

THE HARD BITS IN THE BIBLE

By Albert Van Leeuwen

(UNDERSTANDING THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENT)

Just this year (2008), I re-read the entire Bible from the beginning. I came across many things I have glossed over before; many things that are so hard to reconcile with the loving Creator I know personally and have fellowship with on a daily basis. Some make your hair stand on end.

In my earlier essay, “Old Testament Violence”, I tackled some of it. This time I want to deal with all of it, by trying to put a holistic perspective on the entire Word of God. I will call a spade a spade, as I usually do, addressing why God was so insistent on strict observance of His laws under the Old Covenant, yet apparently much more relaxed under the New Covenant. Why was He so much into legalistic ritual under the Old and so much into freedom of worship under the New? Why under the Old does He often seem unwilling to give a second chance to anyone and He is the God of almost unlimited forgiveness under the New? Sometimes, reading the Old Testament, it seems that God has multiple personalities, and in a way that is true. He is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in One God. But which is the one Who created the world in Genesis 1? Which one is the God dealing with the Israelites in the Pentateuch? And, if Jesus and the Father are one (John 17:21), where do we draw the line?

I know a teacher of the Alpha course who recommends new Christians leave the Old Testament alone until they have grown substantially through reading the New Testament. I think we need to understand God better, so we aren't tempted to hide some parts of Him. And I think anyone making a commitment to Jesus has the right to read all the fine print of the deal they are getting into, *before* they make an informed decision. In fact, there should *be* no fine print in the contract we enter with God.

Here is my own synopsis of the books of the Bible, and the main points each seems to be making, in an effort to find some common thread tying it all together. (The dates after the sub-headings are the approximate time in history of the events, not the time of writing, just to give a sense of chronology.)

GENESIS (around 4000-1660 BC)

This book sets the parameters for the entire Gospel message. Without it, most of the values of western society, including monogamous marriages, loving relationships and the worship of the one and only true deity, make no sense. More importantly, without it the message of salvation through the sacrifice of Christ crucified goes out the door. If sin, death and suffering did *not* enter the world through the first Adam, it could only have been part of an originally flawed Creation, not one that was very good, as God Himself observed (chapter 1). And consequently it makes no sense that it could be put right through the death of the last Adam (Christ) (1 Corinthians 15:45). The Christian message has no foundation or credibility without a *literal* six-day Creation.

Secondly, if a literal Genesis is *not* true, the Bible itself is placed into disrepute. Is it the Word of God or not? If some of it is and some of it isn't, at what point does God *start* telling the truth? A study of the historical aspects and calculation of the life-spans of the characters in the Biblical genealogies gives around six thousand years since Creation. There are arguments that the culture of the time did not require a 'son' to be a son, literally, but could be a remote descendant. Even if that were true, there is no way that the period since creation could exceed ten thousand years. Unfortunately, with most of the world brainwashed into believing it all created itself, we have a huge conflict between thousands of years and millions of years. For what it's worth, I whole-heartedly believe in six days, six thousand years ago, and think it makes a lot more sense, scientifically, than the theory that the mind-blowing complexity of life made itself by sheer accident, something for which there is *no scientific evidence whatsoever*.

There is conflict between the Biblical timeline and the Egyptian timeline, which skeptics like to use to disprove the Bible. The Biblical and Assyrian timelines are largely in agreement, but the Egyptian timeline clashes by hundreds of years. The Egyptian one is based on scholars placing each dynasty consecutively, based on the assumption that each dynasty ruled the entire country. However, there is solid evidence that many dynasties overlapped or ran concurrently (see Isaiah 19:2). In addition, the Egyptian culture and religion believed in an afterlife, the *quality* of which was determined by the legacy you left and the treasures you could take with you. So they built tombs in which their burial chambers were hard to find and penetrate by grave robbers (only two have been found in tact) and they recorded their achievements on its walls. However, truth had little to do with it. Many kings recorded exaggerated achievements or totally fictitious ones, in order to raise their status in the afterlife. Many tried to erase the records of previous kings, claiming conquests for themselves. In these circumstances, I am much more inclined to accept the truth of the Biblical record, which is full of negative reports of the appalling behaviour of the people and kings of Israel.

Here we meet our Creator, *Yahweh* (Exodus 3:14-17). And He was not the benign, easy-going God we would like Him to be. *One* transgression of eating a forbidden fruit incurred God's wrath on Adam and Eve, placing them under the curse of sin and death (3:14-19).

But Genesis also foreshadowed the eternal purpose: - God made them male and female (1:27), as a picture of what He Himself was after. That deep desire for a soul mate in most of us is there to help us understand God's heart. The Godhead already comprised unity between three *male* entities, Father Son and Holy Spirit. He deeply desired intimate relationship with a *female* counterpart. Put simply, God was looking for a *Wife*!

Scouting through Strong's Concordance, the *main* word for 'God' used throughout the Old Testament, is '*Elohim*', a *plural*. Genesis starts with the Holy Spirit hovering over the face of the waters (1:2). And the New Testament makes it clear Jesus was present too (Colossians 3:16). It seems fair to conclude that *all three* parts of the Godhead, including the Father, were present both during Creation and the passing of history.

Genesis records the rebellion of God's creation against His control, as well as God's anger and disappointment (6:5-6). It tells of the almost complete destruction of His creation in a world-wide flood (7:17-22). It explains the origin of different languages and the distribution of people across the globe from a place called Babel (11:5-9).

God selected the Hebrew seed to be His Chosen People (chapter 17), *promised* Abraham that he would become the father of 'many nations' (17:5) and that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (22:18). God gave him the land of Canaan as an "everlasting possession" (17:8). It was here that circumcision was introduced as a symbol of God's covenant (17:10-11). Abraham miraculously fathered Isaac in his old age (17:17) and was then prepared to give him up, almost certainly making fulfillment of God's promise impossible (22:2-14), (something reflecting God's own heart - a *picture* of Him sacrificing His own Son). The very image of a father willing to kill and burn his own child grinds on our modern psyche, yet this total *trust* in God was accounted to Abraham as righteousness (15:6, Romans 4:3). He had previously fathered Ishmael to Sarah's maid Hagar and the two half-brothers became forefathers of, and initiated the conflict between, Israel and the Arab nations, roughly 4000 years ago. Isaac fathered twins Jacob and Esau, Esau being delivered first. Jacob deceived Isaac to inherit the birthright (chapter 25), but, apparently, with God's blessing (chapter 27) as Esau was a totally degenerate character (Hebrews 12:16). Jacob, then, was given the new name "Israel", meaning 'God prevails' (32:28), a term eventually used to describe the "children", the "nation" and then the "House" of Israel.

Israel had twelve sons, to become the fathers of twelve tribes. Joseph was the 'dreamer' and Israel's favorite (37:3). He was resented by his brothers and sold into slavery, but made good through God's blessing (37:2, 41:41). The book concludes with the move of Israel, together with his family and household, to Egypt during a severe famine.

EXODUS (around 1400 BC)

Exodus relates the enslavement of God's people in Egypt and their miraculous escape, after some two-hundred years, to embark on an epic journey back to the Promised Land (Genesis 13:15). Moses was selected by God to lead his people on this exodus. He found a burning bush in the desert, one that miraculously wasn't consumed by the flames. God spoke to him from the bush and identified Himself as "**I AM WHO I AM**" (3:13-14), or YHWH, pronounced *Yahweh*.

It took ten plagues to persuade Pharaoh to let His people go. The last plague was the death of all the first-born sons of Egypt. This commenced the celebration of '**Passover**', as the angel of death *passed over* the Hebrew first-born sons because the blood of a lamb had been smeared on their door frames, establishing the concept of salvation through blood sacrifice (12:1-13). And this book laid down the ground rules for God's expectations of human behaviour (the Ten Commandments, heading the Law, referred to as the "**Old Covenant**") (20:1-17), the *first two* of which say:

"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. "

The rest of the Old Testament is *overflowing* with records of God's Chosen People, Israel, disobeying *those* commandments, the worst sin anyone could commit.

(Interestingly, when Jesus was asked which was the first and foremost commandment (Mark 12:28-30), He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

They *appear* to be totally different, yet, in our fragile human make-up, it is *not possible* to disobey one without disobeying the other.)

Exodus highlights the fickle nature of mankind, showing the Israelites taking forty years (Numbers 32:13) to complete a journey that should have taken 11 days (Deuteronomy 1:2), simply because they kept on disobeying God, constantly complaining and not trusting in Him. God wanted to make sure they were *ready* to be His bride, testing their heart, but they didn't come close. Many times they even wanted to return to the security of slavery (e.g. 17:3). *One occasion* of idol worship resulted in the execution of 3000 Israelites (32:28). And regardless of the continuous miraculous provision by God, like parting the Red Sea and manna from heaven, these people rebelled against Him over and over again.

In many ways it is a picture of our own Christian journey and our own reluctance to submit to Someone far greater than ourselves, in order to reach Heaven.

Not even Moses, man of God as he was, was allowed into the Promised Land, owing to what appears to be a *single instance* of disobedience of His instructions (Numbers 20:12). Only the descendants less than twenty years old, plus Joshua and Caleb, were permitted to enter (Numbers 14:30 and 32:11-12). I really feel for Moses. He tried *so* hard, leading this rabble of thick-skulled, 'stiff-necked' complainers, only to have his life's purpose terminated before its consummation.

Exodus contains explicit instructions for making a portable Temple as a place to make contact with God (chapters 25-30). Whenever it was erected, it was to house the 'Ark of the Covenant' containing the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Only the priests were to carry the Ark

(Deuteronomy 10:8). Only the high priest, in prescribed ritual dress, was allowed into the ‘Holy of Holies’, where the Ark was stored behind heavy curtains (Leviticus 16:2-4). Essentially, Israel was a *theocracy*, a people with God as their King. But the common man could only reach God through the intercession of the priesthood.

To help Moses handle the massive task of ruling this unruly crowd, God allowed him to appoint judges (18:13-26).

