

Speaking of *higher* things leads us to the thought, that for each of us, surely, the destination at which our life’s journey is aimed, is the reaching of the greatest upward development and the highest potential of which we are each capable. Dr. E. F. Schumacher<sup>1</sup>, an author I have admired over a number of years for his words of wisdom,

gives what I regard as a modern-day parable, where he points out that there is more than one level on which life can be lived and to which we can aspire. He shows in fact that this *progression* appears to be a built-in characteristic of the whole of the created world around us.

#### **Four Levels of Being**

Following is a brief summary of Dr Schumacher's description of the various Levels of Being:-

*Inanimate Matter:* Minerals or inanimate matter is purely passive. A stone, for example, is wholly passive – it can *do* nothing, *organise* nothing, *utilise* nothing.

*Plants:* A plant is mainly, but not totally passive. It has limited ability of adaptation to changing circumstances: it grows towards the light, extends its roots towards moisture and nutrients. It is, to a small extent, a 'subject', with its own powers of doing, organising, and utilising. There even seems to be an *intimation* of intelligence, but less than in an animal.

*Animals:* Here, through the appearance of consciousness there is a striking shift from passivity to activity. The life processes are speeded up; activity becomes more autonomous, evidenced by free and often purposeful movement, e.g. swift action to obtain food or escape danger. The power of 'doing', 'organising' and 'utilising' is greatly extended. There is evidence of an 'inner life', of happiness, unhappiness, confidence, fear, expectation, disappointment etc. Any being with an 'inner life' cannot be a mere object: it is a subject itself, [but] capable of treating other beings as mere objects, as the cat treats the mouse.

*Human Beings:* Here there is another marked change from passivity to activity. At this level there is a subject that says 'I' – a *person*. Schumacher comments: 'To treat a person as if he were a mere object is a perversity, not to say a crime. No matter how much a person is weighed down and enslaved by circumstances, there is always the possibility of self-assertion and a rising above circumstances. There is no definable limit to his possibilities, even though there are everywhere practical limits which he has to recognise and respect.'

#### **Origination of Movement / Motives for Action**

The brief review above shows that within these different levels of being, is contained a *progression* of characteristics, from lower to higher levels. Schumacher points out that the most striking of these is the trend from passivity to activity. This can be summed up as follows:-

*Inanimate matter:* here there cannot be change of movement without a physical cause; the linkage between cause and effect is very close.

*At Plant level:* the causal chain is more complex. As at the lower level, physical causes have physical effects – i.e. the wind shakes the tree, but, certain physical factors act, *not simply* as physical cause, but simultaneously as *stimulus*:

- a) The sun's rays cause the plant to turn towards them.
- b) A lean of the plant too much in one direction, causes the roots on the other side to grow stronger – and so on.

*At the Animal level:* causation of movement becomes still more complex. Whilst it can be pushed around, like a stone, stimulated like a plant, there is an *additional* causative factor, which comes from inside: certain drives, attractions or compulsions of a non-physical kind, that we may call *motives*. A dog is motivated, not simply by stimuli impinging on it from outside, but also by forces originating in its 'inner space': i.e. on recognising its master, it jumps for joy, recognising its enemy, it runs in fear.

#### **The Human Level**

While at the animal level the motivating cause has to be physically present to be effective, at the level of man there is *no such need*. The power of self-awareness adds for man another possibility of the origination of movement – **will**, that is, the power to move and act even when there is no physical compulsion, no physical stimulus and no motivating force actually present. In other words, we can exercise *free-will* and make *choices*. These attributes are the privileges we have been given as human beings – but together with privileges, of course,

come responsibilities. Here the Lord's words come to mind: *Where someone has been given much, much will be expected of him; and the more he has had entrusted to him the more will be demanded of him.* (Luke 12:48 REB)

### **Necessity v Freedom**

The progression from passivity to activity, Schumacher points out, is closely related to the progression from necessity to freedom. Inanimate matter *is what it is*, and cannot be other. There is no 'inner space' where any autonomous powers can be marshalled. There is an absence of any creative principle; it is analogous to the zero dimension – a kind of nothingness which means there remains nothing to be determined.

