

# *Forerunner*

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

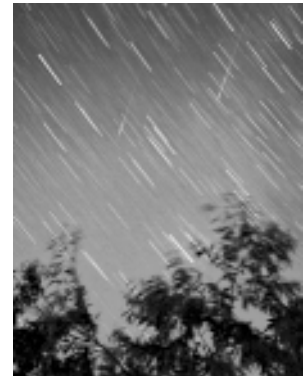
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## HEAVENLY SIGNS

- 3 PERSONAL FROM JOHN W. RITENBAUGH  
*The Beast and Babylon (Part Eight):  
God, Israel, and the Bible*
- 8 *Cogitations on Christmas*  
—Richard T. Ritenbaugh and David C. Grabbe
- 11 A READY ANSWER:  
*The Rich Young Ruler and the Needle's Eye*  
—Mike Ford
- 12 PROPHECY WATCH:  
*The Sixth Seal*  
—Richard T. Ritenbaugh
- 14 *Searching for Israel (Part Eight):  
The Scattering of Ten-Tribed Israel*  
—Charles Whitaker
- 23 WORLD WATCH  
—Charles Whitaker
- 24 BIBLE STUDY  
*The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector*  
—Martin G. Collins

## About Our Cover



“Stars” fall during a meteor shower over Jordan this past summer. Heavenly signs of far greater magnitude are predicted by the sixth seal of Revelation 6:12-17, announcing the beginning of the Day of the Lord.

**Reuters**

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# The Beast and Babylon

## Part Eight: God, Israel, and the Bible

For those who consider themselves Christian, the issue is clear: Do we believe God? Do we really believe He is involved in our lives and that He truly does love us? Are we willing to discipline ourselves and sacrifice, bringing a measure of discomfort upon ourselves, in order to be faithful? Do we not all seek a rich and fulfilling life? However, fulfillment is not generated by variety of experience. Experiencing many things may produce excitement and greater general knowledge, but true fulfillment derives from oneness with God through living His way of life. A dynamic relationship with God is life's missing dimension.

Our judgment is not even one thousandth of one percent of God's, yet even with our limited grasp of things, we see a great deal of disbelief in the Western nations, those that call themselves "Christian." Like their ancient ancestors, Israelites are still seeking fulfillment by pursuing things that cannot possibly produce a complete life. They seem to be doing little more than pursuing their lusts.

The following points summarize the present situation:

1. Babylon has become a spiritual entity, spreading from its Tigris-Euphrates roots to become a worldwide, anti-God system.
2. We live in the end-time nation that epitomizes that system developed to its greatest influence in all of history.

3. We cannot physically flee from it, but we must spiritually flee it, not allowing it to govern our attitudes and conduct.
4. Israel's great weakness is an unbelieving, impatient, hardheaded, fickle, immature curiosity bent upon self-satisfaction, which, if followed, produces unfaithfulness to the covenant through idolatry. It is idolatry because, once ignorance is removed, we are taking sovereignty to ourselves.
5. Our refusal to delay gratification of our desires can be simply stated as a failure to seek to be like God, and instead, disbelieving God, we do little to control our appetites.
6. Israel is indeed religious, but it is not and never has been the Christian nation it has advertised itself to be.
7. Once stripped of their veneer of Christianity, Israel's religions are nothing but neo-paganism, ultimately derived from Babylon, Egypt, and Gnosticism.

## Does Divorce Mean Abandonment?

Jeremiah 3:1-5, 8 helps to introduce the subject of this article:

“They say, ‘If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man’s, may he return to her again?’ Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me,” says the LORD. “Lift up your eyes to the desolate heights and see: Where have you not lain with men? By the road you have sat for them like an Arabian in the wilderness; and you have polluted the land with your harlotries and your wickedness. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain. You have had a harlot’s forehead; you refuse to be ashamed. Will you not from this time cry to Me, ‘My Father, You are the guide of my youth? Will He remain angry forever? Will He keep it to the end?’ Behold, you have spoken and done evil things, as you were able. . . . Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also.”

Jeremiah wrote this over 400 years after Israel’s rejection of God as King and about 840 years after making the covenant at Mount Sinai. Even though by the time of this writing God had divorced the Great Harlot Israel, He still continued to have a fractious relationship with her in order to continue the outworking of His purpose and to fulfill His promises to Abraham, including all the end-time prophecies. In other words, He was not yet finished with Israel.

Ezekiel wrote just shortly after Jeremiah, and he, too, hammered away at Israel’s harlotry:

The word of the LORD came again to me, saying, “Son of man, there were two women, the daughters of one mother. They committed harlotry in Egypt, they committed harlotry in their youth; their breasts were there embraced, their virgin bosom was there pressed. Their names: Oholah the elder and Oholibah her sister; they were Mine, and they bore sons and daughters. As for their names, Samaria is Oholah, and Jerusalem is Oholibah. . . . Now although her sister Oholibah saw this, she became more corrupt in her lust than [Oholah], and in her harlotry more corrupt than her sister’s harlotry.” (Ezekiel 23:1-4, 11)

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and especially Ezekiel and Hosea use this same metaphorical form to illustrate Israel’s faithless relationship with God, connecting directly to the same usage in Revelation 17 and 18. Why is this important? Virtually the entire Bible is devoted to God’s purpose for and relationship to Israel and the church. They are the focus of God’s intention to reproduce Himself, beginning with His promises and then His covenant with Abraham. God went so far as to enter into a symbolic marriage with Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, revealing the intimacy He considered their relationship to have.

He did this with no other nation. Even when the time came to summon Gentiles into His purpose, the great bulk of those called into the church have been Israelites dwelling among fellow Israelites in Israelitish lands. A person even becomes a spiritual Jew when converted! God’s pattern of focusing on Israel continues throughout the Bible to the end-time prophecies. We live in the end time, and God’s concern in Revelation, the ultimate end-time book, does not turn from this pattern. God’s purpose for the nation of Israel is not yet complete, as Romans 9–11 makes clear.

Thus Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, and the church, the Israel of God, Abraham’s spiritual descendants, are still His major focus. Other parts of the Bible reveal that Israel has fully earned the title of “the Great Harlot Babylon” even as she has earned the titles of “Sodom” and “Egypt.”

The Great Harlot of Revelation 17 and 18 is not a Gentile church or a Gentile nation because neither of these has ever qualified for that title by corrupting a covenant relationship with God as Israel has. Of this, God says in Amos 3:2, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” Having done only what comes naturally without the revelation of God, the Gentile world will have its opportunity to have a covenant relationship with Him following Christ’s return.

In defiance of God, Israel has rebelled against her responsibilities and played the harlot with the world. She has embraced its ways to such an extent that she has outdone the Gentiles in their manner of life, becoming appropriately named “Babylon the Great.” In Revelation 17 and 18, God is describing the influence and character of end-time Israel. He depicts all of Israel in close relationship with the Beast, influencing it, but with the two Joseph tribes, America (Manasseh) and Britain (Ephraim), as the Woman’s strongest components—and perhaps America is the one primarily described, as it is the most influential at the end.

## Root Cause of Israel’s Transgressions

The previous two articles digressed into an aspect of the Woman’s identity that is important for us to consider as

Christ’s end-time house, lest we fall into the same error. These articles covered what the Bible reveals to be the

cause and nature of the conduct that earned her the title, “The Great Harlot.”

Israel solemnly entered into the Old Covenant agreement with God, saying in Exodus 24:7, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.” Yet, once away from the excitement of being in the actual presence of God at Mount Sinai and under the pressures of daily life, Israel’s attitude drifted away from the one she had when she solemnly promised.

In Hebrews 3:12, the apostle Paul reports of Israel’s “evil heart of unbelief,” the fountain, the source, that gave birth to her irrational, erratic, unreliable spiritual and moral behavior. She could not be trusted to remain firm to her commitment to be faithful in keeping the commandments and thus God’s way of life. Had the making of the covenant been a literal marriage between two humans, her conduct would have been as God called it, harlotry. However, this was an agreement between a holy, spiritual God and the human nation He chose.

Though she transgressed every commandment in multiple ways, collectively, the spiritual sin through which her unfaithfulness is most frequently demonstrated is gross idolatry. Israel simply serves herself, following the whim of the moment, so that she might “have fun.” Her lack of belief grants her nature free rein to exhibit itself in the self-endowed liberty to follow the lust of her flesh, the lust of her eyes, and

the pride of life. She rejects her divine Husband as her Ruler because she wants a king “just like” the other nations.

Except for the occasional times when Israel had good leadership, she conducted her affairs, whether personal, domestic, or international, in the Babylonian manner. Israel, despite her great advantages, became just another kingdom of this world. While God has remained faithful to His agreements and promises through the centuries, she has maintained a hypocritical “God’s people” stance toward the world, palming herself off as a “Christian nation.”

With the founding of the church following Christ’s resurrection, God’s spiritual focus turned to the church. Having made the New Covenant with God, our charge now is to be faithful while living surrounded by Babylon the Great. Though it is literally physically impossible, we have the responsibility to come out of her, and we can come out spiritually by being faithful to God and His commandments. We must not fail as Israel did, for the stakes for us are much greater. The New Covenant is a better covenant than Israel made; it contains better promises, enabling us a much better opportunity to be faithful and grow. However, those greater advantages also render us more responsible than even Israel, God’s only chosen nation, because the church of God is God’s only chosen church.