LEVITICUS (around 1400 BC)

This book contains the laws and ordinances God gave to Israel and established the Levites as the tribe responsible for the priesthood (chapter 10). The other 11 tribes were to get a share of the Promised Land, while the Levites were to be set aside as priests administering the extensive duties of keeping the tribes in God’s good books, by making blood sacrifices to atone for sins and conducting a variety of rituals. They carried the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:9). In exchange, they were to inherit a tithing of the produce of the other tribes, which the Levites themselves were to tithe again (Numbers 18:24-26).

NUMBERS (around 1400 BC)

They were still in the wilderness here. God instructed Moses to count all those with him, divided into tribes, and he came up with over 600,000 men, 20 years and older, and able to go out to war. (Those outside these parameters apparently didn’t count significantly enough to be included.) The names of the tribes were: 1.*Reuben*, 2.*Simeon*, 3.*Gad*, 4.*Judah*, 5.*Issachar*, 6.*Zebulun*, Joseph (now divided into the two half-tribes, 7.*Ephraim* and 8.*Manasseh*, Joseph’s sons), 9.*Benjamin*, 10.*Dan*, 11.*Asher*, and 12.*Naphtali*. The *Levites* were not numbered among them (1:47-53).

The observance of the Passover was established (chapter 9) to remember their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Israel, as always, struggled to remain true to God. Approaching the Promised Land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh (32:33) found the land east of the Jordan rather attractive, wanted to keep their wives and children safe there, and asked to be excused from entering and to be given possession of this territory instead.

DEUTERONOMY (around 1400 BC)

This appears to be largely a reinforcement of the previous three books. No new history was provided, other than the documentation of the death of Moses. Chapter 28 invoked *curses* on those who do not observe God’s laws.

The killing spree started (2:34, 3:3, 3:6). My mind boggles at the Lord’s instructions to kill women, children, babies, even animals (13:15). Anyone brought up in a culture worshipping false gods was liable to lead the chosen people astray. Whilst the accounts may be horrific in the extreme, I guess the proof of the pudding is in the eating: - time and again the people of Israel were led astray by foreigners tempting them to worship idols.

Yet I still struggle greatly with the idea that the commandment “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) seems to apply only to innocents (19:10), and not to idol worshipers (7:2, 13:9-10, 20:16). And I worry about the detrimental psychological effect all this ruthless killing must have had on those wielding the sword.

JOSHUA (around 1380 BC)

Joshua is a Hebrew word for ‘Jesus’. He is considered by some scholars to be a Christ-type. But I’m afraid he’s nothing *like* the Jesus I know.

This is the record of the conquest of the Promised Land, a land flowing with *'milk and honey'* (5:6). The pages of the book on the other hand are flowing with *blood*. The *men* of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh joined Joshua and the other tribes crossing the Jordan. We've all heard the story of the walls of Jericho coming down miraculously, but we've rarely been told they subsequently destroyed everything, both men and women, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey (6:21). They then destroyed all the people of Ai (8:25-26). Gibeon was next on the list (10:10-11, 10:20, 10:26), then Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron and Debir. The killing went on. By chapter 13, Joshua was old and tired. I would be too. Both he and Caleb were the only two of the older generation to enter the Promised Land. All the rest were much younger.

The conquered territory west of the Jordan was cut up and divided amongst nine and a half tribes of Israel, as the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh already had their inheritance east of the Jordan (13:7-8). Although it appears Manasseh still received a share west of the Jordan (16:3-6, 17:5). And some women of Manasseh also lodged a successful claim to some additional inheritance there (17:6). The Levites were given cities throughout the land, supplemented by tithes, as their inheritance (13:14).

JUDGES (around 1040 BC)

The Lord deliberately left undefeated nations in the Holy Land to *test* Israel, to see if they would remain true to Him (3:1). Unfortunately, their history is a long, pitiful saga of unfaithfulness and corruption. Various judges would berate them and bring them back onto the straight and narrow. But soon they would again fall away and worship idols. So God would abandon them and let them be conquered. Yet whenever they would cry out for deliverance and turned back to Him, He would rescue them again.

Here is the story of Gideon (chapter 7), who defeated an army as 'numerous as locusts' with just 300 men. It tells of the evil Abimelech killing his seventy brothers (chapter 9), presumably so he could reign over Israel. Israel again served false gods, Baal, Asteroth, and a whole range of others (chapter 10). We also encounter Samson and Delilah here (chapters 14-16).

It appears that much of the time the various tribes were self-ruling and at times fighting each other (chapter 20). It seems to set the scene for the future, when the House of Israel and the House of Judah were constantly at war with each other.

RUTH (around 1000 BC)

Finally, here is an edifying account of people *caring* about one another's welfare. Ruth was a Moabite woman, who was brought into the genealogy of Jesus through Boaz, her husband. The end of the book introduced King David.

SAMUEL 1 (around 1050 BC)

We meet Eli and Samuel, both priests. Eli had evil sons (2:22), totally unsuited to take over the priesthood. So God raised up Samuel to take his place. Unfortunately *his* sons, appointed by Samuel as judges, were no better (8:3). Israel cried out to have a king, like all the other nations around them had. Remembering that Israel was a theocracy (God Himself was their King), this was offensive to the Lord and again a rejection of Him (8:5-9). Nevertheless God let them have their wishes. We are introduced to Saul, the first king of Israel and one *not* pleasing to the Lord. Here also is the account of David, the shepherd boy who slew Goliath, and displaced Saul as king. David reigned 40 years all up, about 7 over Judah, and 33 over the whole of Israel (2 Samuel 5:5).

SAMUEL 2 (around 1000 BC)

I haven't quite worked out why this book bears Samuel's name. Samuel died at the end of the previous book. It is unlikely that either book was authored by Samuel himself, but the first at least relates his interactions with the characters mentioned, the second nothing. It might have been better entitled "David", as it *his* story that unfolds.

David was a man after God's own heart (7:21, Acts 13:22), yet he committed adultery with Bathsheba (11:4) and murdered her husband Uriah (11:15). As punishment, David never again lived in peace (12:9-10). Again we are astounded that from what started out as an *adulterous* union stemmed the birth of Jesus (1 Chronicles 3:5). In the last chapter (24), David again sinned against the Lord by numbering both the houses of Israel and Judah. You wonder why this might have been sinful. It appears his motivation was pride and boasting, and his efforts were not in response to an instruction from the Lord. It was in David's heart to build a temple for God, but it wasn't to be (1 Kings 5:3) as he was too busy with warfare. The initial rift separating the House of Israel from the House of Judah happened here (20:2).

1 KINGS (around 970-840 BC)

David was dying and appointed Solomon, son of Bathsheba, as his successor. God offered to fulfill Solomon's dearest wish. He asked for understanding, to judge his people wisely. God was *so* pleased with this request, He gave him riches and honour as well. And if he would only continue to walk in His ways, he would also get a long life (3:10-14). The wisdom of Solomon became famous throughout the surrounding nations (4:30). Who hasn't heard about the two women each claiming a baby as their own, and how Solomon determined the real mother (3:16-28).

It was Solomon who built the first Temple. He married a Pharaoh's daughter* (3:1), but ended up with a thousand wives and concubines (11:3). You have to wonder how, with all his God-given wisdom, he allowed them to turn his heart away from God (11:4-9) towards the end of his life. As just punishment, God took the kingdom away from his descendants, and it became divided into the 'House of Israel' and the 'House of Judah' (11:35-37). The house of Israel got Jeroboam, a valiant warrior, as its first king. Rehoboam, son of Solomon, became king of the house of Judah in Jerusalem, at this juncture known as the house of David (which for some unexplained reason included the tribe of Benjamin (12:19-21)). They were at *war with each other* as long as they both lived (15:6) and war continued way after (2 Chr 10:19).

* (This was probably Thutmose 1's daughter, Nefertiti, and it is possible the 'Queen of Sheba', who visited Solomon in chapter 10, was her sister, Hatshepsut. The king of Egypt called 'Shishak' in chapters 11 and 14 was probably Thutmose 11 or 111. Ref. "Unwrapping the Pharaohs", by John Ashton and David Brown)

Solomon died. It is believed that shortly before he died he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, the words of a clearly cynical and deeply disillusioned man.

The rest of 1 Kings seems like a non-stop account of exceedingly corrupt kings of both houses. The few exceptions were Asa and Jehoshaphat, both of Judah. In chapters 17 and 18 we meet the prophet Elijah, who took on 450 prophets of Baal, daring them to get Baal to light the fire on their altars. When there was no response, he built an altar of twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel, placed wood and an offering on it, thoroughly soaked the lot in water, and asked God to light it. Fire rained down from heaven and consumed the lot.

2 KINGS (around 840-540 BC)

Elijah disappeared (2:11) in a whirlwind to heaven, leaving a new prophet, Elisha, to carry on his work (2:15). In chapter 4, Elisha raised a dead boy back to life, yet Elisha himself died of an undisclosed illness (13:20).

Despite repeated rebellion against Him by various kings, God was not willing to totally destroy Judah, for the sake of His promise to David to give him “a lamp through his sons always” (8:19). King after king did not do right in the sight of the Lord. Some did a little better than others, but none came up to the mark until Hezekiah took the throne of the house of Judah (18:3).

The house of Israel was taken into *exile to Assyria* as punishment for their transgressions (18:11). Even Hezekiah, king of Judah, was afraid of the king of Assyria and gave him all the silver from the Temple (18:15). The prophet Isaiah entered the scene here (19:2). Hezekiah became mortally ill (20:1) but was healed through Isaiah’s intervention, gaining a promised 15 years (20:6). Then Isaiah prophesied the coming *exile of Judah into Babylon* (20:17, see also Isaiah 39:6).

Finally Josiah became king at the tender age of eight, a breath of fresh air. He reinstated the book of the law (22:10-11) and cleansed Jerusalem and its surrounding area of all the idolatrous practices (chapter 23). Regardless of all the wonderful efforts he made over 31 years of rule, God’s wrath against Judah could not be assuaged, after all the indictments against Josiah’s forerunners (23:25-27).