### **Inner Space – the scene of Freedom**

We know little, of course, about any 'inner space' of plants; more of that of animals, and 'a great deal about the 'inner space' of the human being: the space of the *person, of creativity, of freedom*. Inner space is created by the powers of life, consciousness and self-awareness.' These powers, we should remind ourselves, are powers that we have been given and have the privilege and opportunity of developing – and they are closely related above all, surely, to our *spiritual* development.

How then do we enter this personal inner space and fully experience this self-awareness, which will enable us to rise above some of life's minor distractions or mundane attraction? These and related topics are discussed in some depth by Dr Schumacher in his book – which I can thoroughly recommend – but, to conclude this short excursion I want to quote a few of his thoughts in full:

'Close observation discloses that most of us, most of the time, behave and act mechanically, like a machine. The specifically human power of self-awareness **is asleep** [my emphasis]. The human being, like an animal, acts . . . **solely in response to outside influences. Only when a man makes use of his power of self-awareness does he attain to the level of a person, to the level of freedom.** At that moment **he is Living, not being lived.** There are still numerous forces of necessity, accumulated in the past, which determine his actions; **but a small dent is being made, a tiny change of direction is being introduced.** It may be virtually unnoticeable, but many moments of self-awareness can produce many such changes **and even turn a given movement into the opposite of its previous direction.** In his 'inner space' he can develop a centre of strength so that **the power of his freedom exceeds that of his necessity.** It is possible to imagine a perfect being who is always and invariably exercising his power of self-awareness, which is the power of freedom, to the fullest degree, unmoved by any necessity. This would be a Divine Being, an almighty and sovereign power, a perfect unity.'

**Cyril Marsters**

- 1) E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Vintage Books, 2011, pbk, pp166, £7.99. ISBN 978-0-099-48021-1  
(It was first published in 1977 by Jonathan Cape, and first published in Vintage in 1995).

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True freedom is only to be found  
when one escapes from oneself  
and enters into  
the liberty of the children of God.  
Francois Fenelon

**For your library**

*The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative.*

**Christopher J H Wright, 2006, Leicester, IVP, £26.99.**

With about 500 pages, some readers may find this a bit daunting, but if it gets on your shelf it may tempt you, with profound results, as it did for me. Like many believers, I am troubled by the fact that the killing of the Canaanites, men, women and children – in other words genocide – is said, in Deuteronomy and Joshua, to be by the specific command of God. But this does not fit with the requirement of Jesus that we should love our enemies and do good to those who ‘despitefully use us’. Neither does it fit in with New Testament teaching that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to release them from sin. This is rather different from exterminating them.

So far, I cannot get beyond an explanation that there was a cultural concept that caused the human writers to use the normal terms of war in their day to express God’s displeasure with his enemies. However, while recognising that there are human elements in the Bible, I find myself reluctant to adopt any explanation which in any way degrades the Old Testament. I was uncomfortable with some believers honestly admitting that they were leaving the Old Testament largely alone because of their extreme unease with these portrayals of God as cruel and vengeful. I was looking for ways of helping them to reclaim the Old Testament as a vital contribution to God’s self-revelation.

Chris Wright’s book helped me in this. I was thrilled by many aspects of the Old Testament to a greater extent than ever before and more ready to leave some of the difficulties in my mental pending tray. His book doesn’t help to solve the problems, but does give emphasis to the positive aspects of the old testament.