## More Marks of Identification

A number of marks of Israel’s identity as the Harlot of Revelation 17 and 18 remain to be covered. In Part Five, we briefly touched upon a handful of God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By fulfilling those promises, God moved to make their descendants “great” in numbers and influence, as well as economically, politically, and militarily—eventually greater than any other nation or group of nations ever in the history of Planet Earth.

Historically, a significant step to this end occurred at the end of July and the beginning of August 1588, when the Spanish Armada of 125 ships was defeated in the English Channel by a number of factors, including poor weather and the failure of the Duke of Parma’s army to rendezvous with the Spanish fleet in Calais, France. These factors, combined with the harassing defense of Queen Elizabeth’s British navy, doomed the planned Spanish invasion of Britain.

Spain’s intent was to defeat the Protestant Queen Elizabeth and restore Catholicism there, but God had other ideas. This victory for the Israelitish people altered the course of history by inaugurating their rise to world dominance. First Holland, then France, Britain, and finally America rose to political, economic, and

military greatness on the heels of this major Spanish catastrophe.

John writes in Revelation 17:4, “The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.” The elegant clothing, jewelry, and precious metals illustrate her wealth. It is a wealth as among nations, not merely a church. As a group, the Israelitish people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, grew to control around 60% of the world’s wealth at the height of their prosperity.

Nobody else on earth is in the position to influence, persuade, and guide as Israel is. Through the misuse of these gifts, Israel has risen to worldly greatness in terms of evil too. Despite its material greatness, it is unfortunately also spiritually great in its immorality, great in its confusion, great in its deviance from responsibility, great in its polluted influence—so great in its power only it can hold the Beast in check and make it do its bidding until God’s time comes.

In recent history, Israel—represented primarily by the Joseph tribes—has brushed the world aside politically and economically. No other nation of people on

earth today fits the characteristics given in Revelation 17 and 18. However, there are yet more clues to clarify the Great Whore's identity.

In Revelation 17:1, the Woman sits on many waters; in verse 3, she sits on the Beast; in verse 9, she sits on seven mountains, symbolic of nations (Isaiah 2:2-3); and in verse 15, the "waters" are defined as peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. The term "sits" appears more than 300 times in Scripture, and most of the time, it merely indicates a posture contrasting to "stands." However, sometimes it indicates qualities of far greater importance.

Proverbs 31:23 says, "Her husband is known in the gates, when he *sits* among the elders of the land." This is a common positive usage and implies a measure of respect and authority. In contrast, Psalm 1:1 reads, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor *sits* in the seat of the scornful." Here, sitting is shown in a negative usage. Matthew 8:11; 23:2; and Acts 23:3 all show that "sit" indicates a position of prominence, authority, and influence for good or evil. One in this position is influential enough to teach, persuade, guide, or force another to follow, imitate, or submit.

This description of the Great Harlot "sitting" in Revelation 17 opens clues to help identify her among the nations: First, even as a person sits on a horse's back and influences it to go this way or that, walk, or run, the Woman teaches, guides, or coerces many nations, perhaps worldwide, to do her bidding.

Since the Beast is clearly an awesome, frightful entity, this fact suggests that her powers are vast. Adding to this evidence of strength, the Beast is described as consisting of peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. The Beast is no pushover, yet at this time in the prophecy, the Woman is in control. Only Israel in the entire world possesses this combination of strength to control something as ferocious as the Beast. The Bible's description of the Beast having the strongest parts of several vicious, carnivorous animals adds to John's amazement over the Woman.

She is never described in any way as similar to the Beast. The Bible always depicts her as one unit. Because of this contrast between the Woman and the Beast, it is distinctly possible that God wants us to understand that the Woman in this end-time prophecy is one people, as contrasted to the Beast, which consists of many diverse, unrelated peoples.

Feeding this thought into present circumstances, God is describing all of Israel in intimate association with the Beast. The world does not conceive Israel in this manner, but God does. It is an association of support, strong influence, and even control. Consider how entwined the nations of Israel are with Europe through political, trade, and military agreements. As the history of the last two centuries prove, the Joseph tribes—America and the

United Kingdom—in particular, are the clearest end-time realization of the Woman.

Notice how God specifically mentions the tribe of Joseph in prophecies written in the last decades before Israel fell to Assyria in 721-718 BC:

[Woe to you] who lie on beds of ivory, stretch out on your couches, eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint yourselves with the best ointments, but are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. (Amos 6:4-6)

Why single out Joseph, even though all of the ten northern tribes were about to fall? Because "Joseph" is used here to represent the entire house of Israel just as "Jerusalem" is used to represent the entire house of Judah. Ephraim and Manasseh were the leading and strongest tribes just before Israel fell, even as they are today. Judah was the leading and strongest tribe in the south, and today, though small, it is again fairly strong and, interestingly, located to the south of the bulk of Ephraim and Manasseh.

In Amos 5:15, God adds, "Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." God may intend these prophecies for all of Israel, but He singles Joseph out because it was the leading tribe politically, economically, and militarily. Interesting, too, is the fact that most of the end-time church resides in Joseph.

Amos 6:1 adds yet another characteristic of Israel that helps identify her by revealing what some of her citizens were saying: "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion, and trust in Mount Samaria, notable persons in the chief nation, to whom the house of Israel comes!" In modern language, God is saying that the average, reasonably well-off Israelite boasted, "Look at the other nations. None are greater than we are." This arrogance echoed what their leaders, the notable persons, said. This boast was probably true, but beneath it, the cancer of their immorality and false spirituality was eating away at their vitals, and God would soon bring this powerful nation down. Amos paints a picture of a people so self-absorbed with pleasure, so self-confident in their power, that they feel free to indulge themselves, ignoring the fact that the entire nation is, in reality, walking on eggshells in every vital area of well-being.

Amos and Hosea, both prophets to the northern kingdom, were contemporaries during the reigns of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel. Amos began preaching before Hosea, but Hosea preached for a longer time, ending his ministry just a few years before the northern tribes fell to Assyria. In Hosea,

“Ephraim” appears 37 times, using it the same way Amos uses “Joseph.” Sometimes, it is clear that God means all ten northern tribes, but at other times, He means Ephraim alone. Hosea 10:11 is typical: “Ephraim is a trained heifer that loves to thresh grain; but I harnessed her fair neck, I will make Ephraim pull a plow. Judah shall plow; Jacob shall break his clods.” He means all of Israel here, but “Ephraim,” the leading tribe’s name, is used.

It is Israel, primarily the Joseph tribes, to which the Beast is currently submitting, but the time is coming when events will take a stunning turn, as Revelation 17:16-17 shows:

And the ten horns which you saw on the beast,

these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

Within the practical realities of international political, economic, and military affairs, the Beast may be resentful and unwilling to do as the Woman directs. As a wild animal would, it will undoubtedly buck and resist, but until God is ready, it ends up most of the time doing what the Woman wants. The Beast submits to the Woman because she possesses power greater in certain areas than the Beast, a power the Beast resents, envies, and plots to have for itself.

## What Nations Do

Babylon’s spiritual component indeed influences the Beast, but more than religion affects it, as Revelation 18, a continuing description of the Great Harlot, illustrates. Revelation 17:18 clearly calls the woman a city, not a church, and symbolically, God uses a city to represent an entire nation. At the end time, the original Babylon no longer exists as either a city or a nation. But for the end time, God prophesies of a Babylon, which He calls a Great Harlot, to exist as a city/nation. It certainly has a religious aspect to it, but it is not solely a church.

Revelation 18:9-11 adds to the description of a nation, not a church, as it describes a huge, worldwide merchandising and manufacturing entity that men weep over when destroyed. Religious entities do not manufacture and merchandise. This is vital to understand because Revelation 18 must coordinate with the identity of the Woman in Revelation 17. Thus, Revelation 18, describing what nations involve themselves in, provides another major reason why the Woman cannot be a church.

The Woman of Revelation 17-18 may be religious, but she is far more interested in what produces power and influence in this world. Remember, Israel rejected God, becoming a nation of this world. In chapter 18, the emphasis is on her financial aspects, as the merchants, manufacturers, and shippers of products bewail her destruction, seeing their wealth going up in smoke. No church is manufacturing and merchandising as chapter 18 describes.

The Woman’s wealth is a major foundation of her power, enabling her to influence so readily; her economic power adds strength to its other worldly powers. Follow the money, verses 9-11 urge. They clearly portray globalization and all the outsourcing it implies. The Woman is depicted as a huge, worldwide merchandising powerhouse that has promoted the spread of industry all over the world so she might consume what others have manufactured through their craft.

Verses 16-19 show the political figures, merchants, and transportation industry figures weeping because, when the Harlot falls, no one is left to buy or, as we say today, consume, what they produce from afar. They weep because their power, too, has crumbled, and their hopes for even greater wealth have been dashed in her destruction.