More colourful characters were introduced here, like Pharaoh Neco (23:29) (probably Necho 11 in the Egyptian records) who killed Josiah and put his son, Jehoiachin, in charge (23:34). Or like Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (24:1), who took all the treasures from the Temple and ten thousand captives of the house of *Judah into exile* (24:13-16), leaving behind only the poorest people. He put Zedekiah in charge, another baddie, and one who rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. As a result, the Babylonian army slaughtered and pillaged Jerusalem, *burning the Temple* and all the other great buildings (25:9), taking away the last few remnants of wealth left. It appears only a few scattered folk of the land were left behind.

1 CHRONICLES (around 1000 BC)

Apart from extensive genealogies from Adam through to David, and even some of his offspring, Chronicles is largely a repetition of the foregoing books of Kings. It is believed Ezra was the author.

There is some doubt in my mind about exactly *who* was carried away into *exile to Assyria*. In 2 Kings 18:11, it was the House of Israel. In 1 Chronicles 5:26, only the tribes east of the Jordan (Reuben, Gad and Manassah (1/2 tribe)) were taken, and no mention was made of the exile of the other tribes, Simeon, Issachar, Zebulun, Ephraim (1/2 tribe), Dan, Asher, and Naphtali. Some of the Levites were probably included. The tribe of Judah (presumably including the tribe of Benjamin) was taken into *exile to Babylon* (9:1). Babylon was *part* of Assyria, as far as I know (2 Chronicles 33:11), and I’m not sure why the distinction is made.

2 CHRONICLES (around 970-540 BC)

This commences with Solomon building the Temple and again it is much of a repetition of the books of Kings. It *closes* with Cyrus, a new king of ‘Persia’, (probably the new name for a larger Assyria), being moved by the Holy Spirit to challenge the captives to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Persia is today’s Iran, where Babylon was located, although at that time, Persia was probably far more extensive, embracing the Holy Land and even Egypt (Ezra 1:2). At the *beginning* of exile however, Egypt was not yet part of Persia, as the Chaldeans (Assyrians) stopped their siege of Jerusalem on the approach of Pharaoh’s army (Jeremiah 37:11, 44:30 and 46:13). Jerusalem would actually be given to Nebuchadnezzar as wages for fitting in with God’s plans (Ezekiel 29:19-20).

So far, we are left guessing what happened to the Ark of the Covenant (last mentioned in 35:3 being returned to the Temple by Josiah), as no specific record has been found anywhere as to who *removed* it. It *may* have been part of the plunder carried to Babylon, but, being what it was, you’d think it would have deserved special mention. There are those who believe priests hid it in the excavations below the Temple, just before they were taken captive, and that the records of its exact location were lost during the exile.*

“The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit it, nor shall it be made anymore.” (Jeremiah 3:16)

* (“Ark of the Covenant”, by Jonathan Gray, self-published)

EZRA (around 540 BC)

Ezra was a Hebrew scribe and priest. He had set his heart to studying God’s laws and then teaching them to His people (Ezra 7:10).

Seventy years the house of Judah was captive in Babylon. It seems 10,000 people were taken (2 Kings 24:13-16), although that depends on how you read those verses, whether they included, or were in addition to, the others mentioned. With the support of Cyrus, over 42,000 returned, with more than 7,000 servants in tow (chapter 2). The articles of the house of the Lord were brought back, numbering 5,400 in all (1:11). Everyone donated what they could to contribute to the reconstruction (2:68). Despite considerable opposition (chapters 4 and 5), the Temple was rebuilt (6:15) and the Passover celebrated again (6:19).

So who came back? In verses 2:2 and 2:59 the words “of Israel” are used. It doesn’t say “*house* of Israel”. It was the house of Judah that went into captivity in Babylon. It seems like a reasonable conclusion the word ‘Israel’ is used in a generic fashion, referring to any of the descendants of Jacob, and therefore the bulk could have been the bloodline of Judah. They were returning to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, home ground of Judah, and centuries of war between the house of Judah and the house of Israel makes it unlikely, (but not impossible), that the house of Israel would have joined them.

Either way, it seems plausible that a very large number of Israelites remained scattered throughout foreign nations. There are numerous prophecies regarding the gathering of God’s people from the ends of the earth, and many of those predictions seem to refer to end-times (e.g. Isaiah 43:3-7). *Technically*, a ‘Jew’ is only a descendant from the tribe of Judah, not just any Hebrew.

In the last chapter (10) all those who had married foreign women agreed to *divorce* them, to try to keep the bloodline of God’s people pure.

NEHEMIAH (around 430 BC)

Nehemiah was a Hebrew leader who reconstructed the walls of Jerusalem. In the process he had the support of Artaxerxes, king of Persia (Ezra 7:12-18). He encountered opposition from Sanballat, who thought the rebuilding of the walls was a sign that they were about to rebel (2:19, 4:7). Yet the wall was completed (6:15, 7:1). Ezra was a contemporary of Nehemiah (8:9) and was the priest who re-introduced the book of the Law to Jerusalem (8:8, 8:13). All the people rejoiced (8:17). They re-established the priesthood in a sealed document (9:38). A tenth of the people moved into Jerusalem, while the rest remained in other cities spread throughout Judah (11:1).

They banned all Ammonites and Moabites from entering the assembly of God (13:1).

ESTHER (around 520 BC)

Esther was a Jewess married to Ahasuerus, (possibly Artaxerxes) king of Persia. She was the adoptive daughter of Mordecai, her uncle. King Ahasuerus’ first queen Vashti was deposed for refusing to submit to him (1:12,19) and the king sent for young virgins to be sought as potential replacements (2:2-3). Esther was among them. She did not reveal her Jewish heritage at this stage (2:10), on the advice of her uncle. Esther pleased the king more than all the other girls (2:17). Two of the king’s officials plotted

against the king and were overheard by Mordecai at the king's gate (2:21-22). Mordecai told Esther and Esther told the king.

Haman, the king's vizier (Prime Minister), took umbrage when Mordecai refused to bow down to him, and when he was interrogated he revealed he was a Jew (3:2-4). Haman was enraged and decided to eradicate *all* the Jews in Persia as revenge (3:5-6). At his wife's prompting, he constructed a gallows on which to execute Mordecai (5:5).

It was obviously the Lord who intervened. Suddenly the king couldn't sleep and had the chronicles read to him (6:1). He discovered from that book of records that Mordecai had saved him from treason (6:2) and asked what had been done to reward him. His servants told him nothing had been done. So when Haman came into the king's court, Ahasuerus asked him how he should reward someone he wanted to honour. Haman of course thought he was referring to *him* and advised public acknowledgement in the city square on the back of the king's horse (6:7-9). The king then got Haman to do that for Mordecai!

Meanwhile, the king had promised to give Esther up to half his kingdom (5:6) and at a king's banquet, with Haman present, Esther asked only for her life to be spared. She revealed her Jewish heritage and Haman's treachery (7:3-6). By this time the king was a little under the influence and left. In his absence, Haman tried to beg Esther for his life and fell on her couch, just when the king returned (7:7-8). He interpreted it as assault and hanged Haman on the gallows meant for Mordecai (7:10).

Ahasuerus then granted all the Jews the right to defend themselves (8:11) and they rid themselves of their enemies (9:16). Mordecai's status was elevated to being second only to the king (10:3).

JOB (probably during the Babylonian exile)

So far, the insights we've had into the nature of God have been mostly of an uncompromising deity, one who rewards righteousness with blessings and punishes the wicked. *In Job we get a new perspective.* Both Ezekiel and James mention Job, but I have not been able to locate him in any of the genealogies. Apparently he was an Arabian Patriarch from the land of Uz.

Job was a righteous man who tried really hard to obey God. Everything was taken away from him by Satan in the first few chapters, including his children, his livelihood, his wealth and his health. Only his wife remained (2:9), and she advised him to curse God and die!

Three friends came to console him, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They sat with him for seven days, not knowing what to say, but after that Job finally spoke up. Job insisted he had been righteous (32:1) and had done nothing to deserve this calamity. His friends insisted that he *must* have done something to incur God's wrath. There are 27 chapters of this kind of dialogue of worldly thinking. Finally, a much younger man, Elihu, who'd been listening to all of this from the sidelines, spoke up and claimed they'd all missed the mark. Who are we to question the Almighty? he said. Who are *we* to try to justify ourselves? Who are we to tell God when or how to act? Who are we to argue with Him and tell Him He is wrong? The whole of nature is controlled by Him and around Him is awesome majesty. Great wisdom from such a young man.

Then God Himself answered from a whirlwind. He confirmed what the young man had asserted. Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth? He said. Who controls the boundaries of the sea? Who brings rain to the land or creates a desert or makes the grass grow? Can *you* bind the chains of the stars, or fix their rule? Who has put wisdom into the innermost being and given understanding to the mind? Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Who created the deer, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk, the hippopotamus, the Leviathan*? Will you condemn *Me*, so that *you* may be justified?

*(Generally believed to be the crocodile, but from its description it sounds more like a fire-breathing dragon, and could well be a reference to some surviving dinosaur. See also Psalms 104:26 and Isaiah 27:1).

Job repented with a humble heart:

"I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. Listen, please, and let me speak; You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.' 'I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'" (Job 42:2-6)

Job's three friends were told off by God for not speaking about Him what was right and He restored Job's fortunes twofold and let him live another 140 years. James refers to the "patience (or perseverance) of Job" (James 5:11). The real message of the book of Job is that God is *sovereign* in everything. The hardships we go through are His prerogative, and He has His reasons, no matter how *we* perceive them.

PSALMS (around 1000 BC)

The great bulk of the psalms were written by David, who is called the "sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Samuel 28:1). Asaph, Moses and the sons of Korah, are other authors. David's son Solomon also wrote 1005 psalms, as well as 3000 proverbs (1 Kings 4:25). What happened to them only the Lord knows. The "Song of Solomon" would hardly qualify. Most of the Proverbs are his, but few of the psalms, (72 and 127 are believed to be his). Authorship of quite a number of the psalms is unknown.

