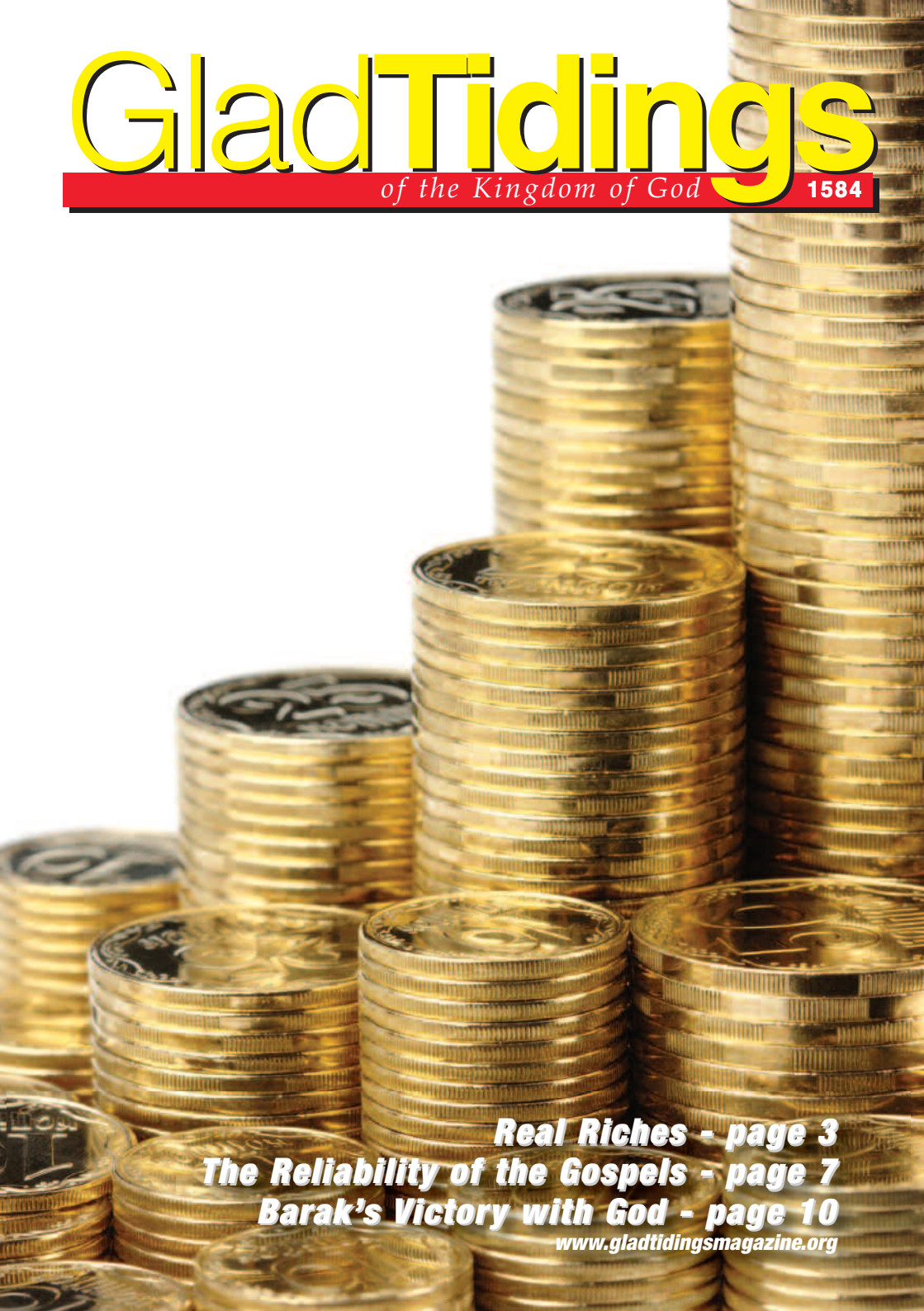


# Glad Tidings

*of the Kingdom of God*

1584



***Real Riches - page 3***

***The Reliability of the Gospels - page 7***

***Barak's Victory with God - page 10***

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# Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

132<sup>nd</sup> Year

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1584



A monthly magazine published by the Christadelphians (brothers and sisters in Christ) and available throughout the world.