Like all worldly nations, the Beast is driven by self-interest, and it is interested in far more than religion. The power of money that merchandising generates drives it. Ezekiel 28:16 says, speaking of Satan, “By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones.” In this verse, we find the source of both the Woman’s and the Beast’s interests and power, and it agrees with Revelation 13:4, which shows the Beast derives its power from Satan. The timing of the prophecies shows the Woman already possessing these powers, and because the Beast undoubtedly greatly covets them, it will make war with the Woman to be free of her domination and take them for itself.

That Revelation 17:1 shows the Harlot sitting on many waters may be intended to show that she is located near an ocean and is thus a seaport city. Another possibility is that God intends us to understand her to be both a seaport metropolis and a powerful merchandising city consisting of many ethnic groups.

Since Rome, formerly a seaport city, and once the administrative, economic, and religious continuation of the Babylonian system, spread beyond the bounds of Europe, could we not consider New York City to represent Babylon in this prophecy? In news reports today, it is not at all uncommon for a city to represent the entire nation. The Bible uses the same device, and

*(continued on page 18)*

# Cogitations

## Christmas Contradictions

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An anonymous quotation that made the rounds of the Internet last year runs, “Christmas is weird. What other time of year do you sit in front of a dead tree and eat candy out of your socks?” Though it may induce a chuckle from its readers, most people either miss or ignore the larger point: Christmas is a bundle of contradictions, inanities, and outright lies.

The astounding fact is that most people are aware of this. On a Christmas Eve radio show, a local preacher substituted for the regular host. His topic of discussion centered on the greeting “Merry Christmas!” and he asked if, in our multicultural, multi-religious society, this was offensive. One caller said, no, Christianity was still the majority religion in America, but what really troubled her was the fact that professing Christians promoted the traditional lie that Jesus was born on December 25.

Without missing a beat, the preacher/talk-show host then explained to the audience that his caller was correct, Jesus could not have been born around the winter solstice, and that, in the early fourth century, the Catholic Church had combined the Roman winter solstice festival, the Saturnalia, with a celebration of Jesus’ birth to help new converts adjust to Christianity. He treated these facts as common knowledge.

His “resolution” to the conundrum, however, was revealing. The gist of his answer to the troubled caller was, “If Christians would live according to the teachings of Jesus, these contradictions would not matter.” I had to shake my head. Neither the host nor the caller could see the self-contradictory nature of his answer. Did not Jesus teach that we

are to be honest? Certainly, He did!

He tells the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-18 that, to have eternal life, he should not bear false witness, which is the ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16). In the Sermon on the Mount, He says, “But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one” (Matthew 5:37). We could say, then, that keeping a celebration to Christ on a day that is not His birthday—with customs and traditions that derive from paganism—is from the evil one. It is a lie, and the Devil is the father of it (John 8:44).

This is what makes the oft-heard phrase, “Let’s put Christ back into Christmas!” so laughable. It is another self-contradictory statement. How can we put Christ back into something in which He never was in

the first place? Search the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and no command—not even a suggestion—to commemorate the Savior’s birth will be found. It is amazing to consider that professing Christians around the world keep days and festivals never once enjoined on them in God’s Word (Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Halloween, Christmas), yet the ones God tells them to keep (the Sabbath, Passover, God’s holy days), they ignore!

What about the real central character of Christmas, Santa Claus? Today’s jolly old elf—a roly-poly old man in a red suit trimmed in white; big, black boots; spectacles; long, white beard; and a “ho-ho-ho”—was the brainchild of Coca-Cola’s marketing department early in the last century. He was based loosely on the English Father Christ-

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## Spirit and Truth

Two years ago, WorldNetDaily published a controversial exposé that spotlighted one of the more frequent skirmishes in our current culture war. Masterfully written by Joe Kovacs, “Christmas in America becomes battleground” ([http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?article\\_id=29995](http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?article_id=29995)) reveals the pagan origins of this esteemed tradition and demonstrates why increasing numbers of “fundamentalist Christians” are realizing that one cannot “put Christ” back into something in which He never was.

Apologist C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, asserts that one of Satan’s most common ploys is to “send error into the world in

pairs”—pairs of opposites—”and then he encourages us to spend a lot of time thinking, Which is the worst?” Satan persuades us to argue over two options, or two points of view, neither one of which is true. Regardless of which side carries the argument, Satan wins the day.

In the current war over Christmas and religious symbols, Satan has pitted the secular humanists, who want to blot out Christianity and encourage almost any other form of worship, against mainstream Christians, who are fighting for the right to worship as they see fit by putting evergreen trees in schools per Jeremiah 10:2-5. Atheists and agnostics arrayed against Christmas-

# on Christmas

mas and the German Kris Kringle. This figure, in turn, has blended with the early “Christian” Saint Nicholas, a churchman who was known for spreading the wealth to needy members of his community, sometimes throwing sacks of coins through open windows and down chimneys. Where is the biblical basis for such a character? He may be present in the modern crèche, but no one like him appears in the gospel narratives of Jesus’ birth.

Then there is the season’s alternate name, Yule. Where does that come from? Check the origin in the dictionary: “a pagan midwinter festival.” Another contradiction! The preacher/talk-show host made mention of this point too, chuckling about how so many people do not realize that their Yule log hearkens back to the heathen practice of driving away

evil spirits with bonfires on the night of the winter solstice! Now, however, it is just another way to stir up Christmas cheer! No harm in that, right?

If these pagan, unbiblical elements are so commonly known, why does the Christmas tradition continue? Three reasons come to the fore:

- Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. (Romans 8:7)
- The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9)
- The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and My

people love to have it so. (Jeremiah 5:31)

Christmas continues because human nature deceives itself into practicing things that are not right because they are enjoyable. Human nature allows people to justify self-contradictory things because they appear to produce benefits for them. In such a case, truth does not matter; all that matters is that a person receives presents and has a good time. And if a religious significance—real or imagined—can be attached to it, all the better!

We should not expect people to give up Christmas anytime soon just because it has pagan origins. Human nature has a long history of explaining such pesky details away.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

bent “Christians”—for whom do we root?

The truth of the matter is that Satan is the real winner regardless of the outcome.

Jesus Christ tells us,

But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in *spirit and truth*; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in *spirit and truth*. (John 4:23-24)

As Mr. Kovacs’ article shows, the truth about the pagan origins of Christmas is easily researched. Any

good encyclopedia will show that the timing and trappings of this celebration long predate Christianity. December 25 has been a focal point of sun-worship for millennia. The pagan origins of this day are so well-documented that the real question is, “What business do Christians have in trying to “Christianize” something that has been blatantly anti-God from the very beginning?” Is this worshipping God in spirit and in truth?

God was so concerned that ancient Israel would begin adopting the pagan ways of the Canaanites—even under the auspices of worshipping the true God—that He gave the children of Israel a categorical warning:

“When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you *do not inquire after their gods*, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I com-

mand you, be careful to observe it; *you shall not add to it nor take away from it.*" (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)

God is very specific in the way that He wants to be worshipped! He has **not** given us permission to worship Him in just any way that seems right to us. He warns His people specifically in these verses, as well as in Revelation 22:18-19, not to add to His instructions, nor to take away from them, and this is clearly within the context of adopting pagan practices in conjunction with worshipping Him. Christmas may not involve physical child-sacrifice—although in spirit millions of children are being sacrificed on the altar of materialism—but the stench of this celebration is odious nonetheless because it is still idolatry: replacing the true worship of God with a false one.

The Bible does not specify when Jesus Christ was born (although the best deduction is that it was in the autumn—see "When Was Jesus Born?" *Forerunner*, December 1994). More importantly, the Bible does not give any instruction in celebrating His birth, nor any example of the first-century church doing so, nor any indication that the celebra-

tion of birthdays is pleasing to God at all! Even this idea has come from paganism, rather than from God's Instruction Book for mankind. Is this, then, worshipping God in spirit and in truth?

Is it any wonder that our Savior says, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And *in vain they worship Me*, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9); and "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that *you may keep your tradition*" (Mark 7:9); and "[you make] the word of God of no effect through *your tradition* which you have handed down. And many such things you do" (Mark 7:13)? Human nature has the rebellious proclivity to do only what it wants to do, even when told by God Himself to do things differently (Romans 8:7)!

We see, then, that on one pole are the secularists, who believe the lie that God should not be a part of their lives. On the other pole are mainstream Christians, who believe the lie that syncretism is an acceptable form of worship. But in either case, the trail of lies indicates who the *real* "holiday spirit" is.

—David C. Grabbe

a teen, but the subconscious desire to fit in is certainly present. We may call it "staying in style" or "not wanting to fall behind," but it is the same urge not to stand out as different.

We Christians have another ingredient to add to the mix: our calling. God's invitation to His Family really complicates matters in terms of fitting in to society. He has called us out of this world (John 15:19). The purpose of His invitation is to make us different! If we accept His invitation, we agree to spend the rest of our lives as the proverbial sore thumb. We are set apart from other people in the world, and commissioned—nay, commanded—to widen the gap!

Notice Paul's blunt statement in Romans 12:2: "[D]o not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . . ." John is equally as blunt: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (I John 2:15). As is James: "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). And God Himself: "Come out of [Babylon, a type of the world], My people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4).