The psalms contain great praise for God, repentance, cries for help and deliverance, acknowledgement of His loving kindness and awesome glory and majesty, requests for revenge on enemies, pleas for judgment, claims for rewards for righteous behaviour and punishment of evil practices. Some of their content is believed to be prophetic (e.g. 89).

But some things Jesus stood for stand out by their *absence*. Things that, were they to be found anywhere in the Old Testament, surely should have been evident in the psalms. What better place to introduce that type of thinking? There is no idea evident of *loving* your enemies, *blessing* and *forgiving* those who have done the wrong thing by you. These are concepts that didn't gain credence until Jesus Himself arrived on the scene in the flesh:

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." (Matthew 5:44)

(The only fleeting reference I've found, so far, of kindness towards foes was way back in Exodus 23:4, where the Chosen People were instructed to be nice to their enemies' animals.)

PROVERBS (around 950 BC)

The proverbs are mainly the words of King Solomon, his God-given wisdom in short anecdotes. He is believed to have spoken 3000 of them. Here are 31 chapters of them, only the last two written by others, (Agur and Lemuel). I haven't tried to separate and count them, but at a rough assessment, they could not really exceed 10 to 20%, of the full list, depending on where you place the divisions.

The Proverbs contain much advice on how to deal with life's issues and the various dilemmas they present. In the main, they place paramount importance on putting God first in everything. I imagine they must have been written *before* Solomon lost the plot (see Ecclesiastes). They advocate wisdom, reproof, discipline, knowledge, understanding, integrity, humility, restraint of tongue, truth and hard work. They condemn fools, laziness, scoffing, pursuit of riches, boasting and deceit. The main presentation format is one of *contrasting* the behaviour of the righteous to the wicked, the wise to the fool.

Again, you'd think this might have been a good place to introduce the type of mindset Jesus was into, but the only *hints* of it I have been able to find are Proverbs 25:21 and 24:17, telling us to feed our enemies when they are hungry or thirsty (thereby heaping burning coals on their heads!), and not gloat when they fall.

ECCLESIASTES (around 930 BC)

These are also believed to be the words of Solomon, written towards the end of his life. Solomon, against the instructions of the Lord, married foreign women, who brought with them false gods and idols made of wood and stone and precious metals. They weren't real gods and had no power of themselves (Deuteronomy 4:28, Psalm 115:4) other than the power the worshiper ascribed to them. As a result, they *did* have the power to make their worshiper *the same as them* (Psalm 115:8). In other words, their worshiper became as empty and meaningless as the idol itself. ***Unfaithfulness to God through worship of idols was the worst sin anyone could commit.*** But it was a bit like a man having an affair with a plastic blow-up doll! So why did it make God so angry? It was unfaithfulness of the heart. And as a result, part of God's intended bride became totally dysfunctional and empty.

The folly of idol worship is manifestly evident in the story of Solomon. Towards the end of his life, Solomon worshiped false gods, tempted to do so, no doubt, by the foreign women in his life (1 Kings 11:1-9). By the time he wrote Ecclesiastes, he didn't know what to believe anymore. He was filled with doubt, severely skeptical about the meaning of life, and highly cynical. He felt God had let him down, while in fact the opposite was true – *he* had let down God. Total disillusionment of his innermost being was the result.

The essence of the Preacher's message in Ecclesiastes is: "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" (1:2 and 12:8). Basically, he felt that the righteous are often punished (by God) like the wicked, and the wicked often reap rewards as if they were righteous (8:14). It is the following verse 15, (with a bit of help from Isaiah 22:13), that was the inspiration for the saying: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!" The writer felt God had predestined the future, and so nothing he could do, good or bad, well-intentioned or malicious, made any difference to the final outcome.

SONG OF SOLOMON (around 970 BC)

A love song, believed to have been written when he was young. It has the curious distinction of being one of two books never mentioning God once (the other is Esther). It describes the deep emotions and feelings of love between a man and a woman of different skin colours (1:5). It reads almost like a script for a play, a dialogue of *mutual* admiration. It is how God wants us to feel towards Him, in a spiritual sense.

THE BOOKS OF PROPHECY (between 800 and 400 BC)

These prophets lived during the time of the Kings of Israel. It was their divinely assigned vocation to steer God's people back onto the right path, following Him with all their heart, obeying His commandments and placing His eternal purpose paramount. They were God's spokesmen. It was common practice during those days to seek out prophets for advice on what to do, particularly in connection with warfare. False gods also had their prophets, full of misguided advice on the 'right' course of action. It is the reason God abhorred divination and forbade His people from participating in such idolatrous practices (Leviticus 19:26).

In the process of disclosing the Lord's will, God's appointed spokesmen often also declared the *outcome* of future events. Most of those declarations related to current happenings, but some appear to have multiple application, to current, near-future, as well as end-time events. For example, the Temple has been built and destroyed a number of times, so it is thought related prophecies *may* have relevance to all of them. Some were meant exclusively for end-time interpretation. Others predict the coming of a

Deliverer (Messiah). Most prophetic books are a *collection* of prophecies made over a period of time and they are not necessarily presented in the chronological sequence of their fulfillment.

There were many prophets over the course of history. This section of the Bible contains the words of sixteen of them. I am by no means an expert in the interpretation of prophecy, but I'll do my best.

ISAIAH (around 740 BC)

A great many of Isaiah's prophecies related to specific events and people of his time. Others related to the future crucifixion of Jesus (7:14, 9:6-7, 52:13-15, 59:20, 61:1-3, and the most significant chapter 53). Still others referred to the end of time, when judgment will take place and Jesus returns (2:2-4, chapters 11, 24, 35, 65 and 66). The longing of God to be in fulfilling relationship with His *bride* is amply evident:

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you; and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you." (61:10 and 62:5)

And His true heart is revealed:

"Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you; and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him". (30:18 NASB)

There are mind-blowing prophecies in this book, many dealing with the coming Messiah, although that term is never used. Most significant are the words Jesus quoted about Himself, in Luke 4:18-19:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"(61:1-2)

And the heart-rending picture of the crucified Christ, (written 7 centuries before it actually happened!):

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. And they made His grave with the wicked - but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth." (53:3-9)

JEREMIAH (around 630 BC)

The bulk of Jeremiah deals with prophecies relating to the coming *exile* of both the houses of Israel and Judah. False prophets tried to undermine Jeremiah's prophecies. They prophesied peace when Jeremiah prophesied exile (18:18, 23:25-40, 27:14-15, 29:9-10). They persecuted Jeremiah, and his anguish is clear

in chapter 20. When he said the exile would last 70 years, the false prophet Hananiah claimed it would only last two years (chapter 28) and consequently was cursed to die by the Lord that very year. Related prophecies deal with the *restoration* in 70 years time (29:10), which was how long it took.

Interestingly, Jeremiah contains a number of suggestions that God can *change His mind* in certain circumstances, and will, provided we do the right thing (18:8-10, 26:3,13,19, 42:10).

Interspersed are prophecies that have dual application, or are exclusively meant for end-times. In 30:8-11, the David mentioned must be the *seed* of David, as *king* David lived centuries earlier. I have no doubt it relates to Jesus, as it also does in 23:5-8 and 33:14-15. End-times are amply evident in numerous scriptures (25:30-38, 46:27-38, 51:5-10). The coming New Covenant was predicted in chapter 30:18 through to 31:34 (see also 32:37-44).

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (31:31-34)

This was to become a foundation stone of the new Temple in the New Testament – "*us*". No longer will we need the intercession of a priest and high priest to set us right with God, because we will *all* know Him intimately and our sin will be forgotten. No longer will we need anyone to *teach* us the meaning of His Word, because He will write His law on our hearts!

LAMENTATIONS (around 580 BC)

This is also believed to be the work of Jeremiah. In it he laments the punishment of God's people in exile, often referred to as the time of "Jacob's Trouble".

EZEKIEL (around 600BC)

This prophet stands out because of the *unusual* visions accompanying his prophecies. He saw the Lord enthroned on top of a four-wheeled carriage occupied by four angelic living beings (chapters 1, 8 and 10). He spoke at around the same time as Jeremiah, possibly a little later. He declared it to be during the 'sixth year' to the 'thirtieth year', but doesn't say of *what*. Some believe it to be the number of years he had been a priest. Others think it dates from the year Hilkiah found the book of the Law and king Josiah reintroduced its observance (2 Chronicles 34:15). In chapter 40 he is more specific, quoting the 25th year of the *exile*.

Most of the prophecies relate to the punishment of Israel in exile for idol worship and harlotry (unfaithfulness to God, e.g. chapter 23), and later to the restoration of Jerusalem and punishment of the surrounding nations for sneering at the Lord. End-times seem to be reflected in chapter 11:16-20 and all of the chapters 33 to 39. Chapters 40 to 48 are devoted to a vision of the reconstructed Temple.

DANIEL (around 530 BC)

To put some historical perspective on some of the prophets, Nebuchadnazzar (reigning 605-562 BC) was the king of Babylon who took the house of Judah into exile (606-536 BC). (*The exile happened in two stages: first the leaders and nobility were taken in 606 BC, and in 586 BC the rest of Judah. I have been*

unable to reconcile the start of Nebuchadnezzar's reign with the start of the seventy year exile, showing at least one year's discrepancy. Someone, somewhere must have made a wrong calculation.)

Belshazzar (not to be confused with Belteshazzar, the new name given to Daniel by Nebuchadnezzar) was king when Babylon was conquered by Cyrus in 539 BC. Cyrus was the king of Persia (559-529 BC) who was inspired by the Lord to encourage the exiles to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, in 536 BC. Babylon had periods of being independent, being part of Assyria, and later Persia. Ahasuerus (also possibly known as Artaxerxes) took over as king of Babylon in about 529 BC and it appears he was the one who delayed the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 4:17-22). A guy called Smerdis apparently usurped the throne for less than a year in 521 BC. Then Darius, king of Babylon (521-486 BC), took over and initially was reluctant to reauthorize building, but finally relented (Ezra 6:8). He is the one who promoted Daniel to the highest dignity (Daniel 6:1-2).