Its objectives are - to encourage the study of the Bible as God's inspired message to mankind; to call attention to the Divine offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

## Glad Tidings Distributors

for orders and payments

**United Kingdom** - Cilla Palmer, "Highlands",  
78 Mildenhall Road, Fordham, Ely, Cambs,  
England CB7 5NR  
Tel: (01638) 723959 (24 hrs & Fax)  
[cilla@gladtidings.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:cilla@gladtidings.fsnet.co.uk)

**Australia** - Jon Fry, 19 Macey Street, Croydon South,  
Victoria, Australia 3136  
[gladtidingsaustralia@gmail.com](mailto:gladtidingsaustralia@gmail.com)

**Canada** - Vivian Thorp, 5377 Birdcage Walk,  
Burlington, Ontario, Canada L7L 3K5  
[vivianthorp@bell.net](mailto:vivianthorp@bell.net)

**New Zealand** - Neil Todd, 14 Morpeth Place, Blockhouse  
Bay, Auckland 7, New Zealand  
[thetodds@xtra.co.nz](mailto:thetodds@xtra.co.nz)

**U.S.A.** - Pat Hemingray, 3079 Kilburn West,  
Rochester Hills, USA MI 48306

**Other Countries** - Andrew Johnson, 22 Hazel Drive,  
Hollywood, Birmingham, England B47 5RJ  
[andrew@gladtidings.me.uk](mailto:andrew@gladtidings.me.uk)

**Editor:** Andrew Hale, 52 Mardale Crescent,  
Lymm, Cheshire, England WA13 9PJ  
[gladtidingsmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:gladtidingsmagazine@gmail.com)

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# Real Riches

Today's world places great value on money and its close relative 'celebrity'. From films and TV shows we hear "Show me the money!".

Whatever our aspirations, we are encouraged to know what we want from life and then to go after it. In fact, this also applies to very worthy personal goals, such as helping the needy, being a good parent or supporting the community. In each case, we are used to the idea of putting effort and focus into the right things – getting our priorities fixed.

## Stories of Discovery

In Matthew 13:44–46, Jesus introduces us to two men who did just this. They saw something of real worth and did what they needed to, in order to get hold of it.

The first man found treasure in a field, seemingly by chance. He recognised its value and quickly made sure that he wouldn't lose it while he purchased the field. It's clear that he really wanted the treasure; he went off with excitement and joy, and didn't hold back when he had to sell everything he had so that he could afford to buy the field. Can we imagine anything so precious, that we would exchange everything we have to get it? He did, and he was happy about it, thankful he had come across this wonderful fortune.

The second man was actually looking for something of value. He was a specialist merchant, looking for beautiful pearls. When he came across that particular pearl, the amazingly valuable one, he too sold all he had,

and bought it. Now this was a man who knew his business, who was already trading in pearls, and recognised something so exceptional that it was worth all of his goods and wealth put together. The cool, calculating businessman had made the deal of his life and committed everything to it.



## The Real Value

Jesus told these stories as parables of the kingdom of God, starting each with "*the kingdom of heaven is like*". They come in a sequence of parables about the response, lifestyle and priorities now, of those people who will form part of the future kingdom of God (or 'the kingdom of heaven', the two terms are interchangeable) when Jesus returns to the earth.

The good news (the 'glad tidings') of the kingdom of God is shown as something of huge value to those who find it. Some of us find it almost by acci-

dent, through a casual word from a friend or something we happen to read. Others of us may search for years, sure that there is something of worth but taking time to identify it.

However we come across the Bible's true message, we find something of infinite worth, far more precious even than treasure or pearls. Why can we say this?

## **For Today and the Future**

The Apostle Paul helps us here when he writes that trying to be godly has *"the promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come"* (1 Timothy 4:8).

The Bible message gives us purpose, direction and perspective in this life. We can understand the world and our place in it, and we can face whatever difficulties it presents with perspective and the knowledge that a loving God cares for us.

Then the gospel gives us hope for the future, to be part of the kingdom of God and to worship Him for ever in a perfect world.

## **Hold On To It**

Having found this precious hope, we need to follow the example of the men in Jesus' parables and do whatever we need to take hold of it.

Later in the first letter to Timothy, Paul has this advice: *"lay hold on eternal life"* (1 Timothy 6:12). It is a strong phrase and means to seize, hold on to or take possession of; exactly what Jesus was talking about. A modern example might be a rugby tackle, where the person throws themselves into it and holds on until they have full control of their target. Paul refers to his own experience:

*But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:7-8).*

Paul had a great profile in the religious world of the Jews, and would even have enjoyed a certain celebrity status. Yet he turned his back on all that because his priority was to 'gain Christ'.

## **Being Valuable to God**

In the Old Testament, God spoke through the prophet Malachi to give comfort to people who were trying to do the right thing. We are told that they feared and respected God and His message. They spoke to one another about their faith. God heard and He promised to remember them, especially when He sends Jesus to set up the kingdom.

*"They shall be mine," says the Lord of hosts, "On the day that I make them my jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17).*

Let's give the Lord Jesus the final word on this. He tells us not to worry about life now, but to focus on the kingdom of God and to trust Him:

*Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:33).*

**Editor**

# The Essential Links

Helen was talking about her new Bible. “How is this different from my old school Bible?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, your old Bible isn’t all there”, was the reply.

Helen giggled at this: “What do you mean, ‘not all there’?”

“Well, your old Bible contains the New Testament and the Psalms, but not the whole Old Testament. The Bible consists of 66 different books written by a variety of people. The Old Testament comprises 39 books written before Jesus was born. They do teach about Jesus, but in prophecy. This was what Jesus had as his Bible, which he referred to as ‘scripture’. The New Testament contains the four gospels...”