Perhaps it is during this time of the year that we feel most different. We are among a tiny minority of Christians who do not celebrate Christmas. Our house may be the only one on the block without brilliant and colorful decorations. We must beg off going to the office party or participating in the gift pool. We think of new and clever ways to respond to "Merry Christmas!" or "Happy holidays!" Unlike the rest of the human herd, we avoid the malls, restaurants, and any other "festive" gathering place. Some of us leave the radio off to avoid the constant, mind-numbing holiday tunes.

(continued on page 22)

## Dare to Be Different!

Most of us are by nature conformists. We tend to want to blend into the crowd and desire not to stand out as different. Most cultures teach conformity to their children early and often, and this initial training remains with them throughout their lives. Those who stray from conformity are called "black sheep," and are regarded somewhat suspiciously by "normal" people.

Schoolchildren seem to feel this need to conform—to be like everyone else—more than adults. As a preacher's kid whose family did not have a great deal of disposable income to keep up with the neighbors' kids, I felt this desire

acutely. How much I envied my pals' Nikes®, Izod® shirts, and Members Only® jackets! The shoes and clothing I had were just as nice and serviceable, but they had all the wrong tags. They—and thus I—did not fit in. When I later received an Izod® shirt—burgundy, second-hand—I wore it until I nearly burst its seams.

As adults, we feel similar peer pressure, but the stakes are higher. Now it is cars, homes, memberships, investments, salaries, résumés, benefit packages, and vacation destinations—not to mention all the latest toys, gizmos, and accoutrements. Not running with the in-crowd is not as devastating to an adult as it is to

*“And again I say to you,  
it is easier for a camel  
to go through the eye of a needle  
than for a rich man  
to enter the kingdom of God.”  
Matthew 19:24*

# The Rich Young Ruler and the Needle’s Eye

**In the three and a half years** of Christ’s earthly ministry, He held thousands of conversations and counseled perhaps many hundreds of people. The Gospels record only a portion of those exchanges, indicating that those dialogues chosen for inclusion in the Bible are of particular importance to us, and we should pay close attention to the lessons there for us. One such conversation is found in Matthew 19:16-22:

Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to Him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to

him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

What can we learn from this brief discourse? We see a very polite, respectful, and eager young man who leaves Christ and goes away sorrowful. Why? The story makes it clear that he is young, and Luke tells us he is a ruler (Luke 18:18), possibly a magistrate or a kind of Justice of the Peace.

In the parallel account in Mark, we are told that the young man came “running” up to Christ and “knelt” before him (Mark 10:17), indicating a sense of urgency and respect. He then shows submissiveness and a willingness to be taught when he addresses Jesus as “Good Teacher.” This was not a typical form of address for the Jews at this time. A more respectful greeting may not be found in the entire Bible.

*(continued on page 20)*

# THE SIX

*“I looked when He opened the sixth seal,  
and the sun became black as sackcloth  
And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree  
Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up and  
And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the c  
hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the  
‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who s  
For the great day of His wrath has*  
(Revelation)

**A**mong astronomy buffs, mid-November of each year brings the potential for an exciting and spectacular display in the heavens, the famous Leonid Meteor Shower, which in recent years has far outdone summer’s Perseid Shower for oohs and ahhs. During a typical meteor shower, a person can expect to see only five to ten falling stars per hour, even in a dark, country location. In 1966, however, stunned observers of the Leonid Shower estimated a peak rate of 100,000 meteors per hour, a rate rightly termed a “meteor storm.” In contrast, Joe Rao, Night Sky Columnist at SPACE.com, writes in “Drizzle of Shooting Stars Expected Friday Morning” (November 12, 2004):

The Leonid meteors are debris shed into space by the Tempel-Tuttle comet, which swings through the inner solar system at intervals of 33 years. With each visit the comet leaves behind a trail of dust in its wake.

Lots of the comet’s old dusty trails litter the mid-November part of Earth’s orbit and the Earth glides through this debris zone every year. Occasionally we’ll pass directly through an unusually concentrated dust trail, or filament, which can spark a meteor storm resulting in thousands of meteors per hour. That’s what happened in 1999, 2001 and 2002.

Since the Tempel-Tuttle comet passed the Sun in 1998, it was in those years immediately following its passage that the Leonids put on their best show.

But now, the comet—and its dense trails of dust—have all receded far beyond Earth’s orbit and back into the outer regions of the solar

system. So odds are that there is little, if any chance of any unusual meteor activity.

Mankind has always been fascinated with the heavens: their beauties, their mysteries, their movements, and their surprises. Early on in man’s history, after years of observation and record keeping, the learned discovered that—with certain exceptions—the movements of the heavenly bodies could be predicted, as could phenomena like eclipses, comets, and meteor showers. To them, what occurred on the dark canvas of space revealed creation’s design, order, and perfection. As David wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).

Despite the rational, scientific understanding of most celestial happenings, sudden changes in the normally placid, soothing nighttime sky can cause wonder and even panic. Comets, long thought to portend world-changing events, have been known to ignite terrors in superstitious people. Eclipses of the sun can spur the unenlightened to believe the end of the world has come, as can a “bloody” moon. From the earliest times, men and women perverted even the regular movements of heavenly bodies into astrology, and millions still consult their readings daily. God warns, “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them” (Jeremiah 10:2).

Yet, God Himself uses heavenly phenomena as signs of momentous events. Perhaps the most famous is the “Star of Bethlehem,” which guided the wise men to their audience with the young King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11). Though this “star” was most likely an angel standing as a beacon for the magi to follow, many have postulated “natural” explanations such as comets and supernovae. The Ninth Plague on Egypt (Exodus 10:21-23), Joshua’s Long Day (Joshua

# THE SEAL

*and behold, there was a great earthquake;  
of hair, and the moon became like blood.  
It rolls up its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind.  
Every mountain and island was moved out of its place.  
Commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man,  
mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks,  
Come, sit on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!  
Who can stand?'"*  
(Revelation 6:12-17)

10:12-14), Hezekiah's Sundial (II Kings 20:8-11), and the darkness during Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 27:45) all involved aberrations of expected solar behavior. All signaled major movements in God's plan.

The sixth seal also involves heavenly bodies doing the unexpected: The sun darkens, the moon turns blood-red, the stars fall, and the sky itself rolls up like a scroll. Not only do these terrifying cosmic wonders signal the beginning of the Day of the Lord, but they, like the previous five seals, also serve as judgments against sinful mankind on planet Earth.

## EARTHQUAKES, HEAVEN SHAKES

Unlike the other five seals, the text of the sixth seal is straightforward and uncomplicated. Only a few of the details in the description require more than a brief comment in explanation. Far more important to understanding this seal as a judgment is the effect the signs have on the people of the earth.

The seal opens with "a great earthquake" (Revelation 6:12), a common indicator of God appearing (see Judges 5:4; Psalm 68:8; 77:18; 97:4; Habakkuk 3:10; Haggai 2:6-7), working out His purpose (see Exodus 19:18; Matthew 27:51-54; 28:2; Acts 16:26), and/or striking out in displeasure and judgment. In terms of anger and punishment, God caused an earthquake to open the ground in the wilderness and swallow Korah and his fellow rebels (Numbers 16:31-32). In Psalm 18:7, David writes, "Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of the hills also quaked and were shaken, because He was angry" (see Isaiah 5:25; Nahum 1:2-5). God prophesies in Isaiah 13:11, 13, "I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity. . . . Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of His fierce anger."

Earthquakes occur frequently in Revelation, of which this one is the first. Seismic activity accompanies the seventh seal (Revelation 8:5), the resurrection of the Two Witnesses (11:13), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the seventh bowl or vial (KJV) of God's wrath (16:18). Evidently, massive earthquakes—the kind that strikes dread and panic into every soul caught in them—will frequently punctuate the Day of the Lord.

Certainly, the heavenly signs that occur in tandem with the great temblor are astounding, especially if all of them should occur within a short span of time. Joel 2:30-31 describes the same event: "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD." In the Olivet Prophecy, Jesus repeats the warning: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29; Mark 13:24-25). Luke's rendition adds a few details:

And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of heaven will be shaken. (Luke 21:25-26)

*The Sun Darkened:* John describes the darkness of the sun as "black as sackcloth of hair" (Revelation 6:12), comparing it to the black goat hair used to make sackcloth and tents in his day. This may depict a solar eclipse or possibly a massive dust storm caused by a volcanic explosion. The Ninth Plague covered Egypt  
*(continued on page 17)*

# SEARCHING

## Part Eight: The Scatter

*"So I swore in My wrath,  
'They shall not enter My rest."  
(Hebrews 3:11)*

Assyria conquered the ten-tribed Kingdom of Israel in 718 BC. According to II Kings 17:6, Assyria "carried Israel away to Assyria." She deported the Israelites *en masse*, to what is now northern Iran, just south of the Caspian Sea.