The book of Daniel is probably the most popular, fascinating and exciting of all the prophetic books, and many have tried their hand in interpreting it. But that's not the purpose of this essay, only to present its essence.

Daniel was amongst those taken into exile. His three mates were renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego (1:7). Daniel was renamed Belteshazzar and quickly proved himself to be highly intelligent and visionary (1:17). Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and required his 'wise men' to tell him both what the dream entailed, as well as its interpretation. Of course they couldn't. But Daniel *could*. God revealed a statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay. A stone crushed its feet and the whole lot turned to dust and blew away (2:31-35). The various layers represented kingdoms which would finally be replaced by a kingdom that would never be destroyed (2:38-45). Daniel gained much respect and was promoted.

Then the king made a statue of gold and required everyone to worship it. Naturally, Daniel's three mates refused, at the risk of being thrown into a furnace. (The account does not reveal why Daniel was not included.) His mates were thrown into a fire *so* hot, the guys pushing them in burned up (3:22), but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego weren't touched by the heat! An angel was spotted in the furnace with them (3:26). The king gained a new respect for the God of Israel, but apparently not enough.

The king had another dream, this time of a large tree that sheltered and fed multitudes, but that had to be chopped down (4:11-17). Again Daniel interpreted it, but reluctantly, as the tree represented the king himself, to be driven mad unless he recognized the Most High God (4:25). He didn't and lost his mind (4:33), but when he regained his sanity, he finally acknowledged God. Belshazzar (not to be confused with Belteshazzar), an idol worshiper (5:23), became king and saw a floating hand write, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" on a wall. Daniel revealed its meaning and that same night the king died (5:26-30).

Darius took over the throne. Government leaders were jealous of Daniel's extraordinary spirit and conspired to have him thrown into a lions' den. A deeply distressed Darius couldn't stop it, as he had personally signed an injunction (6:9) that no one should make petition to any god but himself. Daniel survived unharmed, but his accusers and their families were thrown to the same lions and did not (6:24).

Chapters 9 to 12 deal with personal revelations to Daniel of end-time events, the *meaning* of which wasn't made clear even to him (12:9). The most famous of these is the 'seventy weeks', finally attributing the title 'Messiah' to the coming Redeemer:

"To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince, *there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined. Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week he shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the*

wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate." (9:24-27)

The seventy weeks (70x7) is generally believed to represent 490 *years*, divided into three lots.

(There are many different interpretations, but one fairly credible version goes like this: - Starting at the decree by Cyrus to rebuild the Temple; 49 years (seven weeks) to the restoration of Jerusalem; 434 years (sixty-two weeks) to the crucifixion; the "Church Age" as an unaccounted for 'gap'; followed by 7 years (one week) under the rule of the Anti-Christ. Ref. The Big Picture of Daniel, M.A. Butler, Herald of Hope)

HOSEA (around 730 BC)

Hosea is a form of the name "Hoshea", an alternative spelling of the name "Joshua", meaning 'Saviour'. He prophesied during the period when Israel was first divided into the houses of Israel and Judah.

In chapter 1, Hosea was instructed to marry a harlot named Gomer. It was an *illustration* of the relationship between God and His adulterous Chosen People. Interestingly, while verses 1 to 9 were explicit that God *disowned* the house of Israel (v.6), but would have compassion on the house of Judah (v.7), immediately after making that statement came the *end-time* prediction:

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' there it shall be said to them, 'You are sons of the living God.' Then the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together" (v.10-11)

The book condemned the behaviour of God's people, predicted the coming exile hundreds of years in the future (9:3 and 11:5), exposed God's *great anguish* over their unfaithfulness (11:8-9), and foreshadowed their eventual return from exile (11:10-11).

JOEL (probably around 540 BC)

No one is certain just *when* this prophet wrote about this locust devastation of Israel. Verse 3:2 suggests it *may* have been during the exile. Verse 3:6 suggests there may have been a further dispersal of the house of Judah to Greece. But Joel is best known for this stunning end-time prediction:

"And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. And also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days. 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 awesome day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (2:28-32)

AMOS (around 780 BC)

Amos proclaimed judgment against Israel's neighboring nations in the first few chapters, but primarily addressed the sinfulness of Israel itself, warning of the coming exile (5:27, 6:7, 6:14, 7:11, 7:17). He, too, suggested the possibility of God '*changing His mind*' (7:3-6). He concluded with the future restoration of ruined cities, although the wording could well be referring to end-time restoration, not the return from Babylon, as it specified that the destruction won't happen again (9:14-15).

OBADIAH (probably around 600 BC)

This was a stern warning to the nation of Edom (another name for Esau) to refrain from looting Jerusalem, presumably after the house of Judah would be carried off to Babylon (v.11). The consequences of their participation would be total annihilation (v.18), something historically fulfilled.

JONAH (possibly around 750 BC)

This book is more of a narrative than a prophecy. Jonah was fleeing the presence of the Lord on a foundering ship and was thrown overboard when he personally took the blame for the severe storm. A large fish swallowed him and safely delivered him to a beach on the way to Nineveh three days later, a *picture* of Christ's time in the grave (Mathew 12:40). Nineveh was a city to be destroyed forty days later (3:4), but its occupants repented. Much to Jonah's consternation (4:1) the Lord *changed His mind* (3:10). Jonah was then tested by severe heat in the desert, till he begged the Lord to take his life (4:3). As in Job, the moral of the story was the sovereignty of God.

MICAH (around 720 BC)

Again, this prophet predicted the destruction of Israel and Judah (1:5) and their exile (1:16), nearly two hundred years before the event. He had a go at the false prophets in Jerusalem (3:5-12). And he had a vision of end-time restoration (4:1-8). Chapter 5:2-5 appears to refer to the coming Messiah.

God's heart was revealed in chapter 6:

"He has shown you, o man, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you: - to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8)

And it finished with an acknowledgement of God's greatness and forgiveness (7:18-20).

NAHUM (around 615 BC)

Nahum lived in the city of Nineveh and prophesied its overthrow and complete ruination. I can only assume that its occupants went on a major back-slide, after it was spared in the time of Jonah.

HABAKKUK (around 620 BC)

The Chaldeans were the people of Assyria who were raised up for a time to punish God's people for their unfaithfulness (1:6), by taking them into the Babylonian exile. Habakkuk again stressed the uselessness of idol worship (2:18-20). The *fig tree* was a symbol of the nation Israel (Matthew 24:32), and Habakkuk finished by giving glory to the Lord, even though that fig tree did not blossom (3:17).

ZEPHANIAH (around 630 BC)

This guy was around at the time of the good king Josiah. He prophesied the day of wrath (exile) on Judah. He shed more light on the reason the exile could not be averted (chapter 1), even though Israel finally had a king who did right in God's eyes (2 Kings 22:2, 23:26). He concluded with a prophecy for end-times, proclaiming restoration, victory and joy (3:14-20).

HAGGAI (around 520 BC)

Haggai addressed the nation during the reign of Darius. The returned exiles in Jerusalem were having trouble getting their priorities right, trying to decide whether to spend their efforts and resources building their *own* dwellings, or building God's house (1:4). They got it right eventually (1:14). Haggai then had a go at their unclean offerings (2:14).

To me, this is a picture of modern-day churches being more concerned about improving their own prosperity, than about rebuilding the new spiritual Temple, made up of all born-again Christians all over the globe.

ZECHARIAH (around 520 BC)

Zechariah had a vision of the angel of the Lord conversing with God and God promising mercy to Zion. In another vision, he saw a man with a measuring line setting out the boundaries of Jerusalem *without walls* (2:4). The walls were eventually reconstructed, so it is likely this vision related to the end-time reconstruction of the Temple, not the rebuilding in progress at the time. It may even refer to the spiritual New Covenant Temple constructed out of people's hearts, not stone. This view is reinforced by verse 2:11, saying that **“many nations will join themselves to the Lord that day and become His people”**.

Chapter 3 reveals a vision of Joshua, the high priest, with Satan accusing him. The angel of the Lord admonished Joshua for his dirty clothes and promised the coming of “My Servant, the Branch”, which probably referred to the Messiah. In chapter 4, Zerubbabel was nominated as the one to finish building the Temple (4:9), and in chapter 5 a man called ‘Branch’ (6:12-13). Again, it seems likely the latter related to the end-time reconstruction.

Verses 9:9-10, relate to the Messiah, coming into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and verses 9:11-17 appear to skip forward to end-times. In chapter 10, verses 6-10 seem to refer to a scattering and gathering of Hebrews from ‘far countries’, probably at the end of time, rather than at the return from Babylon.

In chapter 11 we see a picture of ‘thirty pieces of silver’ paid to Zechariah because his prophecies were from God. It was the price of a slave set in Exodus 21:32, and it was the price exacted by Judas for betraying Jesus (Matthew 26:15). The remaining chapters 12-14 seem to deal exclusively with end-times:

“And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be -"The Lord is one," and His name one.” (14:9)

MALACHI (around 420 BC)

God declared, “I have loved Jacob (Israel); but I have hated Esau” (1:2-3). All, but the last chapter, are devoted to berating a *corrupt priesthood*.

Chapter 4 predicts the return of Elijah the prophet (4:5). Jesus declared John the Baptist to be Elijah (Matthew 11:14), yet John himself denied it (John 1:21). Christian doctrine does not embrace the concept of reincarnation, based mostly on the scripture: **“It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”** (Hebrews 9:27). Of course Elijah was different from the average man, in that he never experienced physical death, but was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11).