### **The story of God’s mission**

Chris Wright, (no relation to NT (Tom) Wright, who has highly recommended his namesake), thinks of the term ‘mission’ in very much wider terms than is usual in religious circles, where it is used generally to describe the activity of people who go into under-developed countries to bring some understanding of the gospel of Jesus to those who have little or no knowledge of him. To Chris Wright, on the other hand, ‘mission’ speaks of the whole purpose of God to illuminate spiritually the whole of humankind. This is the expressed purpose of God and any human missionaries, at home or abroad, are participants in what is essentially a divine activity. Hence his subtitle ‘Mission of God’. This leads him to expound scripture from the perspective of what God has been seeking, is still seeking, and will ultimately achieve in the enlightenment and salvation of the human race.

This involves the study of the Bible, especially the roots of the mission in the Old Testament, to elucidate the themes of monotheism, creation, election, redemption, covenant, ethics and future hope or eschatology. He reads the Old Testament on its own terms, but as a Bible Christian who is aware of the completion of the story in Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament. He sums it up: ‘The Bible renders us the story of God’s mission, through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.’

### **The blessing of Abraham**

The exposition in this book is founded upon the promises made to Abraham by God, initially recorded in Genesis 12.1-3, and subsequently in the rest of Genesis, including amplification to Abraham himself, and then to Isaac and Jacob. The key to these promises is that, through the race to spring from Abraham, all nations would be blessed. There is an extensive examination of the places in scripture where the term ‘blessing’ is used and described as being promised repeatedly, so that its communication was the very *raison d’être* of Israel’s existence, though their performance did not live up to the intention. The creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God, covered in the first three chapters of Genesis, soon brings disappointment; intimacy with God is broken. Things go from bad to worse,

with the first murder, violence filling the earth, and man seeking to rise to the heights of divinity in the tower of Babel. So God makes a new start with an elderly couple past natural childbearing.

Abraham became the channel of God's mission to fill the earth with his glory, exhibited in the human race. Through him and his descendants, God sought to remedy what had gone wrong and ultimately will remedy it, though as a very long term project in terms of human time calculation. And this mission becomes the mission of the church in which Jews are united with Gentiles in proclaiming the mission of God. In this connection the author defines mission: 'Fundamentally, our mission (if it is Biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world, for the redemption of God's creation.'

#### **Why Israel was chosen**

The reason for Israel's very election, for their existence as a unique nation, was not that they were special in themselves, but as the route God would take for the salvation of humanity. Israel were not brought into existence just for their own benefit, but that through them the nations should be saved. Israel existed for the sake of the nations. According to Deuteronomy ch.4, they were to display their wisdom and understanding to other peoples, who would say 'What a wise and understanding people this great nation is.' We also read in Deuteronomy ch.7 that it was not because they were more numerous than any other nation that the Lord cared for them and chose them; it was because the Lord loved them and stood by his oath to their forefathers.

Israel themselves did not live up to this high purpose, clearly expressed throughout the Old Testament, but the New Testament picks up the narrative and presents Jesus as taking over the Israelite function and successfully seeing it through, in unity with his Father. He was all the nation had been called to be, and in his ministry, death and resurrection was laid the foundation for God's successful outcome for project earth after the failure of the nation.

Nevertheless, the cream of the nation left on record the means for understanding and participating in the Mission of God. Giving this record was the purpose of the Old Testament, even though many of its specific commands were no longer enjoined on mankind. Its fundamental message has never been superseded. Jesus became what Israel should have been.

#### **All nations should know the Lord**

Against this background to the choice of Israel, Chris Wright examines many fully quoted sections of scripture to see the outworking of God's purpose in Israel. He makes clear one outstanding intention behind all that was revealed to and by Israel. It was that in the then and there, but more perfectly in the ultimate future – day of the Lord – all the nations should 'know the Lord', as their creator, Lord and King. There was no other God but He. Wright spends many pages clarifying what is meant by the phrase 'to know the Lord'. In doing so, he explains what is meant by the faith expected from Israel being monotheistic. He rejects the idea that Israel's monotheism was the result of gradual evolution as they supposedly left behind, step by step, a polytheism – 'gods many and lords many' - that they were supposed to have originally shared with all mankind.