Conquering Israel was not easy; the siege of Samaria, Israel's capital, lasted three years. Assyria may have "overextended" herself in the effort. Whatever the reason, Assyria began her decline almost immediately after she conquered Israel. By 650 BC, Assyria was in an advanced state of decline.<sup>1</sup>

The rapid decline of Assyria afforded some Israelites the opportunity to become aggressive. Early on, some Israelite groups actually became strong enough to mount a guerilla war against their captors. Although unable to turn the tables on Assyria, they did weaken her to the extent that a confederation of the Babylonians and the Medes found it relatively easy to capture Nineveh, Assyria's capital city, in 612 BC.<sup>2</sup> A few decades later, other Israelites banded together to become the Scythians, whom historians recognize as a fierce and warlike people. Centuries later, these peoples would merge with others to become the Parthians, the scourge of the Roman Empire. For the entirety of the Roman period, the Parthians effectively contained the Roman

armies at the Euphrates River, keeping them from ever invading the rich Indus Valley on the Indian sub-continent (now Pakistan).

However, the majority of Israelites left the Middle East during the several decades just after Assyria's fall. They took a number of routes, of course, but in general they made their escape using several passes over the Caucasus Mountains, one of which, located in present-day Georgia, retained the name, Pass of Israel, until renamed by the godless communists of the last century.

The prophet Amos, as recorded in Amos 9:9, uses the metaphor of sifting grain to describe what God has done (and will do) to Israel. God, Amos says, "will sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground."

God will separate His people and scatter them, while at the same time keeping track of every Israelite. The Scriptures provide plenty of evidence regarding where this sifting placed the Israelites over a period of time. For convenience, we will divide that evidence into two categories. First, God's Word tells us where to look for Israel. Second, His Word tells us *from* where He will gather Israel in the last days. Together, these two categories of evidence provide substantial detail regarding the whereabouts of modern-day Israel.

### Driven Where?

**Category One:** God's Word states *where* to look for Israel.

# FOR ISRAEL

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## ing of Ten-Tribed Israel

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- Psalm 89:25: The psalmist Ethan prophesies that God “will set his hand over the sea, and his right hand over the rivers.” So, Israel was to be scattered somewhere over oceans and rivers. That is, admittedly, a bit general. God’s Word becomes much more specific.

- Hosea 12:1: In a passage condemning Israel (specifically Ephraim, the primary tribe, having received the greater portion of the birthright blessing), God says that Israel “pursues the east wind.” To pursue the east wind is to travel west.

- Jeremiah 3:12-13: Jeremiah, pleading for Israel to repent, to “acknowledge your iniquity” (verse 13), asks that his words be proclaimed “toward the north.” Jeremiah, remember, lived at the time of Judah’s fall to the Babylonians, some 130 years *after* the Kingdom of Israel had been forcibly moved out of its homeland. So, he was not writing to Israelites domiciled within a hundred miles north of Jerusalem—residing in and around Samaria. No, he is addressing a people living somewhere else further north.

- Jeremiah 31:10: God says that He, “who scattered Israel,” will also gather it “as a shepherd does his flock.” He asks that His message be declared “in the isles afar off.” This is not Crete or even Cyprus or Malta. The islands must be far away, and northwest of Jerusalem.

Therefore, Israel migrated north, west, into islands some distance away. People who look for the “Ten Lost Tribes” in Africa or South America need to study God’s Word with a globe in one hand and a compass in the other!

### Gathered from Where?

**Category Two:** God’s Word speaks of the areas *from where* He will gather Israel in the last days.

- Jeremiah 31:10: Here again, God says He will gather Israel from “the isles afar off.” Note the plural, *isles*.

- Jeremiah 23:8: God prophesies that the time will come when people will look back and remember how He “led the descendants of the house of Israel from the north country.”

- Jeremiah 31:8: God says He will “bring [the remnant of Israel] from the north country, and gather them from the ends of the earth.” This nails the matter down even tighter: God will not bring Israel back from the near north, from the area of the Caspian Sea, where it first migrated. God will gather Israel from a much greater distance, from around the globe.

- Jeremiah 3:18: God says He will gather Judah and the house of Israel “together out of the land of the north.”

- Isaiah 11:12: God says He will gather “the outcasts of Israel, and . . . the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” This reference indicates that Israel will have migrated far and wide.

- Hosea 11:8-10: God asks rhetorically, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?” He goes on to explain that He will roar like a lion, and “then His sons shall come trembling from the west.”

- Isaiah 49:1, 12: In verse 1, God indicates His audience: the “coastlands” and the “peoples from afar.” Then, in verse 12, He tells more about the areas from where He will gather His people: “Surely these shall come from afar; Look! Those from the north and the west, and these from the land of Sinim [Vulgate: Australi].” Israel, God says, will come to dwell at “the ends of the earth,” even in Australia.

- Isaiah 41:1, 9: In verse 1, God encourages the peoples of the “coastlands,” telling them in verse 9 that He has “taken [you] from the ends of the earth, and called [you] from its farthest regions, and said to you, ‘You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away.’”

The Scriptural evidence is conclusive: Israel is today—and will be until God re-gathers it—scattered around the world, but principally to the north and west of Jerusalem and in isles afar off. Now we have some definite geographic search criteria. Next month, we will conclude our gathering of search criteria by looking at the venue of today’s Davidic monarchy.

—Charles Whitaker

Critics assert that Israel’s history demonstrates the weakness of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in that their God could not keep His promises. Is that so? We need to set the record straight.

The Old Testament is a chronicle of Israel’s repeated failure to obey God, of its refusal to keep His commandments and statutes. In Psalm 78:10-11, 40-42, 56-57, the psalmist mentions that Ephraim (meaning Israel at large)

did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law, and forgot His works and His wonders that He had shown them. . . . How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power. . . . Yet they tested and provoked the Most High God, and did not keep His testimonies, but turned back and acted unfaithfully like their fathers.

II Kings 17:7-8 speaks of the sins of the Kingdom of Israel, up north:

For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, . . . and they had feared other gods, and had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LORD had cast out from before the children of Israel.

The prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 32:30, quotes

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Jaspers, Karl, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953. Jaspers argues that the period from (roughly) 900 to 200 BC is an “axial” time of history, a term he uses to designate a pivot point during which the powerhouses of the ancient world (e.g., the empires of the Hittites, Babylonians, and Assyrians) passed into the dustbin of history, while modern nations (e.g., Greece and Italy) had their birth. It is important to recognize that the double falls of the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah took place during this period.

God calls Israel His “battle-ax” in Jeremiah 51:20-23. He continues: “For with you I will break the nation in pieces; with you I will destroy kingdoms; . . . and with you I will break in pieces governors and rulers.” It is only fitting, then, that after her fall, God would use the descendents of the Kingdom of Israel to break up more than a few kingdoms during this Axial Period. Israel played a key role in Assyria’s fall, and under the name of the Scythians, became a scourge to all around them, including the Babylonians.

God had used Israel before in this capacity. Abraham, in defeating the kings named in Genesis 14:1-2, retarded the

development of the Assyrian-Babylonian axis for hundreds of years, giving Egypt the opportunity to develop its massive civilization unchallenged, in relative peace and quiet. Again, under the hand of Moses, God “defeated many nations and slew mighty kings—Sihon king of the Amorites, Og king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan” (Psalm 135:10-11).

Finally, it is quite possible that Israel’s wanderings in northern Europe after 250 BC provided the stimulus that resulted in the southward migration of the displaced indigenous folk—among them various Germanic tribes. These tribes eventually crossed the Danube River, invading the territories of the Roman Empire. In this sense, Israelite migrations in northern Europe may have played an indirect role in the fall of the Roman Imperium.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, it appears that certain of the Israelite tribes raided Babylon sometime after its fall to the Medes and Persians, around 539 BC, capturing those of the tribes of Benjamin, Levi, and Judah who had not returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and later, Nehemiah. It was at that time and in this way that those who stayed back in Babylon rejoined their brethren, the house of Israel. These peoples accompanied the Israelites on their subsequent migrations, finally to emerge as the Jews of Eastern Europe—Ashkenazi Jewry.

# mises are Not Forgotten Ones

God's scathing indictment of the people of both Kingdoms: "[T]he children of Israel and the children of Judah have done only evil before Me from their youth."

Because of their sins, as II Kings 17:18-20 indicates, God

was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight. . . . Also Judah did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the statutes of Israel which they made. And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them from His sight.

In Psalm 78:59-62, the psalmist Asaph relates that God, when He became aware of the idols of Israel,

was furious, and greatly abhorred Israel, so that He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, . . . and delivered His strength into captivity, and His glory into the enemy's hand. He also gave His people over to the sword, and was furious with His inheritance.

As early as the days of the founder of the Kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam I, God understood the direction Israel was taking. In I Kings 14:15, God warns that He will ultimately

strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water. He will uproot Israel from this good land which He gave to their fathers, and will scatter them beyond the [Euphrates] River, because they have

made their wooden images, provoking the LORD to anger.

Much later, Amos warned Israel, "Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth" (Amos 9:8).

The patriarchs were, as God attests again and again, faithful. However, the people of Israel failed to observe the terms of God's conditional promises to them. Israel exhibited again and again its refusal to obey God. As a result, it has yet to enter into the peace, prosperity, and eternal possession of the land He promised the patriarchs. Hebrews 3:8-11 summarizes the matter: "In the day of trial in the wilderness, [the children of Israel] . . . tested Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation. . . . So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

Because of the peoples' recalcitrance, God *withheld* His blessings, ultimately separating Himself from them by casting them out of the land He had promised the patriarchs. *God punished Israel for its disobedience by deferring the fulfillment of His promises to the patriarchs.* This deferment did not make Him unfaithful to the people, because His promises to them were conditional, based on their obedience to His revelation.