THE NEW TESTAMENT (1 -70 AD)

After Malachi, there is a *four-hundred year gap of silence*, when nothing is recorded of God's dealings with His people. It may well have been the period of “famine of the word” described in Amos 8:11-13. History tells us the Chosen People were constantly under oppression. When Jesus came on the scene, they were subject to Roman rule. The religious leaders (Pharisees) were in cahoots with their Roman conquerors and the common people cried out for the Messiah, who, centuries earlier, prophets had promised would come,. They were all familiar with the prophecies, and naturally were looking for a Deliverer to set them free from these cruel and uncompromising invaders of the Holy Land. Interestingly, in the Old Testament, the word ‘Messiah’ is rarely used in connection with the expected Redeemer. The Hebrew word is ‘Masiah’, meaning ‘the anointed one’. It is used 37 times in connection with anointed kings and priests; only twice (in Daniel) in prophecies relating to Jesus.

There were many contenders for the title of Messiah, but only One had any rightful claim, Jesus, God's own Son, Jesus, God Himself in human flesh. He came to reveal what I have been looking for throughout my search for Truth in the Old Testament – the kind of sacrificial love that made me decide to give my life and heart to Him in the first place, decades ago. In the New Testament, we see a *new* revelation of the heart of God. It doesn't do away any aspect of what we've learned about Him so far, but it discloses what God was after all along.

Yet, I can't help but wonder whether during the four-hundred years since Malachi something *inconceivable* happened in the spiritual realm; something that changed God's attitude towards us. We must remember that God has always been omnipresent, omniscient, and everlasting. *He has known the outcome* of His project of dealing with mankind from the beginning. Time is only a created medium to accommodate human existence, so to talk in terms of God changing His attitude is really intellectual nonsense. But what I'm talking about falls into the same incomprehensible category as: - God (who already knows the future) *changing His mind*; and, God *becoming human flesh* in order to save us.

To help me in some small way to tune into what's going on, I wonder, whilst He always loved us, whether sometime during the four hundred years since Malachi, *He fell IN love with us!*

THE GOSPELS

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are accounts of the stunning arrival and crucifixion of Jesus. Each writer has his own particular perspective on the events that took place. They have had more impact on the world we live in today than anything else that has ever taken place in the history of the world. No one, no conqueror, no emperor, no philosopher, no terrorist, no genius, no philanthropist, no author, has ever managed to positively influence, and deeply change, the lives of as many people as Jesus did.

MATTHEW

Matthew was one of Jesus' disciples, originally a tax collector for the Romans, and eyewitness to what happened.

Matthew started by tracing the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17) back to king David through His *male* ancestors,. He gave a stirring account of the virgin birth in Bethlehem, the guiding star in the heavens chased by Magi from the East (2:2), followed by the rage of Herod the Great, king of Judea, and his order to murder all Jewish babies under two years old (2:16). Mary and Joseph took their new-born to Egypt to escape his wrath, returning only after Herod died (2:21), to take up residence in Nazareth in Galilee.

John the Baptist was the 'voice crying in the wilderness' predicted by Isaiah (Is. 40:3), announcing the arrival of the Messiah (3:3). He humbly baptized the adult Jesus in the Jordan river, when the heavens opened and God declared, "**This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased**". And the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove (3:16-17). Jesus immediately went into the desert for forty days of fasting and temptation (4:1-2), to prepare Him for His three year ministry.

Jesus gathered disciples and started preaching. Multitudes followed Him. Chapter 5, 6 and 7 relate His Sermon on the Mount, teaching a revolutionary philosophy never heard before:

"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (5:44)

He healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, calmed the raging sea, taught parables and "the Lord's Prayer" (6:9-13), preached forgiveness, argued with religious leaders, mixed with sinners but spurned hypocrites, and walked all over the Holy Land to deliver the message of Salvation. He told us not to seek material wealth, but rather the spiritual riches (6:19-21) that come from caring for others. '**Judge not, lest you be judged**', He stressed (7:1). He saw Himself as a *bridegroom* (9:15). When the

imprisoned John the Baptist was plagued by doubt, Jesus declared John to be the spirit of Elijah (11:14) and quoted Isaiah to him:

"The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (11:5, Isaiah 35:5-6)

Twice Jesus fed thousands of people with just a few loaves and fishes (14:19-20, 15:34-38) and He walked on water to illustrate how much faith we ought to have in God (14:25-32). He told us that it isn't what goes *into* a man that defiles him, but what comes *out* of his heart (15:11-20). He told us there was a *price* to be paid for the right to follow Him:

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (16:24-26)

It is fascinating to realize He must already have known He was to be crucified, and that He expected the same level of devotion from His followers. He revealed the *essence* of the New Covenant (Heb. 8:8-12) at this early stage:

"But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (23:8-12)

He introduced His disciples to the covenant that was to replace the Old Covenant as a result of His death:

"For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."(26:28)

In the end, He agonized over His coming crucifixion at the Mount of Olives (26:38), but chose to submit to the Father's will (26:39). He was betrayed by one of His own (26:48), and deserted by those closest to Him (26:56). He was humiliated, tortured and hung on a cross to die. The moment He died, the veil of the Temple was torn in two (27:51), symbolising new access to God that would no longer require an intercessor priest. And then He rose again (28:6) three days later, to seal the promise of eternal life for all those whose heart is for Him! He left final instructions for us to share His message with the rest of the world (28:19-20), so that as many as possible could partake of so wonderful a salvation.

MARK

Mark was also known as John Mark (or Marcus) (Acts 12:25, Acts 15:37), like Paul, having both Jewish and Roman citizenship. He is believed to be the founder of the church in Alexandria. He could well have been an eyewitness, and was possibly one of the seventy sent out by Jesus on a practice evangelizing mission (Luke 10:1). There are theories that he wrote this gospel under the direction of Peter, who would have then authorized it.

Mark started his gospel with John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, the dove, the voice from Heaven, the forty days in the desert, however with much less detail than Matthew. And like him, he related Jesus comparing Himself to a bridegroom (2:19-20). He illustrated the principle of faith, through the woman who touched Jesus' garment (5:30-34).

Again, Jesus performed many miracles and denounced hypocrisy. He declared the deceitfulness of riches (4:19). He confirmed He truly *is* the promised Messiah (Christ) but told His disciples not to tell anyone at that stage (8:27-30). He explained the humble attitude we ought to have:

"Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (10:43-45)

Then He rode into Jerusalem on the back of a borrowed donkey, as predicted by Zeccheriah, to the cries of 'Hosanna' ("Save us now, we beg you") from the multitude (11:9), fully aware of the horrors awaiting Him. He showed real anger at the disrespectfulness of the moneychangers in the Temple and physically threw them out and overturned their tables (11:15-17). He stressed that if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us (11:26). When asked, "what is the greatest commandment?", he quoted Moses:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." (12:30)

He warned of the dire circumstances of end-times (13:5-37). He celebrated Passover with His disciples and revealed He already knew who (Judas) would betray Him (14:18). Peter, the 'rock' on which Jesus would build His Church (Matthew 16:18), denied Him three times after He had been arrested (14:30, 72). All of his followers deserted Him (14:50). He was crucified and confirmed dead by a Roman Centurion. He rose on the third day, and ascended into heaven in full view of His disciples, leaving instructions to spread the Gospel and assigning miraculous powers to His followers (16:15-19).

LUKE

Luke was a physician, a highly intelligent researcher, the companion of Paul. He may have been a gentile convert and was *not* an eyewitness (1:1-4). He is also the author of Acts, the history of the early church.

He provided many more details on the conception and birth of both Jesus and John the Baptist (chapter 1) and the only details of Jesus growing up. He traced the genealogy of Christ through the *female* line all the way back to Adam (3:23-38), husband of Eve, whose offspring would bruise Satan's head (Genesis 3:14-15). But as was the custom, he quoted their *husbands'* names, making it *seem* like an error.

He briefly touched on Jesus' baptism, and the imprisonment of John the Baptist by a new Herod (the Tetrarch) (3:16-22). He detailed Christ's forty days in the desert, tempted by Satan to abort His mission (4:1-13), then told of Jesus entering the synagogue in Nazareth, declaring Himself to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah (Is. 61:1-2), thereby enraging the listeners (4:16-30).

Everywhere Jesus went, He amazed everyone with His teaching and made enemies of religious hypocrites offended by the Truth. He gained enormous public support by performing many miracles of healing and deliverance, making it very difficult for any of His opponents to discredit Him. Luke included a shortened version of the Sermon on the Mount, which amply illustrated the *radical* teachings of Jesus:

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed, your reward is great in heaven, because their fathers treated the prophets in like manner. "

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets. But I say to you who hear: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and

pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise.

"But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.

"He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you." (6:20-38)

Luke recorded the parable of the good Samaritan (10:30-37), the importance of repentance (13:2-5), and the parable of the prodigal son (15:11-32). Jesus told us that no man can serve two masters – serving God and serving money are *mutually exclusive* (16:13). And He foreshadowed the final judgment and His own second coming at that time (17:22-36, 21:8-28) and used the symbol of Israel, the fig tree, as a sign of the times (21:29-31). And He made explicit the futility of chasing wealth (18:22-30).

He *knew* He would be in the grave three days (11:30, see also Matthew 12:40) and fully understood the significance of the symbols of the Passover, using them to introduce the *New Covenant* in His blood:

"This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you." (22:20)

There is another account of the crucifixion, desertion by His disciples and miraculous resurrection, and He explained that everything the disciples had witnessed had been to *fulfill the Old Testament prophecies*:

"These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." (24:44-47)

JOHN

This was also one of Jesus' disciples, the brother of James (Mark 3:17), a fisherman. He was also the author of three letters and the final book of the Bible – Revelation. John diverted from the mere narrative style of the previous three accounts and focused more on the *spiritual* aspects of what had happened, the mystery, life, heart and soul of so great a salvation.

He started off by explaining Jesus was there, right at the beginning of Creation, part of the creative force:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it." (1:1-5)

He showed salvation was for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike (see also Romans 1:1 and Colossians 3:11):

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (1:12-14)

Jesus explained that to become God's children and see the Kingdom, they needed to be *born again* in a spiritual sense:

"Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' " (3:3-8).