“Ah – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John”, said Helen.

“Yes, that’s right; then Acts which is about the spread of the gospel message, letters to various churches and individuals in the first century, and finally the book of Revelation. The New Testament has 27 books, but it is impossible to fully understand them without the Old Testament.”

## Jesus and the Old Testament

The Old Testament records the history of the Jews, with important promises from God and prophecies about world history. These centred on Jesus Christ, and we cannot make proper sense of the New Testament without the Old Testament. In fact, the very first verse in the New Testament says:

*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).*

Without knowing about Abraham and David from the Old Testament, we cannot appreciate why this was important enough for God to inspire Matthew to record them. Christians claim to accept the teachings of Jesus, and there are many, many occasions where Jesus was referring to the Old Testament. Here are some examples:

- ❖ King Solomon’s royal glory (Matthew 6:29).
- ❖ Judgement on Sodom, and its destruction (Matthew 11:24).
- ❖ The sign of Jonah the prophet (Matthew 12:39–41).
- ❖ The words of the prophet Daniel (Mark 13:14).
- ❖ Old Testament prophecies about Jesus himself (Luke 24:25–27).



There are other instances. For example, Jesus told many parables, and one of these, recorded in Matthew 21:33–41, is about a vineyard. It is based on a prophecy in Isaiah 5:1–7 which explains exactly what the vineyard represents, providing the key to a proper understanding of the parable.

We cannot fully understand what Jesus said without the Old Testament.

His words, like all words in the Bible, had a meaning and we are not at liberty to put our own interpretations on them. Bible expressions have biblical meanings, not man-made ones. In order to understand the gospel message in the New Testament we must look at the Old Testament.

## The New Testament Letters

We need the Old Testament to properly understand the letters to the first century churches. This applies especially to Romans, Galatians and Hebrews with their extensive references to Adam, Abraham and the Law of Moses.

The table below shows more examples of words or people mentioned in the New Testament, which refer back to the Old Testament. For each, it shows how many New Testament verses refer to it, and in how many different New Testament books the expression or name appears.

Word or Person	NT Verses	NT Books
'written' <i>refers to OT text</i>	85	11
Moses	78	11
Abraham	65	11
David	54	9
'fulfilled' <i>refers to OT text</i>	32	6
Jacob	25	7
Isaiah	21	6
Isaac	18	8
Ancient Egypt	16	3

## Totally Connected

Some Bibles have notes down the middle or at the bottom of the page,

containing cross references. These are connections between the particular verse and other verses, identifying links with an idea, event or word. These notes show how often the New Testament refers to the Old Testament.

Just dipping into the New Testament is not like reading volume two in a series of novels, where each book is self-contained. It is more like trying to study stage two of a college subject without having done stage one. The Old Testament is no easier than the New Testament, but it is certainly the foundation for it.

Nearly all of the New Testament was written by Jews familiar with the Old Testament. So the teachings in the New Testament are based on, and must be interpreted in the context of, Old Testament teachings. Misunderstand the Old Testament and you will misunderstand the New Testament. Reading the New Testament without the Old Testament will lead to bias and false beliefs.

## How to Start

However, if you are new to the Old Testament, there is a better way than reading straight through from Genesis to Malachi. It is better to use a reading planner to break it into more easily digested sections. This will also get you into the habit of regular Bible reading.

Such a planner is available in each December issue of *Glad Tidings*. You can request this, or indeed a full Bible Reading course, on our web site or by post – all the details are on the back of this magazine. Whichever way you do it we urge you to prayerfully read the whole Bible.

**Anna Hart**

# The Reliability of the Gospels - 1

## Introduction

Consider these two views about the Gospels.

- ❖ They are eyewitness documents written by people who were there at the time and who gave an accurate account of what they saw and heard, or
- ❖ They are documents written long after the event by a group of people who had only a vague idea of what had happened but who used their imagination, and those of other people, to produce an essentially fictional account.

Traditionally the Gospels were viewed as very accurate eyewitness records. However, in the 19th century, sceptical scholars theorised that they were written in the second century by communities of Christians after they had been passed on through generations of oral transmission. They claimed the records were altered by the community that passed them on and sometimes were completely invented.

This critical idea was not based on evidence, but on supposition. Nevertheless, it has proved attractive to modern sceptics, and is often found in popular culture and even among some academic scholars.

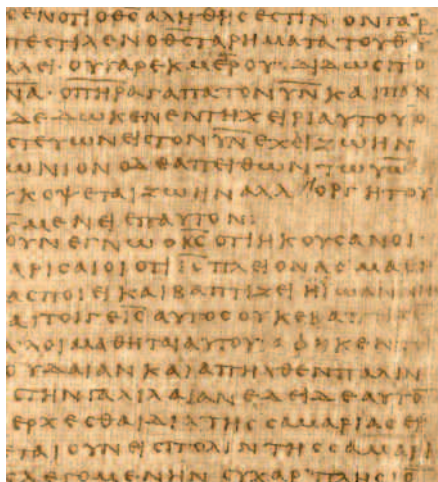
The evidence points in a quite different direction. This series of articles examines the evidence and will lead to the conclusion that the Gospels are, indeed, eyewitness records which give a very reliable and accurate record of what Jesus did and said.