In fact, it is not perverse to assert that God was *completely* faithful to the children of Israel, doing to them exactly what He promised He would do *if* they persistently sinned against Him. At the right time and for the right people, God will honor His unconditional promises to the patriarchs. Israel's sad history is the consequence of *peoples'* faithlessness, not of their God's weakness.

(continued from page 13)

with a "darkness which may even be felt," a "thick darkness" (Exodus 10:21-22), and perhaps God will repeat it on an even grander scale. Whatever the case, visibility will be severely limited, even during the daylight hours.

*The Moon Like Blood:* This chilling sight presages calamity and death, particularly in war, as in the color of the second horse (Revelation 6:4). Sometimes lunar discoloration occurs naturally when unusual amounts of dust are suspended in the atmosphere, particularly after a volcanic eruption or an earthquake. Incidentally, many manuscripts read "full moon" rather than simply "moon."

*The Stars Fall:* John's imagery reflects countless late figs blown down by the violent winter wind (verse

13). This seems most likely to predict a meteor shower of immense proportions, possibly containing larger-than-normal meteorites, thus increasing the effect and making it seem as if the stars themselves are falling. Because stars are a biblical symbol of angels, some have suggested that this verse parallels Revelation 12:7-10, the casting out of Satan and his demons from heaven. However, for this to have any credence, the concurrent celestial events must also be taken symbolically.

*The Sky Recedes:* Of these four wonders, this event is the most puzzling (Revelation 6:14). The apostle compares it to a scroll rolling up, or we might think of it in terms of opening a spring-loaded window blind. Joseph A. Seiss, in his *The Apocalypse: Expo-*  
(continued on page 18)

(continued from page 7)

most frequently the city named is Jerusalem. Here, though, the city of Babylon represents the entire world's political, economic, religious, and commercial system. New York City, the location of Wall Street, is the financial capital not only of the United States, but of the world.

In the recent past, New York City's Mayor Bloomberg has twice called it the capital of the world because of its cultural and financial power, as well as because the headquarters of the United Nations is located there. This is not a major point, as it cannot be proved from the Bible, but it is plausible. Israel contains a city that appears to qualify as "that great city."

## The Blood of Saints and Martyrs

What about the blood of the martyrs mentioned in Revelation 17:6? When people read this verse, their thoughts immediately turn to the Roman Universal Church of the Dark Ages. Indeed, that organization's record is a sorry one, but Israel's record against the people of God is not any better.

Jesus cries in Luke 13:34, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!" The Bible is replete with examples of the persecutions of God's people.

It is easy to read the histories of modern Israel over the last two hundred years or so and conclude that today's Israelites would never do such a thing. Since they are nominally Christian, one would like to think that they would never stoop to that. However, human nature never changes. All it takes is the right set of circumstances, and persecution will happen again in Israel, even as the book of Acts witnesses threats and murders occurring among Israelites in the first century!

One may perhaps think that persecution occurred then, but it stopped with the end of the first century. Not so! Many are familiar with *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, which focuses on numerous persecutions, including martyrdom, that raged against Evangelical groups. An-

other book, *Martyrs Mirror*, as large as *Strong's Concordance*, contains a comprehensive history of 1,600 years of the persecutions, including martyrdom, perpetrated against Anabaptist groups.

"Anabaptist" is a name attached by the world at large to any professing Christian group that opposes infant- and child-baptism because the biblical requirements for baptism are repentance and faith, which no infant or child can meet. One must be an adult of considerable living experience to consider baptism seriously. The most prominent Anabaptist groups in the Western world are the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites. Many of these and other, smaller groups were quite active even up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

The terms "Evangelical" and "Anabaptist" can and did include the Baptists and, most importantly for us, the church of God. *Martyrs Mirror* begins with the martyrdoms of the apostles because they were, by definition, Anabaptists. Religious persecutions periodically raged in Holland, France, and England, all Israelitish countries, during the Middle Ages. It waned only after the Protestant Reformation had been underway for a century or two, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation joined it.

Anybody who has read American history should know that many of the original settlers to this country

(continued from page 17)

sition of the *Book of Revelation*, comments: "Great, massive, rotary motion in the whole visible expanse, is signified, as if it were folding itself up to pass away forever." Perhaps John saw clouds building to thunderheads, roiling, and flying at breakneck speed across the expanse of the sky. Such turbulence could make an observer on the ground think the sky was splitting apart. Isaiah 34:4 describes the day of the Lord similarly.

*The Mountains and Islands Move:* As a result of the great convulsion of the earth, massive land transformations occur, shifting mountains on land and undersea. Obviously, such a violent shaking will create unprecedented destruction and loss of life. As the conclusion of the sixth seal's disturbances, this dis-

placement of *terra firma* is the calamity that most terrifies earth's inhabitants. Suddenly, nothing is stable—not even the earth under their feet!

Finally, God has their attention!

## "F ALL ON US!"

The effect of these cosmic signs from God is to produce terror in earth's populace, triggering humanity's strong drive to preserve itself. Despite mountains moving, men and women of every origin, status, and creed—from king to slave—flee for the caves under the mountains in a vain attempt to hide themselves from God (Revelation 6:15). This is reminiscent of Isaiah 2:19, a prophecy of the Day of the Lord: "They shall go into the holes of the rocks, and

came to escape religious persecution in northwest Europe. The Puritans and Pilgrims are prime examples. They fled England for Holland and then left Holland for America.

To think that the Israelitish people are somehow above perpetrating religious persecution is not historically accurate. The Bible clearly shows it happened before and will happen again. Just eleven years ago, the entire nation witnessed the Branch Davidian massacre in Waco, Texas. This is remarkable to us because the Branch Davidians kept the Sabbath.

Jeremiah 30:7 warns us that a horrific time of trouble lies just around the corner: "Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob's trouble, but he shall be saved out of it." This period of trouble is greater than any before it. Persecutions of true Christians will happen again. Revelation 13:15—in this end-time book—confirms that persecutions are just beyond the horizon: "He [the beast from the earth] was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed."

This persecution is instigated by a religious figure, the False Prophet, who will arise and promote his competing religion so vigorously as to kill those who do not submit to his idolatrous, pagan brand.

Revelation 6:9-11 verifies that this persecution will be aimed directly at the true church:

When he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

The blood of the saints is already staining Israel's histories, and more will be added afresh to her descendants' despicable and hypocritical anti-God record.

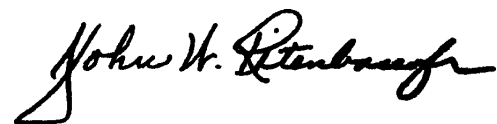
## Summary

The Great Harlot is a major player in the biblical record. Virtually the entire Bible, including Revelation, is devoted to Israel and the church. The Harlot is not a Gentile nation or church because neither had a covenant relationship with God. The elegant clothing, jewelry, and precious metals illustrate Israel's wealth and therefore power among the nations.

The Harlot is depicted as one people led by the Joseph tribes and the Beast as many diverse people in a loose confederation. The Woman is pictured as a huge manu-

facturing and merchandising power. She is hypocritically religious, calling herself Christian but conducting life as immorally as any pagan people. Martyrs' blood was on her hands in the past and will be on her hands again in the near future. More to come.

In Christian love,



into the caves of the earth, from the terror of the LORD and the glory of His majesty, when He arises to shake the earth mightily."

John sees these fearful people speaking to the mountains and rocks, commanding them to hide them from the sight of God the Father and from the "wrath of the Lamb" (verse 16). Their cry, "Fall on us!" is not a death wish or a suicidal means to avoid God's judgment but a hope that the mountains will cover and conceal them. "Fall on us and hide us" is typical Hebrew parallelism, as can be seen from an Old Testament parallel in which Israelites "shall say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'" (Hosea 10:8).

It is somewhat startling that earth's sinners correctly identify these catastrophic events as evidences

of God's wrath. We are used to them being termed "natural disasters" and in no way a result of God's intervention in humanity's affairs. Yet, this time, these cataclysmic signs are indeed "acts of God," and men know it. Such a succession of disturbances can be nothing other than divine anger.

Further, people seek to be "out of sight, out of mind" to both the Father—"Him who sits on the throne" (Revelation 6:16)—and the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Often, the phrase "face of Him," "face of God," or "face of the Lord" suggests being in His presence (Genesis 33:10; I Samuel 26:20; II Chronicles 7:14; Lamentations 2:19; Luke 1:76). However, it can also imply being under the judgment of an angry God (see Leviticus 26:17; Psalm 34:16; Jeremiah 44:11; Lamentations 4:16; also Amos

*(continued on page 22)*

*“And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

*(continued from page 11)*

This young man came, not to tempt Christ, but to learn from him. We know that he was not a Sadducee because it is clear that he believed in eternal life and wanted to attain it—an unusual goal in someone of his position and age. A man of wealth will often trust his riches and not be interested in what God has to offer. The young do not often look beyond today, much less to the far reaches of eternity.