Monotheism is defined, not as the idea that there was only one out of many gods who was peculiarly their own God, but that there was only one God, the only one who created all things and was alone to be worshipped. The rest, though they could be spoken of as if they did exist, because they did exist as concepts in human imagination and culture, nevertheless did not exist as divine beings and in this respect were nothing. And although people bowed down to images of them, which for the more intelligent were mere statues representing their gods, the statues were all they had, and therefore subject to ridicule in various Israelitish

writings (eg Isaiah) and by Elijah. Without the Old Testament we should not be given a clear idea of the monotheism which informs our own faith, nor be able to gain some idea of the embodiment of the one God in Jesus, who could say that 'I and my Father are one' and yet at the same time declare that the Father had 'sent' him.

Wright makes a full survey of the many occasions when God declares his determination that in the end 'all nations will know him'. He sees this oft repeated statement as a framework for reading the whole of the Bible. Jesus inaugurated this process at and after his first coming and will consummate it after his second coming in the fullness of the kingdom. While I was reading this part of the book, if you had asked me what the purpose of the Kingdom of God on this earth will be, I would have answered - and still do - that it was that the whole population of the earth should know God and his Messiah.

This confirmed to me that the purpose of God is not to have a kingdom of merely a very small minority of people who have ever lived, but of all mankind who have ever lived and who ultimately come to know him (having been raised from the dead for the purpose, but recognising that some may never accept this knowledge and the behaviour that goes with it). It also confirmed me in the view that sometimes we have looked at the kingdom of the future in a somewhat selfish way in terms of personal benefits and the exercise of power (beneficent of course), rather than with emphasis on the glory of God filling the earth and all our fellow humans being recreated by the renewing of their minds, in the day of the new heavens and the new earth.

### **A kingdom of priests**

As I continued reading, I was thrilled at the prospect of having a part in the priesthood of the coming age, seen as the loving duty of bringing all humankind to the condition where they would see Jesus through us, as well as through his own presence on the earth, as we taught them, so that they would be able to reflect the words of the epistle of John and say 'We are becoming like him, for we are seeing him as he is'. As we look ahead to our future work in the kingdom of God, we are aware of an overarching story in the midst of which we are already located, as members of his church - his body.

In several places Wright alludes to the mission of God as expressed in the letter to the Ephesians: 'He has made known to us his secret purpose, in the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ, to put into effect when the time was ripe, namely that the universe, everything in heaven and in earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.' And all this stems from the mission of God expressed in the Old Testament that all the nations would come to know the one God in this way.

### **A community role**

The point is made in several parts of the book that the mission of God is with Israel and then with the nations collectively, and not merely as a matter of picking one individual here and one there. Although communities are made up of individuals, they are linked in relationships as communities. And we should read the Old Testament, and indeed, all scripture, as concerned with people as communities and not with moralising and individual spiritual growth on its own. The two great commands that Jesus highlights are first, that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and then, flowing from that, we should love our neighbour as ourselves. On these two commands, says Jesus, 'hang all the law and the prophets'. In other words, they are the subject matter of the Old Testament. As Wright says: 'The uniqueness and universality of Yhwh (Yahweh) are foundational axioms of Old Testament faith, which in turn are foundational to New Testament faith, worship and mission.'

Israel were given their mission as the descendants of Abraham in clear terms at Sinai in the

words recorded in Exodus 19:5-7: 'If only you will now listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples you will become my special possession; for the whole earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' There is an echo of these words in Peter's second letter (ch.2.4-9): 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' Thus the church is called to continue the mission which was given to the nation of Israel; note the emphasis on proclamation.