### External Evidence

Let's think about what kind of evidence exists. There is direct evidence of accuracy which comes from making a comparison of the accounts in the Gospels with evidence gathered from external sources. One can compare the details of places, people, events and customs written in the Gospels with what archaeologists have excavated. One can also compare the language in which the Gospels are written with what one knows of the place and time where the events took place. This kind of evidence is known as external evidence.

### Internal Evidence

There is also internal evidence, which comes from the text of the Gospels themselves. This helps us to identify whether they are just fictitious inventions or genuine eyewitness accounts.



Fictional accounts tend to have particular characteristics which are not shared with eyewitness evidence. In fictional accounts there are few details and those details which exist usually have a direct bearing on the main plot and characters in the narrative. Eyewitness accounts tend to be detailed and to contain incidental details.

## **Topical, Honest Content**

Accounts which were made up by the early Christian community would be expected to deal with the topics that the early church considered important; they would not deal with out-of-date issues. Of course we know what was of interest in the early church from the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude; later we have the writings of other early church leaders. It is interesting that these are very different from the words and teaching of Jesus.

Fictional accounts made up in communities founded by the Apostles, which produced traditions based on their memory, would have a certain bias. No matter how garbled, they would not contain material which showed these Apostles in a bad light. The denials of Peter, the constant bickering of the disciples and their failure to understand Jesus' teaching would hardly have appeared in a fictional account.

## **Undesigned Coincidences**

Sometimes, insignificant details included in one account match insignificant details in other accounts, to show some fact which is incidental to the real narrative. This is described as an "undesigned coincidence". Undesigned coincidences are very difficult to invent, even in the work of a single

writer. They are features of detailed and accurate accounts of real-life events such as court proceedings or detailed diaries. The Gospels contain these in great quantity (and they are found throughout the rest of the Bible as well).

## **Eyewitness Accounts**

It is clear that the real Gospels really are eyewitness accounts. In general, they contain detailed accounts, although there are places where a sequence of events is summarised for brevity rather than recounted in detail. They contain details which are not part of the main narrative and sometimes they are critical of the Apostles or contain statements which would have been completely irrelevant in the early church.

These are hallmarks of eyewitness accounts and are very unlikely things to find in fictionalised or traditional accounts. Coupled with the external evidence, internal evidence that the Gospels are factual is very strong.

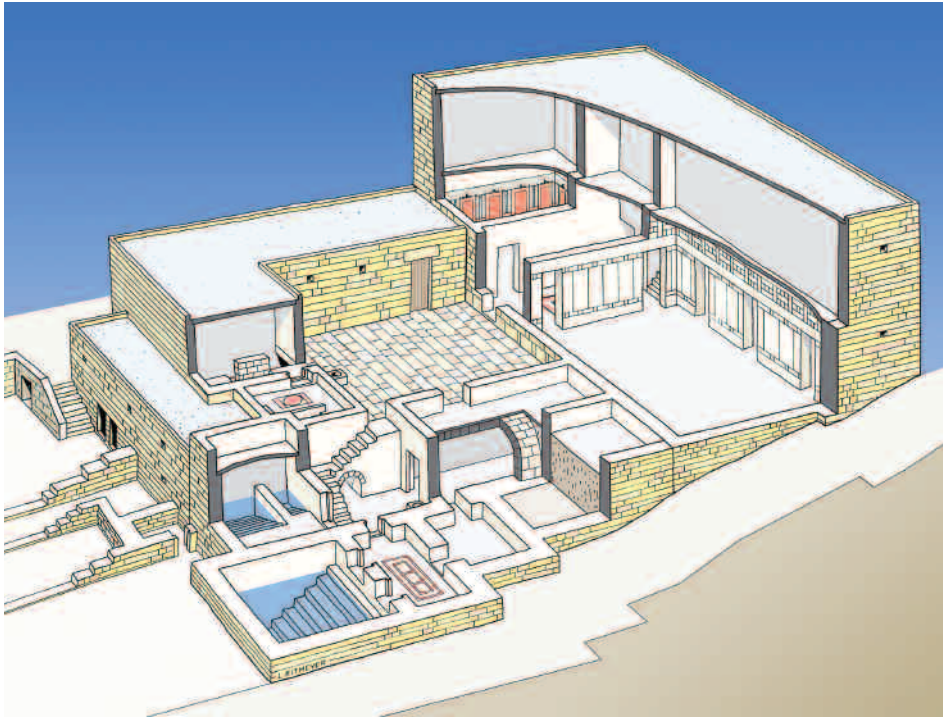
## **A Worked Example**

After his arrest Jesus was taken to the house of Caiaphas the high priest (*Matthew 26:57; Mark 14:53*). Peter also went into the house and remained in the courtyard, where he denied that he had known Jesus.