This rich young ruler was a very sensible fellow. He knew something must be done to attain this happiness; eternal life is not a game of chance or blind fate. Romans 2:6-7 tells us that we are rewarded for our works, good and bad, and that “eternal life [goes] to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality.”

## Jesus' Reply

**Christ's response** to all this is interesting. He first establishes that none are truly good except God, and to Him goes all glory. Then Jesus tells him to “keep the commandments,” specifically listing the last six of the Ten Commandments, the ones dealing with human-to-human relationships. The Jews of the time were well-versed in the mechanics of the first four commandments, in terms of the letter of the law, so Christ lists the ones in which they were weakest.

It seems so simple, right? In order to have eternal life, “keep the commandments.” How do today's professing Christians, who claim the law has been done away, get around this simple instruction? Other verses, such as John 14:15, “If you love Me, keep My commandments,” reinforce this straightforward directive.

The young ruler tells Christ that he has kept the commandments since he was a child. What else should he do? Jesus does not con-

tradict him. In Mark's account, it says He looked at him and “loved him.” Possibly, this man was adept at keeping the letter of the law, but he was coming up short in abiding by the spirit of the law. Perhaps Jesus saw that he was absolutely sincere in his efforts to abide by those commandments.

Whatever the case, Christ does not attempt to sermonize on this point. The way the young man phrased his question, “What do I still lack?” smacks a bit of pride or self-righteousness. In effect, he says, “I'm keeping the commandments and have done well in that regard all my life. Show me where I'm coming up short.”

Unlike what many of us would do, Christ avoids becoming mired in a dispute about this claim, but gets right to the bottom line: The young man's love of the world. He tells him to sell his possessions, give the money away, and follow Him as a disciple. Yet, the young ruler was unwilling to do this. His treasure was here on earth. His money exerted a stronger tug on his heart than Christ did. Matthew Henry says in his commentary, “When we embrace Christ, we must let go of the world, for we cannot serve God and money.”

To the young man's credit, he was not hypocritical. He did not pretend he could do this when he could not. He knew what this meant: Christ's high standards and his own ambitions and desires were incompatible. Being both thoughtful and well-intentioned, he went away “sorrowful.”

## Love of Money

**What did he possess** that had such a hold on him as to make him willing to walk away from eternal life? To put it into terms we can relate to: Did he have a fully equipped game room with pinball, billiards, jukebox, and wet bar? Maybe he had the latest and hottest SUV?

Perhaps his living room sported a plasma television, where he could kick back and watch all the sports he could handle?

What was holding him back? What did he really trust in? There is nothing spiritually wrong with wealth itself. The Bible is full of examples of godly men who were very wealthy—for instance, great men of God like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, and David. The problem is in the love of money.

Because we live in a consumer-driven society, the love of money can hold us back too. Advertisements call to us constantly, informing us of “needs” we did not even know we had. It is difficult to maintain a proper balance while under such an assault. We may not think of it this way, but it could be considered a blessing not to have great wealth because of the additional stress it can put on our spiritual lives.

It is instructive to study what Christ had to say to His disciples after the rich young ruler sadly walked away:

“Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:23-26)

Twice Jesus tells us how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. The Christian walk is not easy for anyone, but it is particularly hard for the wealthy. In fact, Jesus goes on to say, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

This proverb has always been intriguing. Years ago, a friend re-

lated a story of a gate in the wall around ancient Jerusalem called the “Eye of the Needle,” or the “Needle’s Eye.” This gate was designed in such a way that it could be used by pedestrians but not by marauding bandits on their camels. The only way a camel could get through this “Eye of the Needle” was to be unloaded and crawl through on its knees. This great story—and several variations of it—have made the rounds over the years.

The spiritual analogies were clear. The camel *could* go through the “Eye of the Needle,” but only after being stripped of its baggage—its wealth!

The only problem with this story is that it is not true! There is absolutely no archaeological or historical evidence for the existence of such a gate. The story was first told several centuries ago and has been repeated ever since. It is yet another example of people trying to make Christ’s words fit their own concepts of what He meant.

## Camels, Rope, and Gnats

Jesus clearly says that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Can this be done? Of course not! That is the point! Yet, people have tried in vain to make it happen. Some have suggested that there is a misprint in the Greek. The Greek word *kamelos*, meaning “camel” should really be *kamilos*, meaning “cable” or “rope.” Still, passing a rope through a needle’s eye is nevertheless impossible. Ah, but what if one uses a six-inch carpet needle, and the rope is actually made of camel’s hair? Others have suggested that this was an Aramaic pun on the word for a camel and that of a gnat or louse, from the Aramaic *kalma* meaning “vermin” or “louse.” It can become quite ridiculous.

All this maneuvering is unnecessary. Christ was using hyperbole,

just as He did when He spoke of a plank being in one’s eye while attempting to remove the splinter in a brother’s eye (Matthew 7:3-4). Everyone seems to understand that this is exaggeration for effect; commentators do not claim, “Well, He really meant a toothpick, not a 2 x 4.” In our own speech, we use hyperbole all the time, such as, “This book weighs a ton,” or “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”

Jesus’ hyperbole in Matthew 19:24 is easily explained. The camel was the largest animal regularly seen in Israel, and its contrast with the small size of a needle’s eye shows the utter impossibility of the effort to squeeze the former through the latter. In Babylon, where portions of the Jewish Talmud were written, since the elephant was the largest animal, it was substituted for “camel” in this common aphorism.

Why do so many want to act as apologists for what Christ “really” meant in Matthew 19? Is it because we secretly—or even openly—desire wealth and do not want any biblical negativity slowing us down? Just in case we inherit big bucks from the uncle we forgot we had, we would not want any spiritual stigma attached to the money! To reiterate, the wealth itself is not the problem, but our attachment to it or what it can buy.

Jesus’ disciples were horrified at His words. “Who then can be saved?” they wondered. It is very simple. Christ is instructing them that, through his own efforts, *no one* can be saved. He does not mean just the wealthy cannot be saved, but *no one* can be saved through his money, his skills, his talents, his intellect, or his good looks!

During the time of Christ, the Jews believed that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God’s blessing, so the reaction of His disciples is sheer incredulity. Later, professing Christians fell into the opposite ditch by portraying riches as

a hindrance to salvation—which they can be—but so can many other things.

What if we are considered to be poor by this world? Are we somehow better than those with more physical goods? It would be just as dangerous for an underprivileged person to think that he had it made—that his poverty gave him some sort of piety—as it would for a rich man to trust in his wealth. We can be tempted from the path of righteousness by just about anything. Our downfall might be drink, food, television, or any number of things available to us in this world.

It is easy for us to look at the wealthy and judge them to be unfit for God’s Kingdom, congratulating ourselves in the process for not having that particular distraction in our lives. While the rich young ruler walked away from Christ, extremely sad that he could not make that leap of faith, what in our own lives has the same hold on us? What is the anchor that keeps our spiritual ship from sailing?

In II Timothy 4:10, Paul writes, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.” What caused Demas to leave Paul and Christ? Demas loved the world; the particulars are not divulged. Whatever it was is of less import than the simple, spiritual fact that a camel cannot go through the eye of a needle. Someone who loves the world, whether rich or poor, will not be in God’s Kingdom (James 4:4; I John 2:15-17).

The point is that we do not achieve salvation through our own efforts; it is from God alone, by His grace. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible,” Jesus assures us. We have our part to play and are rewarded for our efforts, as Romans 2 explains, but when God takes us from this world, works with us, blesses us, and brings us into His Family, it is truly a miracle.

—Mike Ford

## Dare to Be Different!

(continued from page 10)

Ultimately, if we want to succeed in our calling to be different, we must see our estrangement from the world as a small price to pay for eternal life and the rewards God promises. Being a bit unusual is not so bad, at least not in tolerant America as the third millennium AD begins. Other, far stranger people attract the public eye today. Although

this period of tolerance is bound to end in the persecutions of the coming troubles of the end time, right now we can be different without drawing much notice.

Paul's warning in II Timothy 3:12 can be discouraging: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." The last of Christ's beatitudes offers some balance:

Blessed are those who are per-

secuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. . . . (Matthew 5:10-12)

Is this enough to dare to be different?

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

(continued from page 19)

9:4). Obviously, the latter idea fits this instance.

Initially, it seems incongruous to pair "wrath" with "of the Lamb," but it makes perfect sense on two levels. First, "Lamb" is only one title of this complex Individual, Jesus Christ, who is not a cute, cuddly, little lamb. As the Johnny Cash song, "A Boy Named Sue," relates, a person's name cannot describe his entire personality, and one may rue the day he made the assumption it could! The same Jesus Christ who took little children in His arms and blessed them also made a whip of cords and angrily drove the moneychangers from God's Temple.

Second, as it pertains to Christ, the lamb represents a sacrificial Redeemer, One who gave His life to buy back others who had been enslaved. The meaning of the symbol contemplates, not only the force of character it would take to perform such a selfless act, but also the position of mastery to which it elevated Him due to its success. In other words, the imagery of the lamb contains both the Suffering Servant and the Exalted Lord and Judge of all (John 5:22).