### **Praise him for his mighty deeds**

The deeds of YHWH are glorious and receive much attention in the Old Testament. His many deliverances of Israel and his judgments upon them, particularly his bringing them out from the yoke of the oppressor in Egypt are mentioned again and again in psalms and the words of the prophets. God's presence with Israel is constantly reflected upon and gratitude is inspired. Praise is the natural outcome of the realisation of the great things God has done for them, just as praise showers forth when we realise what he has done for us in Christ. Chris Wright has much to say on the emphasis on praise throughout the Old Testament, and I found myself being called to spontaneous praise as I received these Old Testament exhortations in a New Testament context. Praise to YHWH is the expression and outflow of a realisation of the ongoing care God has bestowed on his holy nation, to make it fruitful in fulfilling his purpose. Knowing God leads to praising him. So it will one day be for all the nations - for all humankind.

In the light of this emphasis on praise, I found whole tracts of the Old Testament coming alive as I set them in the context of the New. They were arousing my sense of the evocation of praise as central to my relationship to the one true God. I would no longer tend to overlook them as just another reference to the requirement for praise. Praise became a personal necessity and not a mere standard element of godly living. The Old Testament was wringing it out of me. The Psalms meant more than ever.

The themes of praise and all nations coming to know the Lord came together, flowing through to the New Testament into the exciting poetic cartoons found in the book of Revelation. In chapter 4, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, seen as a lamb which had been slain, opens the scroll of history, having bought for God, people of every tribe and language, nation and race. 'Then I heard all created things, in heaven, on earth, under the earth and in the sea, crying "Praise and honour, glory and might, to him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb for ever"'. Victory is celebrated in chapter 7 vs 9-10 by the same international community, robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb. So the mission in the Old Testament to enable all nations to know the Lord is brought to fruition in the New, as the climax of history is previewed. On into the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Revelation, and the nations bring their splendour and wealth into the New Jerusalem Community, so that nothing of real value in human history and culture should be lost.

### **Conclusion**

To review such a rich book of 500 pages in a few, I can do little more than present the flavour of the book and encourage people to read it for themselves. But those who do, will also be able to explore the meaning of the social laws of Israel, the economic and social significance of the Jubilee, the concept of the Covenant, the good and ill of kingship, human responsibility for the care of the earth, the message of the Wisdom sections of the Bible, selections from God's law book. The ultimate success of the mission of God rests on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Knowledge of God will go forth from the people of God (Zion) and people will go up to this Zion, (what Wright metaphorically calls a centrifugal and a centripetal mission respectively, both linking them to the saving work of Jesus.) The image of God in the human race and how it will be restored is covered.

No book is without flaw and while the cross is given central place, it is not expounded with the same sure touch as is found in the rest of the book, but there is room for the reader to fit in a number of windows on the cross into the themes of the book. The mission of God depends on the death and resurrection of Jesus and its ultimate transforming influence on all mankind.

One specific story lingers with me whenever I think of this book and that is Wright's reference to Isaiah 19 verses 24-25 in what he sees as 'the most breathtaking pronouncement' on mission in the Old Testament: 'In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."' The identity of Israel is merged with that of Egypt and Assyria. This is a sample of the universal harmony that God will bring about. Philistia (Amos 9:7), Moab, Ammon and Edom (Jer. 49) and Israel's originally 'evil neighbours' (Jer 12:14-16) are mentioned for a similar destiny, when all nations shall know the Lord.

**Alfred Ward**

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. . . while Scripture is  
the book that shows us Christ,  
Christ is the person  
who must govern  
our interpretation of Scripture.

**Keith Ward**

#### **Review**

*Exploring the Old Testament* Vol 1 The Pentateuch  
Gordon J Wenham, SPCK, London, 2003  
ISBN 0-281-05429-0

This is the first of five books in a series, dealing with the Psalms and Wisdom Literature Vol II (Ernest Lucas), the Prophets Vol III (Gordon McConville). Two further books explore the New Testament: the Gospels and Acts Vol IV, the Letters and Revelation Vol V.