*Now as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came. And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus of Nazareth" (Mark 14:66, 67).*

This account contains several items of evidence. The fact that Peter was





**Plan of palatial mansion, Jerusalem (1st Century).**  
 Courtesy of Ritmeyer Archaeological Design: <http://store.ritmeyer.com>

below in the courtyard suggests that Jesus was upstairs. We know from elsewhere in the Gospel that the room he was in contained various priests and scribes, some guards and potential witnesses. This suggests it was a large upper guestroom.

The room in which the Last Supper was held was also a large upper guestroom (*Mark 14:15; Luke 22:12*). This shows an unmentioned detail of the architecture of the houses of wealthy men in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus; they tended to have large upstairs guestrooms. The correspondence of this tiny detail is an undesigned coincidence, and it is confirmed by archaeology. Various houses from the period, excavated in Jerusalem, had

large upstairs rooms. You can see this in the detailed diagram above.

The denial of Jesus by Peter is a narrative which would have been embarrassing to Peter, the Apostle most closely associated with Mark's Gospel. It is unlikely that this would have been allowed to stand in a fictional account; it is only there because it really happened.

Thus we have several reasons for accepting the reliability of these two verses in the Gospel of Mark (and of course the parallel verses in other Gospels). And there is much, much more.

**John Thorpe**

# Barak's Victory with God

God wants us to worship Him, and Him alone. So He gave Israel clear instructions when they had completed their journey to the promised land: drive out the occupants from the land and destroy their worship and culture, or *“those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides”* (Numbers 33:55).

Why? Because God did not want Israel to become like the inhabitants of Canaan, who worshipped almost anything except God Himself. Sadly, Israel did fail to drive them out, and so their neighbours were often their enemies.

## Oppression

We take up the story in Judges chapter 4, when Israel had had peace for 80 years. They started worshipping idols, so God ‘sold them’ into the hand of King Jabin, whose capital city was near Mount Carmel. The land became depopulated, and marauding bands stole any goods or crops. Today we would call it guerrilla warfare.

Jabin’s garrison town was Hazor, the military hub of Canaan and the largest of Biblical towns, numbering 40,000 inhabitants. They had chariots of iron, and were quite ruthless. Imagine being armed only with a sword or javelin, standing on your own two feet in open-toed sandals, with an army coming towards you. That army has 900 chariots of iron, each with two horses and a driver, plus a marksman with bow and arrow! With this powerful force, it is easy to picture how the Canaanites were able to oppress Israel for 20 years.

Now Jabin, with his commander Sisera, was going to launch a full-scale attack on the Israelites.

Israel did not have a king at this time: ‘Judges’ ruled them. The current Judge was a lady called Deborah. She would sit under a palm tree and people came to her with their disputes. When Deborah gave her verdict, the people accepted it.

## A Challenge

Deborah sent for Barak and told him that God had commanded him to go to Mount Tabor with 10,000 soldiers. God would bring Sisera there so that He could help Barak defeat the Canaanite army.

Barak was completely taken aback and very frightened, but obeyed the command. He told Deborah that he would go into battle, but only if she went with him. She agreed to accompany him telling him that God promised he would win the battle. However, because Barak was afraid, God would sell the captain of the enemy into the hands of a woman, and she would get the glory. Deborah went with Barak, but she did not lead the battle: she supported Barak as he assembled his army.

Sisera, the captain of Jabin’s army, gathered his troops and his 900 chariots of iron. Being informed where Barak and his ill-equipped army were camped, they came to the river Kishon to do battle.

Barak, meanwhile, was camped near the top of Mount Tabor, and so was able to see Sisera with his great army and chariots in the valley below.

Barak would have a perfect view: in fact he would be able to see right across the plain to Mount Carmel, some ten miles away. It would not have been a comforting sight: archaeologists have discovered pictures and fragments of these chariots and they would have been terrifying.



## God's Battle

So, Sisera mustered his forces, but so did God! Deborah says to Barak, "*The LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand*" (Judges 4:14).

God was going to defeat Sisera, his army, and his chariots. This was God's battle, on behalf of His people. And He would do so in an amazing way. Firstly, He gave Barak's army the upper hand and they thoroughly defeated the Canaanites. Then nature played a part: Deborah and Barak's song records in Judges 5:21 that "*the torrent of Kishon swept them away*".

The river Kishon, meandering gently along the flat and level Esdralon plain, is unpredictable. It is often dry, but liable to swell and flood very suddenly without warning, especially in spring after the snow melts from Mount Tabor. The result is mud that is just impassable. Sisera tried to get away and had to flee on foot, maybe because his chariot was caught in the

torrent, or in the boggy morass caused by the sudden flooding.

This actually happened in the Battle of Mount Tabor in April 1799. The muddy ground on the banks of the Kishon flooded and became impassable, so many of the Turkish army were drowned.