And He followed up with that wonderful declaration of God's love:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (3:16)

And then there is this magnificent prophecy, one that virtually nobody alive at that time could grasp:

"Jesus said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' " (2:19)

He meant that during the three days of His death He would turn His followers into the Temple of the Holy Spirit, *abolishing* the need for buildings to worship in and intercessor priests to commune with Him.

At a well, Jesus met a Samaritan woman and asked her for a drink. He then told her He could give her water that would quench her thirst forever (4:6-15). And He then revealed He was the Messiah (4:25-26).

Throughout this gospel, Jesus talked about the intimacy between Him and the Father, and His complete submission to the Father's will (e.g. 5:19, also Luke 22:42). He revealed Himself as the 'bread of life' (6:32-58). He rescued the adulterous woman from stoning, by offering the first stone-throw to any man free from sin (8:3-11). When the Pharisees tried to make Him out to be demon-possessed, He made what they considered *the* most outrageous declaration possible: **"before Abraham was, I AM!"**(8:58). They all knew the scriptures, and this was equivalent to saying "I am God" (Exodus 3:14).

Jesus demonstrated the humility we should all display, by washing the feet of His disciples (13:5-12). And He gave us a New Commandment, which was to be another corner stone of Christianity:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." (13:34-35). "Greater love has no one than this, than he lay down his life for his friends." (15:13)

He was, and still is, the Way, the Truth and the Life (14:6). No one comes to the Father, except through Him. He is now our High Priest and no mere mortal can take His place (Hebrews 4:14). *If He hadn't ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit could not have come* to teach us all Truth, convict us of our sins, and glorify Him (16:7-14). Then comes that *magnificent* chapter 17, where Jesus prayed to Father to make us all One with Him, just as He and the Father are One, so that the world might believe (17:20-21). Surely, if anyone's prayers should be answered, the ones prayed by Jesus ought to be!

I always wondered why the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:40), **three** days in the grave, had not been literally fulfilled, and the answer is right here – it has! Traditionally Jesus was crucified on a Friday, died at three in the afternoon, and rose again on Sunday morning before sun-up, a day and three quarters at most in the grave. In the Jewish week, Saturday is the day of rest (Sabbath). Sunday is the first day of the week. To complicate our thinking, the days run from 6 pm till 6 pm. But this was the Passover festival, a seven day celebration of the Exodus. Both the first and the last day of this festival are Sabbaths or ‘high days’, and are **in addition** to the normal Sabbath. Jesus was crucified on the **preparation day** to the Passover Sabbath, a **high day** (19:31), so He most likely died on Wednesday 3 pm, was buried that night, was in the grave three full days, to rise before sun-up on the Sunday, the first day of the week (20:1).

Following His resurrection, Jesus commissioned Peter, who had denied Him three times before His crucifixion (18:15-27), to tend His sheep (21:15-17)

ACTS

This is the record of the early church, written by Luke. Cowardly disciples, who had run away like scared rabbits when Jesus was arrested, suddenly and magically turned into bold evangelists, preaching the Gospel without fear or favour (4:20). This is probably **the** most convincing evidence that the resurrection was genuine – **no man gains such courage from something he knows to be a fraud.**

On the day of Pentecost something amazing happened - the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled (2:1-4). They all began to speak in other tongues. The listeners were bewildered, as everyone heard them in their own language (2:6-12). *(From the straightforward reading of this passage, this seems to have been a totally different manifestation to the tongues we hear today, which nobody understands and which Paul warned should **not** be used in the presence of strangers (1 Corinthians 14:23).)*

What stands out for me, from chapter 2 through to 15, is that the first evangelistic messages focused totally on the **fulfillment of the prophecies in the Old Testament.** The apostles quoted Joel, David, Moses, Isaiah, Habakkuk, Amos, Jeremiah and Daniel. This is what it was all about: - God’s promises had been delivered smack-bang into their laps.

The early church grew very fast, gaining three thousand converts the first day (2:41), and they commenced communal living, selling everything they had and sharing the proceeds (2:45). The power of the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles to perform miracles of healing. Peter told the lame man, “Silver and gold I have not, but what I do have, I give to you: Stand up and walk!” (3:6-7). They encountered huge opposition from the religious factions (e.g. 5:18, 7:54) and Stephen became the very first martyr for the faith (7:59-60).

This book delivers the testimony of Saul, better known by the much more familiar name ‘Paul’ (13:9), a fervent **persecutor** of the early church (8:1, 9:1), being confronted by a spiritual manifestation of Jesus on the road to Damascus and being struck blind for three days (9:3-18), to be converted into probably **the** most ardent apostle of all (9:22, 19:11). He is the author of most of the following epistles, from Romans through to Hebrews. He was conspired against by the Jews (23:12-14), stoned (14:19) jailed (25:4) and shipwrecked on the way to the courts in Rome, to be tried for being a Christian (27:41). Paul was opinionated, highly educated and extremely passionate for Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, his **humanity** shows through. For example, his intense disagreement with Barnabas (15:39) and his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7) He was sometimes bitterly disappointed in the treatment he received from his fellow Christians, and once he was **so** harshly critical of a sinful Corinthian (1 Cor. 5) that he spent an entire chapter in his next letter apologizing and trying to justify himself (2 Cor. 2.) Some of the statements he made don’t go down real easy in today’s emancipated society, especially what he had to say about women. Yet his writings are the source of most of the Christian doctrine we practice today, and if we discount the bits we don’t like, most of our faith system is brought into disrepute.

A guy called Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a God-fearing man but not a Jew, had a vision of an angel telling him to fetch the apostle Peter from a place called Joppa (10:1-8). Meanwhile Peter had a vision of 'unclean' animals being lowered from the sky, and being told to eat them (10:9-16). The upshot of the whole thing was to show the Jewish Christians that Gentiles are also included in God's plan of salvation (10:28,43,45, 11:17).

"I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth." (13:47, also Isaiah 49:6)

ROMANS

In the first chapter, Paul homed in on the utter depravity of sin. He made it clear that all sin is totally abhorrent to God and makes us worthy of the death penalty (1:32). But then it becomes clear that this point was made to convict *all of us* of our sinfulness (3:23), explaining that *we incur our own condemnation by judging others*, because chances are *we* are guilty of the very same things (2:1).

Paul recognized very early in the piece he had been called to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles (11:13, 15:16, also Acts 22:21, Galatians 2:9). Here he was addressing Roman gentiles. He discussed the *ritual* of circumcision (chapters 2, 3 and 4), and the fact that the type of circumcision that *really* counts is one of the *heart* (2:28-29), which equates to *faith* in God (3:29-30, 4:10). The application of this faith results in the administration of God's *grace*:

"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (5:1-2)

The only reason we can now live a life acceptable to God is that we are no longer under the Law, but under Grace (6:14).

Paul was highly intelligent, and loved in-depth legal arguments, addressing questions we have all struggled with, but were afraid to ask. Romans essentially asserts the fact that the Gospel is for all the world, not just the Jews (9:6-8, see also Ephesians 3:6). The *reason* given to justify bringing Gentiles into the Kingdom was Israel's unfaithfulness and to make them jealous (11:11), but that is probably bringing too much worldly thinking into matters which are deeply spiritual. The truth is our names were already written into the Book of Life *before* Creation started (Revelations 17:8). And we are all members of one another in Christ (12:5).

1 CORINTHIANS

We should, when reading the epistles, remember at all times the physical circumstances of the early churches. Evangelists would travel around the Middle East bringing the Good News of the Gospel. They would stay a short time, give the adult converts a crash course in the tenets of the crucifixion, resurrection and salvation by Grace, and then move on, leaving them to their own resources, with no Bible, no Bible colleges, no pastors or buildings or reference material. Their only guiding resource was the Holy Spirit and an occasional letter from the apostles. And they were all still mere human beings, with their own agendas to fulfill.

The church at Corinth was no different. They struggled with the foundations of their new-found faith. They struggled with their own human weaknesses. Paul got wind of their troubles and wrote this letter to set them straight (3:1-3). Don't create divisions within the Body of Christ, he told them (1:11-12). You are not followers of a particular preacher, only of Jesus (3:4-11).

He told them he had already judged a particular man in their midst guilty of incest (5:3) and delivered him over to Satan (5:5). He told them one day *they* would judge the world (6:2) and their body was the

Temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19), implying harsh treatment of the sinner was not only justified, but essential. He was to regret these statements later (2 Corinthians 2). I can't help thinking that even Paul had not fully grasped the principle of not judging others that he himself was promoting.

Paul recommended singleness, like himself, over marriage (7:7). Marriage, in his view, hindered your ability to serve the Lord, as the wife or husband would make too many demands on your time (7:33-34). But marriage was a better option than 'burning' with sexual desire (7:9). He was adamant that there is a *headship* principle at work within marriage, placing the husband over the wife, just as Christ is the head of Man and God is the head of Christ (11:3).

Here, Paul introduced the proper way to share Holy Communion (11:23-29), showing accurate "*discerning of the body*" of Christ to be the factor that made one *worthy* to partake. The Corinthians had been using these occasions as an opportunity to gorge themselves (11:20-22). And he used it to get them to see themselves as members of one body, all contributing harmoniously to its operation, in accordance with their gifts (12:1-31). Rejection of anyone Jesus had accepted was equivalent to not discerning the body correctly.

And then came that magnificent exposition on the true nature of love, a favourite at weddings:

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." (13:4-8)

They had on-going problems with lack of understanding of the Resurrection, use of the gift of tongues, and when the end would come. Here we find that wonderful description of the "Rapture", (although that word is never used in the Bible), that has inspired many a novel, movie and doctrine:

"Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." (15:51-52)

2 CORINTHIANS

Life as an apostle wasn't easy. Paul talked of afflictions that made him and his companions despair even of life (1:8). Then he found himself apologising profusely for condemning the guy who had slept with his father's (new?) wife (1 Corinthians 5), (2:1-11 and again 7:1-12).