Gordon Wenham, who was Professor of Old Testament at the University of Gloucestershire, is well known to many Christadelphians through his commentaries on Genesis, Leviticus and Numbers. These are well worth consulting.

This work would not be classified as a commentary, for its format is more in the nature of a workbook 'designed to help the beginning student' get to grips with the first five books of the Bible. If one has read and studied the Bible extensively over a period of many years one can still come to fresh insights by using this textbook.

In a volume of 207 pages, we are given 11 chapters with only 47 pages devoted to the

book of Genesis. Thus, one will not find answers to all one's questions. What is of interest is the section dealing with 'The New Testament use of Genesis.' Those who use the marginal references in our Bible, to compare scripture with scripture, will still find much to think about as we compare scripture with scripture.

What are of particular use are the sections 'What do you think?' For example, in 'Rewriting the story of human origins' we are directed to the story of creation in Genesis 2 and the flood in Genesis 6-9 and asked to make a comparison with ancient near eastern parallels. By noticing any similarities and differences, we are asked to see how Genesis changes the story. In order to assist the student, a table is given to illustrate parallels between the Sumerian flood story and Genesis 1-9. The conclusion that Wenham reaches is that 'what we have in Genesis is a major *theological* reinterpretation of traditional origin stories.'

Of particular value is that at the end of each chapter of our textbook we are given a list of books for further reading. For example, our attention is directed to A. Heidel's *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, University of Chicago Press, 1949.

In the panels entitled 'Digging Deeper' we are directed to such questions as 'Was there a universal flood?' Older Christadelphians no doubt would have been excited by the discovery by Leonard Woolley in 1929 of a 'flood' layer in his excavations of Ur. Hopefully, few would now see this find as evidence of a 'universal' flood.

In the chapter dealing with the book of Exodus, the Ten Commandments are considered and the question is posed 'What are the differences between what modern society values and what the Bible values?' Such questions force us to consider the Bible's relevance to twenty-first century life.

The value of the book under review is best summarized by the publisher's blurb: 'This book offers an exploratory approach that enables students to engage with the (Biblical) text for themselves, and not simply to be passive learners.' It would be an excellent resource for Bible Class studies, at a low cost of NZ\$ 69.95. The four-page glossary and five-page index are particularly useful.

**John Stephenson (NZ)**

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If all the neglected Bibles  
were dusted simultaneously,  
we would have a record dust storm  
and the sun would go into eclipse  
for a whole week.

David F Nygren

**The Funny Side of Life**

My neighbour knocked on my door, the other day, at half past two in the morning. Can you believe it? Can you really believe it? Half past two, IN THE MORNING! Luckily though, I was still up, playing the bagpipes!

The drive-through MacDonald's was more expensive than I thought - once you've hired the car.

A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. Then he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: 'I have circled the block 10 times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses.' When he returned, he found a ticket from a police officer along with this note: 'I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation.'

A wife left a note for her husband, 'Could you please go shopping for me and buy one carton of milk, and if they have eggs, get 6.'

Some time later the husband returns home with 6 cartons of milk.

The wife asked him, 'Why did you buy 6 cartons of milk?'

He replied, 'Well, they had eggs!'

I went to a bookstore and asked the saleswoman, 'Where's the self-help section?' She said if she told me it would defeat the purpose.

Artificial intelligence is no match for natural stupidity.

Is there another word for synonym?

It doesn't matter whether you win or lose - until you lose.

A young executive was leaving the office late one evening when he found the Chief Executive Officer standing in front of a shredder with a piece of paper in his hand. 'Listen,' said the CEO, 'this is a very sensitive and important document here, and my secretary has gone for the night. Can you make this thing work?' 'Certainly,' said the young executive.

He turned the machine on, inserted the paper, and pressed the start button.

'Excellent, excellent!' said the CEO as his paper disappeared inside the machine. 'I just need one copy.'

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