So maybe Sisera's chariot, along with the rest of his forces, was bogged down by a storm deliberately sent by God. Judges 5:22 describes how the horses' hooves pounded and the chariots and army of Sisera were completely destroyed by Israel.

## Complete Victory

Sisera fled for his life and came to the tent of his ally, Heber. Heber's wife, Jael, saw him coming, went out to meet him, and invited him into her tent for 'safety'. Having covered him with a rug, she gave him some fermented (slightly intoxicating) milk and he fell into a deep sleep.

It is possible that Jael, having heard of the amazing defeat of Sisera's army, decided to side with the victors, and so with God. Certainly, as the commander slept, she drove a tent peg right into his head with a hammer. She then showed Sisera's body to Barak, proving correct Deborah's prophecy that the glory of success would go to a woman. Israel then had peace, at least until the next time they disobeyed God.

God wants us to be His children, and obey Him, just like Israel should have done. If we choose not to, then we must bear the consequences. Our only hope of deliverance from death is through the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ. That battle has been won: our job is to have faith in God's saving power, just like Barak.

**Peter Hale**

## Thinking About God - 2

# Unity

The Bible is absolutely clear: there is only one God. It is our only source of information about Him, and it is explicit on this point. Early in the Old Testament we read:

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one (Deuteronomy 6:4).*

This is reinforced in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul.

*Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence’, and that ‘there is no God but one’ (1 Corinthians 8:4).*

### Dangerous Mistakes

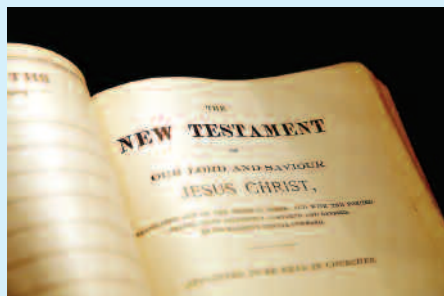
The *Religious Dictionary* (ed. Lyman Abbot) states that belief in a God of three persons came long after the Bible was completed. It was not until the beginning of the fourth century that the trinitarian view began to be elaborated and was formulated into a doctrine. Then efforts were made to reconcile it with the church’s belief in one God.

There is a serious issue here. The notion of a ‘trinity’ is not found in the Bible, and there is no mention of the word or the idea all the way through it. So to introduce such a concept is to try and redefine what the Bible says – an approach which is both wrong and dangerous. It is condemned in the Bible itself:

*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the*

*plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 22:18–19).*

This means that we have to accept what is found in the Bible as God’s final revelation to us. We cannot add to the words of Scripture, nor can we take away from them. Our understanding of God must conform to what is in His Word.



### A Father and Son Relationship

So we must also try to understand the relationship between the Lord Jesus and Almighty God. Again the Bible is quite specific. Jesus is the Son of God, and never, ever described as ‘God the Son’.

The gospel of Luke uses these words in recording the message which the angel Gabriel gave to Mary, the mother of Jesus, telling her that she would have this remarkable son:

*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God (Luke 1:35).*

The Bible also makes it quite clear that Jesus is of lower rank than his Father.

*If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I (John 14:28).*

These are words of the Lord Jesus, and clearly the person in the best position to know about the relationship between Father and Son, and to explain it to us, is Jesus himself.

The Apostle Paul also makes a very clear statement about the different status and roles fulfilled by Jesus and his Father, this time in respect to the relationship they have with men and women:

*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).*

This is the clear understanding of the New Testament writers following the Lord Jesus, though they say nothing which demeans him in any way. Here is a further comment by Paul, looking to the future:

*When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).*

The whole of the teaching of the New Testament is that the Lord Jesus is very much the son of his Father, but

that he is not the same as or equal to God. We shall return to this later in this series.

## **Unity of Purpose**

The anonymous writer who penned the letter to the Hebrews put it this way:

*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world (Hebrews 1:1–2).*

God communicates with us through the pages of the Bible, but we learn most about Him when we read about the work and words of the Lord Jesus, His Son. It belittles both the Lord God and the Lord Jesus to suggest that they are the same person. There is unity between them in the sense that they are both of the same mind and purpose, not because they are the same person. This is what the Lord God says of himself.

*I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things (Isaiah 45:5–7).*

**Mark Sheppard**

*Bible Quotations from the English Standard Version.*

# **Faith and Repentance**

In this series so far, we have surveyed the message that God has given to us in the Bible. Across its pages we have seen consistently that He plans to set up a kingdom which will last for ever, that He will make this earth a place of peace and joy, with no sin, disease or unhappiness; and finally, not even death. Now we look at how God wants us to respond.

## **A Choice to be Made**

We read that nothing is too hard for the Lord (Genesis 18:14), so God could have made us like robots, keeping His laws by animal instinct. But He had a higher plan. After He had made the animals God said:

*“Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26).*



God made men and women with the intention that we should become like Him. He described His own character to Moses in these wonderful words:

*The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty (Exodus 34:6-7).*

Men and women have the potential to behave like that, but He also gave us free will, and so how we live is our own responsibility. We have a duty to live in the way that pleases God, but He wants us to do so by our own choice. From the beginning, men and women showed a strong preference for pleasing themselves rather than God. Left to ourselves, we mostly do not live to please God, and that is why humankind as a whole is astray from Him, suffering and dying.