### "WHO IS ABLE TO STAND?"

Revelation 6:17 should read, "For the day, the great [day] of Their wrath, has come, and who is able to stand?" This is a plain statement of truth followed by a rhetorical question (see Nahum 1:6; Malachi 3:2). The sixth seal announces in unmistakable fashion that "the great day of the LORD is near; it is near and hastens quickly" (Zephaniah 1:14). The prophet Joel describes it:

Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all of the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the LORD is coming, for it is at hand: A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. . . . The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon grow dark, and the stars diminish their brightness. The LORD

gives voice before His army, for His camp is very great; for strong is the One who executes His word. For the day of the LORD is great and very terrible; who can endure it? (Joel 2:1-2, 10-11)

This is the question: Who will survive it? Who will pass God's judgment? The answer seems to be, "No one." But there is hope, as Joel 2:12-14 instructs:

"Now, therefore," says the LORD, "turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning." So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind Him . . . ?

Jesus gives us His answer in Luke 21:36: "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." We must be alert and prepared for what may come, and the most important part of our preparation is the strengthening of our relationships with the Father and the Son through prayer, study, meditation, and obedience to His instructions. This is the only means to escape God's wrath.

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the LORD's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you! Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger. (Zephaniah 2:1-3)

If we wish to avoid the coming stern and destructive judgment of God on recalcitrant mankind, there is no time like the present to seek His face (Psalm 105:4).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

## *Procreative Madness: The Price Our Offspring Pay for Lawlessness*

In an article entitled “Overcoming Motherhood” (*Policy Review*, December 2002/January 2003, p. 31), Christine Stolba discusses the moral and ethical challenges reproductive technologies offer men and women today. First-generation technologies, extant now for years, allow parents to control the timing and quantity of children. These technologies include contraception, abortion surgeries, in-vitro fertilization (or IVF, where conception takes place in a test tube, and the fertilized egg is then implanted into a womb for nourishment), gender-selection techniques, and genetic diagnosis (where embryos that will produce diseased or disabled children are identified).

Second-generation technologies go beyond this—far beyond. They allow parents to control the *quality* of their offspring and to enhance, rather than just treat, genes. They include:

- *Cytoplasmic cell transfer*: To facilitate fertilization, cytoplasm from a donor is introduced into another woman’s egg. Since cytoplasm holds traces of genetic material, the human being that eventually results from the fertilization of a cytoplasmic transplanted egg will have three “parents”: the mother, the father, and the cytoplasmic donor. This procedure, writes Stolba, could “upend our conceptions of genetic parenthood.”
- *Ovary/Fallopian tube transplant*: After the transplant, the recipient is able to conceive, but using *implanted* eggs, the eggs of the donor woman.
- *Uterus transplants and artificial wombs*. A “fully functional artificial womb for human beings” is evidently about six years away.

These technologies offer the potential to change the very definition of motherhood, as a typically American form of “consumer-driven . . . eugenics” develops. Building “designer babies” could become big business. Yet, bioethicists offer scant guidance as to what is right and wrong in the process. Their guiding principle is *autonomy*, which literally means “self-law.” Individuals, exercising the free choice bioethicists so avidly glorify, become laws unto themselves. Some examples of individual choice gone wild:

- What was it—the permissible exercise of

free choice, therapy, or genetic enhancement—when a woman with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease had her IVF-created embryos screened for the “Alzheimer” gene, then discarded all the embryos having the defective gene, accepting only the embryo without the Alzheimer gene for transplant into her body? Advocates call this sort of procedure “quality control,” concluding that “failing to prevent the birth of a child with serious defects is ‘immoral.’”

- What about parents who obtain gender-selection tests on fetuses with the stated intention of aborting any fetus of the “wrong” gender? Is this decision murder, or is it equivalent to choosing a hamburger with cheese rather than one without it? Stolba points out that, in 1970, only one in a hundred qualified physicians would screen fetuses under those circumstances; today, sixty-two would.
- What about a woman who chooses to have “babies for the explicit purpose of harvesting spare parts for themselves or loved ones”? Does such an act stem from a natural desire to provide medical care for herself or a family member, or is it perhaps the ultimate in selfishness?
- Has individualism gone out of control when people actually take action to *guarantee* that their offspring will be born handicapped? That is precisely what a deaf, lesbian couple in Maryland did. They “used sperm donated by a fifth-generation deaf man to ensure that their son and daughter would be born profoundly deaf.” This is a case where the definition of wellness is turned on its head.

Although there is variation between different bioethicists, most have no difficulty with individualism unbridled to the extent that it permits these kinds of actions. Having left God out of their ethical and moral systems, they fail to recognize that He intends His law to be *the* supreme regulator of human actions. That law is fixed and absolute. It trumps the supposed “right” of the individual to make choices based on desire, convenience, and expedience. The fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil has turned out to be bitter indeed. ■

NEWS AND TRENDS  
Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:13)

# BIBLE STUDY:

## THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) contrasts two different attitudes: self-righteousness and humility. The two men who go to the Temple to pray contrast in character, belief, and self-examination, representing opposite sides of the law. The Pharisee corresponds to the self-righteous, merciless worshipper of the law, and the tax collector exemplifies the humiliated lawbreaker. Both are sinners, although the outward form of their sins differs. Both men allow the judgment that they had already formed about themselves to determine the form and wording of their prayers.

As Luke comments, the parable's purpose is to expose



1. What is wrong with believing we are safe from God's judgment due to our own efforts? Luke 18:9.

**COMMENT:** The Pharisee's prayer manifests his mindset (II Peter 2:3). People like him trust in their own works to gain salvation and eternal life, not trusting in Jesus Christ for them. They do not really think they need His sacrifice or help because they think they are good enough in themselves. So, they toot their own horns, making sure God knows how righteous they are. While kneeling before Him, they tell Him all the good things they are always doing, and believe that He is impressed. They act as if God owes them salvation because of their good works.

This attitude shows how little they understand of the true holiness of God and the lowliness of our spiritual state. While on earth, Jesus worked more easily with tax collectors and sinners than with the Pharisees, though the latter were more dedicated to adhering strictly to the letter of the law. The Pharisees, knowing they were more righteous, made sure others knew it. In their self-delusion and self-righteousness, they could learn little from Christ.

2. What commonly causes a person to disdain another person? Same verse.

**COMMENT:** The Pharisee, considering others as nothing, treats them accordingly. It is typical of human nature to elevate itself while putting down others, and some believe that this is the only way to elevate themselves above their peers. Isaiah writes about such people: ". . . who say, 'Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!' These are smoke in [God's] nostrils, a fire that burns all the day" (Isaiah 65:5).

The Pharisee compares his own flaws, not with God's infinite perfections, but with the imagined greater flaws of others. His pride has made him bankrupt of genuine compassion and concern (James 2:13). He presumptuously errs in his prayer in that it is neither his duty nor his right as a sinner to point out another's sins. In trusting in Christ for righteousness, our inadequacies and guilt are revealed, and we become willing to admit that others may be much better than we are.

those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." *Despised*, which literally means "to count as nothing," describes the religious egotism the Pharisees repulsively personified. Jesus' intention is to rebuke this self-righteous trust in the self, as well as self-righteous loathing of others. Not only do the self-righteous think they are safe from God's judgment, but they also habitually disdain others as not being as righteous as they are and therefore deserving of God's judgment. Although it involves prayer, this parable is not one about how to pray as much as it is on how to be justified before God.

3. What makes the Pharisee's prayer so obnoxious? Luke 18:11-12.

**COMMENT:** The Pharisee glories in what he is ("I am not like other men"), what he does ("I fast twice a week"), and what he gives ("I give tithes of all that I possess"). Self is a prominent feature of his prayer—he uses the personal pronoun "I" five times—showing his great obsession with himself. He does not pray for others, and frankly, he has no interest in them other than to point out their faults. Not satisfied with commending himself, he disdains the tax collector as well, when he should have interceded for him before God. His prayer shows that he thinks of God as being impressed with pettiness and severity.

4. Why does the tax collector leave justified? Luke 18:13-14.

**COMMENT:** *Justified* means "to be declared righteous." The apostle Paul teaches that human beings are not justified by their works but by God's mercy—by grace (Titus 3:4-8). Our responsibilities in being justified are to humble ourselves in faith before God, repent of sin, and plead for His mercy and forgiveness. The Pharisee may not have been an extortioner, unjust, or an adulterer; he may not have overtly sinned as the tax collector did; and he may have fasted and tithed with greater dedication than most—but none of his good works could justify him (Romans 3:27-28; 4:1-3).

It is much less humiliating to humble ourselves than it is to be humbled by others. The tax collector humbles himself before God, pleading for mercy, and in the end, he receives exaltation. In Proverbs 27:2, Solomon expresses the principle of this parable: "Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." This principle works in all facets of life, but most people cannot see it at work because they see no reward for humbly working behind the scenes. Godly principles at first seem contradictory to success, but they always work for the ultimate benefit of all. If we would be as concerned about our character as we are about being recognized for our achievements, we would be far more impressive to our Creator, whose gifts and rewards are unimaginable.