## **Without Hope?**

Paul tells some new Christians in Ephesus to remember that before accepting the Gospel and becoming part of God's family, they were in a very different state:

*At that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).*

This is the natural position of all men and women unless we accept God's way.

If we desire to be amongst His people, we have to 'opt in'. By ourselves we cannot solve the problem. Even if we could live perfect lives starting today, we could not *earn* the eternal life that God wants us to have. In New Testament times there were scholars who thought that if they kept all of God's laws from the Old Testament they could be sure of eternal life. But Jesus told them that although they were obeying details they were failing to exercise the big things like justice, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23). The Apostle Paul shows from the Old Testament itself:

*By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).*

If you look at the earlier verses (Romans 3:10–19) you will see that Paul quotes from Psalms 14, 53, 5, 140, 10, 59 and 36 in that order. These show that humans, left to themselves and without guidance from God's Word, do not please Him.

## **The Importance of Faith**

The Lord God is merciful and gracious:

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

Therefore, God does not demand perfection from us, which would be impossible. What He does demand is faith – He expects men and women to believe what He says, and then to try hard to please Him.

This is what we learn from Abraham. God promised a child to him although he and his wife were very old:

*He believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6).*

Abraham was not perfect, but God was pleased with him because he showed faith. In Romans 4:23–5 (ESV), the New Testament explains how important this is:

*The words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (in other words, 'to put us right with God').*

Another key scripture says "*the just shall live by his faith*" (Habakkuk 2:4) and this is quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

When we have been put right with God by faith in this way, God will resume His work of making us like Himself – 'in His image' as our English translation puts it. Paul wrote to the members of another church:

*Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Colossians 3:9–10, ESV).*

When we really try to do that, we start to realize how far from God's ways our lives have been. This is the beginning of what the Bible calls 'repentance'.

## God Desires to Forgive

Six weeks after Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, the Apostle Peter stood up boldly in the city and accused the crowd of murdering the Son of God. There could not be a worse sin. Peter said:

*“Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:36–38).*

Even a sin as bad as that can be forgiven, if we can truly repent and do as these people did. The word ‘repent’ means ‘change your mind, think differently’. It means being truly sorry for the wrong we have done and the good we have failed to do, and then making up our minds to start again, living a new kind of life.

Although we cannot possibly earn eternal life and we depend completely on God’s grace (meaning His favour and forgiveness), God expects us to show our appreciation by doing our best to live in His way.

## Facing Up to our Faults

Before Jesus began to teach, John the Baptist was sent to show people the way back to God, to be reconciled to Him.

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written*

*in the prophets: “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make his paths straight.’” John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins (Mark 1:1–5).*

They had to be honest with John the Baptist, and with themselves, in confessing their sins. Indeed, when people came to John with the wrong attitude, he turned them away:

*When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them: “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Matthew 3:7–8).*

It must be the same with us, when we desire to be associated with Jesus by baptism into his name, to share the hope of eternal life. We must look at ourselves honestly, facing up to the faults we have.



Saul the Pharisee learned the same thing. He converted to Christ, and



became the person we know as the Apostle Paul. He spent the rest of his life preaching and teaching people *“that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance”* (Acts 26:20).

## **In the Old Testament**

In earlier studies from this series, we were thinking about the sacrifices and other rituals of Old Testament times. One important fact we learned was that these practices had no value in themselves. Their purpose was to teach men and women about how far they had gone from God’s standards and to make them aware of their need for forgiveness. In other words, they were to bring people to this state of mind that the Bible calls ‘repentance’. The prophet Joel explained it in this way:

*“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? (Joel 2:12–14).*

## **The Invitation of Jesus**

John chapter 4 records a wonderful conversation about the state of mind that God wants us to have. A woman wanted to know whether it was best to worship God on a mountain in her country (Mount Gerizim, see Joshua 8:33), or in Jerusalem. Jesus carefully explained to her that where believers worship is not the important thing. What matters now is the way in which

they worship, and that they do so sincerely:

*Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. 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 4:21–24).*

God calls us to have faith in His promises and to believe that He wants us to be part of His kingdom. When we develop this faith, we realise our shortcomings and so repent, changing our mind and outlook to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**John Woodall**



# Bible History - The 'Ages'

A useful way to understand Bible accounts is to place them in the context of historical periods. Historians tend to divide human development into three main 'Ages': the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age.

If we compare historical books and commentaries, we soon see that these Ages occurred at different dates around the world as nations developed at varying rates in the areas where they lived.

An expert in archaeology (Leen Ritmeyer, Archaeological Architect) has given us the following dates which refer to the lands of the Bible in the Middle East:

- Stone Age: prior to 3,000 BC
- Bronze Age: 3,300 BC to 1,200 BC
- Iron Age: 1,200 BC to 586 BC

We notice that some dates overlap each other. This is because no 'Age' had a clear-cut beginning or end. A modern day illustration of this can be seen in how many people today would use the internet for reference and research, whereas others still refer to books. In some countries, younger people are likely to measure in metres and centimetres, or grams, but the older generation often still prefer feet, inches and ounces. The modern world is changing, but there is no actual cut-off point for certain methods or systems.

We will now concentrate on the dates which concern Israel and the Middle Eastern lands where the Bible narratives took place. We can relate them well to these periods in history.

## The Stone Age

The Stone Age lasted until about 3,000 BC. In biblical history these dates relate to the time of Adam and Eve right through to the birth of Noah. The main events under the Stone Age can therefore be listed as:

- Adam and Eve, Garden of Eden
- Their sons Cain and Abel: Cain killed his brother, the first murder
- Seth, their third son, who Eve said replaced the deceased Abel
- Enoch, whose writings are quoted later in the Bible
- Methuselah – the oldest man who ever lived (969 years old!)

We should not make the mistake of thinking that these people were primitive cave-dwellers. They wrote, kept flocks, built cities and made technical progress. Genesis 4:22 says that a man called Tubal-Cain worked in bronze and iron, which illustrates that there were some people who were ahead of their time. The very fact that this is recorded proves that these periods did not suddenly stop, and another one begin. The change came gradually over time.

## The Bronze Age

The accepted dates for this Age are 3,300 BC to 1,200 BC. This equates to the time of Noah right through to Samuel, the last of Israel's judges.

The Bible account tells us that after the Flood, people again turned away from God. So the Lord chose Abraham and made a covenant with him. The

rest of the Bible deals with Abraham's descendants, known as Israel or the Jews. 'Testament' is the same as 'covenant': the Old Testament relates to God's promises to Abraham, and then the New Testament shows their fulfilment through Jesus.

The main Bible events under the Bronze Age are:

- Noah's ark and the Flood
- Tower of Babel – the rebellion against God soon after the Flood
- Abraham and his son Isaac
- Isaac's son Jacob – whose name was changed to Israel
- Joseph – sold as a slave into Egypt, but rose to be governor
- Israel as slaves in Egypt
- Moses – the deliverer who led Israel out of Egypt (the Exodus)
- Joshua – succeeded Moses and led Israel into the Promised Land
- Capture of the Promised Land – promised by God to Abraham
- The judges (leaders) until Samuel

Some interesting exceptions again show the gradual transition from this 'age' to the next. Og, an enemy king, had an iron bedstead (Deuteronomy 3:11). This was before the Iron Age, but the very mention of it shows that advances were being made, and that it was exceptional in its time.

Similarly, while Joshua was helping the people of Israel to occupy the Promised Land, the following complaint was made:

*All the Canaanites who dwell in the land of the valley have chariots of iron (Joshua 17:16).*

This was obviously to pose a huge problem to those who did not possess Iron Age vehicles.

## The Iron Age

The last of these three Ages lasted from about 1,200 BC to 586 BC. This time period takes us from the start of the kings of Israel through to their last king, and the subsequent captivity in Babylon. It includes much of Israel's history and a large proportion of their writings, the Kings and Chronicles, Psalms and Prophets. It should be understood that the Psalms and prophetic books fit in alongside the history of their kings, so that the two sections run in parallel. The principal Bible events under the Iron Age cover:

- Samuel – the last judge
- Saul – Israel's first king
- David – the godly king who wrote many of the Psalms
- Solomon – the king who had huge wealth and wisdom
- Rehoboam and Jeroboam – in whose reigns the kingdom divided into North and South – and the subsequent kings
- Prophets – the teachers who tried to turn the nation back to God
- Capture of the Northern kingdom in 722 BC
- Capture of the Southern kingdom in 586 BC – they would return 70 years later and their descendants were the Jews living in Israel when Jesus was born.

All of this helps us to see that the Bible is a reliable document which corresponds well to the historical periods in which it is set. More importantly, it should give us confidence that it will continue to be accurate and to look forward to the 'Age' still to come – the Age of the Kingdom of God.

**David Simpson**

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### Africa & Europe

Christadelphian Bible Mission,  
404 Shaftmoor Lane, Birmingham,  
England B28 8SZ

*requests@cbm.org.uk*

### The Americas

CBMA, 567 Astorian Drive, Simi  
Valley, CA 93065, USA

*cbma.treasurer@gmail.com*

### Caribbean

CBMC, Box 55541, Unit 119,  
15280, 101 Avenue, Surrey, BC,  
Canada V3R 0J7

*philsnobelen@shaw.ca*

### India

T Galbraith, GPO Box 159,  
Hyderabad, 5000001, India

*tim@galbraithmail.com*

### South and East Asia

ACBM, PO Box 42, Wallacia, NSW,  
Australia 2745

*coelmada@ozemail.com.au*

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