God didn't spare Christians persecution, or poverty, or hardship, flogging, imprisonment, ill health (11:23-28), or even martyrdom. God knew these things were character-building. They tested your level of commitment and the strength of your faith. We don't grow when everything goes smoothly. And nothing has changed in that respect. *Gone forever* is the Old Testament thinking pattern, that when things go badly, we must have done something wrong; that God must be punishing us for some dreadful sin. (Or alternatively, that God is blessing us for doing good.) He makes the rain fall on both the good *and* the evil (Matthew 5:45). And the 18 people who died when the tower in Siloam collapsed were no worse sinners than anyone else (Luke 13:4-5). The "Job principle" (*my* inverted commas!) is firmly in place – God is sovereign, calling for the perseverance to endure until the end (James 5:11).

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

God hasn't promised us an easy journey, only a safe arrival. And even on safe arrival, our actions while here on earth will still be judged (5:10).

Paul explained that the Gospel entailed a new kind of freedom, free from Old Covenant Law:

"Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." (3:17)

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to do charitable works (8:7). He *said* he was confident in their level of demonstrative love (8:24-9:2), and boasted about it to the Macedonians. But I hate to say this, it almost smacks of manipulation when the 'brethren' had to be sent ahead to make sure they really *were* ready for visitors (9:5). And I detect a measure of *sarcasm* in the last few chapters, again demonstrating the humanity of all of God's children, including the ones we look up to and revere.

GALATIANS

Like the Corinthians, the Galatians were Gentiles, located in central Turkey. Obviously they had Jewish Christians living amongst them. Many of these were still very much influenced by their Jewish heritage and they tried to impose ritual restrictions on the new churches, claiming you couldn't be a Christian unless you were circumcised. Even Peter and Barnabas, whose ministry was specifically to Jews (2:9), were apparently afraid of the strong Jewish pressure group and caved in to it (2:12-13). Paul opposed Peter to his face (2:11, 2:14) over the issue.

Paul preached New Covenant *liberty* (5:13, also James 1:25 and 2:12) and strongly opposed the tendency of the religious traditionalists to try to put people back under the Old Covenant Law.

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." (5:1)

He cursed anyone who would try to preach a different gospel (1:6-9) to the one Jesus died for. We see the same thing happening in many of the modern churches of today, with pastors teaching Old Covenant tithing (with themselves as the beneficiaries), in place of spontaneous giving to those in need; with pastors compromising the literal Word of God to please the pressure groups around them; with pastors preaching a different gospel to the one Jesus brought, in order to gain popularity with their audiences.

Essentially, Paul's letter aimed to correct false teaching going around, negating the concepts of salvation through *grace* (1:6) and righteousness through *faith* (3:6-8). If you submit to one part of the Law, he said, you become obligated to keep the lot (5:3) and you will find yourself severed from Christ and fallen from grace (5:4). No one can possibly be justified by the Law (3:10-13), but instead will be *cursed* by it.

We are then treated to that wonderful exposition on what walking in the freedom of the Spirit is like:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." (5:22-25)

EPHESIANS

Paul wrote to the Christians at Ephesus from prison. In this letter he addressed many of the truly *mysterious* aspects of the Gospel, like *Predestination* (Ch.1) - God exists *outside* of time, existing simultaneously at the beginning and the end, so while we have the free will to choose Him, He already knows what we are going to decide. The *Armor of God* (Ch.6), explaining how to protect ourselves from the arrows (accusations and temptations) of Satan. *Salvation by Grace* (Ch.2) - Grace is defined as 'unmerited favor', meaning there is *no way* we can possibly *earn* our salvation:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." (2:8-9)

For me, what truly stands out here is that, in the spiritual realm, the Bride of Christ is *one* body and we are all members of one another (Chapters 3 and 4). That united body should walk together in *love* (5:1-2):

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." (4:4-6)

Then comes that *greatest mystery* and most explicit revelation of the eternal purpose (3:11), described anywhere in the Bible, likening the headship of man in marriage, to the headship of Christ over His bride:

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church." (5:22-32)

This passage tends to be rather unpopular in today's society, for obvious reasons. Few wives accept a man's headship in this new-age culture. But when I read it, the heaviest burden is placed on the man *by far*, requiring him to love his wife as Christ loved His bride, the Church, and *gave Himself up* for her.

PHILIPPIANS

This was a letter of great encouragement and a thank you to the Christians in Philippi, while Paul was still in prison. Paul personally planted this church and regarded its members as his own children. He described Jesus as the ultimate ruler of the universe:

"Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (2:9-11)

COLOSSIANS

The church at Colossae was founded by Epaphras. Paul had never met them and was writing from prison. Nevertheless, it is a very positive letter of encouragement. We would be hard-pressed to sum up the meaning of the universe more succinctly than this, (talking about Jesus):

"For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence." (1:16-18)

1 THESSALONIANS

This letter was written early in Paul's ministry. Christianity in its infancy encountered its strongest opposition from the Jewish establishment, who were intent on keeping Jews bound under the Law and keeping Gentiles out (1:14-16). Paul encouraged them by getting them to focus on the expected return of Jesus:

"For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words." (4:17-18)

2 THESSALONIANS

A letter prompted by the reaction of the church to the preceding letter. Apparently they encouraged each other a little *too* much, and had started to convince themselves the Lord had already returned:

"Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had (already) come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition" (2:1-3)

1 TIMOTHY

Timothy was one of Paul's own converts and the apostle regarded him virtually as his own son. So this letter was probably never meant for general distribution, and Paul was even more outspoken than usual. Timothy was also a church planter and was overseeing growth at Ephesus at the time of writing. Paul advised him what type of people were suitable for leadership positions (3:1-15), and how women ought to behave generally (2:9-15 and 5:3-16). He warned Timothy to beware of deceitful spirits (4:1 and 6:3-11) and not to neglect the spiritual gift he received through the laying on of hands (4:14). This letter is the source of that most well-known scripture:

"For the love of money is a root of all evil." (6:10)

2 TIMOTHY

These were further instructions to Timothy. It is a pity we don't have access to the communications that must have led to the writing of this one. Timothy, it seems, was feeling severely discouraged with progress in Ephesus, and Paul was trying to boost his confidence:

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." (1:7)

Again Paul stressed that no amount of good works can earn us a place in heaven. It is only His mercy and grace that allows us in:

"God, who has saved us and called *us* with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began" (1:9)

In chapter 3, he predicted people's behaviour in end-times, strongly reminiscent of the mindset of many people in the twenty-first century, even rubbing off on Christians, to the effect that the main gospel preached today seems to have changed its focus, from Jesus, to ourselves:

"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will heap up for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." (3:1-5 and 4:3-4)

TITUS

This letter to Titus at Crete addresses many of the same issues as Timothy encountered at Ephesus.

PHILEMON

Onesimus was a slave belonging to Philemon. He had escaped and made off with some of Philemon's belongings, only to encounter Paul and giving his life to the Lord. To make things right, Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter of commendation. Again, I find Paul to be rather manipulative, putting the pressure on Philemon by saying, "You owe me!" (v.19).

HEBREWS

This letter is generally ascribed to Paul, however it does not start with Paul's usual elaborate greeting, so authorship is not definite. It was written by someone who had in-depth knowledge of the Jewish scriptures. Paul was just that, a Pharisee (Philippians 3:5), someone who had felt, intellectually, totally justified in *persecuting* Christians, until his own conversion. The writer's reference to 'our brother Timothy' (13:23) at the end, to me, makes it almost certainly the work of Paul.

Christ was a "**stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles**" (1 Corinthians 1:23). To the Gentiles, the whole idea of a god dying a human death to save mankind was utterly ridiculous. To the Jews, Jesus just didn't fit their image of the expected Messiah, Redeemer and Deliverer. For two thousand years it had been drummed into them that they *must* keep the Law of Moses. Now, suddenly, they were expected to ditch the Law and enter into Liberty, on the basis of some frivolous claims that the Law was actually a *curse* (Galatians 3:10-13). I can appreciate how hard that must have been for them. This letter specifically addressed their issues, frequently quoting the Messianic prophecies and explaining how they apply to Jesus.

The first three chapters were devoted to validating Jesus as *the* Christ: "**How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?**" (2:3). The writer dealt with the *spiritual* meaning of the Sabbath rest, going right back to the Exodus, when observance of the Sabbath was first instituted (3:14 - 4:11). He established Jesus as our High Priest, according to the order of Melchizedek (5:10). Melchizedek was a priest who was given tithes by Abraham and was a Christ '*type*' (7:2-3), which ranked him *above* any of Abraham's descendants, including the Levitical priesthood. And Jesus, being our permanent High Priest (7:24), no longer needs to make regular sacrifices for the remission of sins (9:7), as He made one *final* sacrifice by dying in our place (7:24-28).

The Law was a mere *shadow* of heavenly things (8:5 and 10:1) and he used that principle to introduce the New Covenant, (the essence of Liberty), prophesied by Jeremiah 31:

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." In that He says, 'A new covenant', He has made the first obsolete."
(8:10-13)

The New Covenant did away with priests (9:6-10), regular blood (animal) sacrifices (9:12) and tabernacles (temples) made by hands (9:11). It established Jesus as the **'Mediator of the New Covenant'** (9:15).

The concept and importance of *Faith* was explored in chapters 11 to 12, citing numerous characters from the Old Testament, from Abel, to Noah, to Abraham, to David, to prophets and martyrs, none of whom ever saw the fulfillment of the promises they believed:

"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (11:1) "Without faith it is impossible to please Him." (11:6). And, "All these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise," (11:39)

Once we *receive* what we have believed God to provide, faith is no longer needed and somehow, something diminishes in the spiritual realm that was a real source of pleasure to God. As Jesus Himself told the doubting Thomas:

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)

Even our faith, the fact that we believe in Him, is a gift from God:

"... looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (12:2)

JAMES

This letter was specifically addressed to "the twelve tribes dispersed abroad". That surely must mean it was speaking to Hebrews of both houses, and that James was aware of their *location*. It could have been written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, in which case it was probably meant for remnants of the Babylonian exile. Or after, in which case it may have been intended for a possible Roman dispersal of Israelites.

James dealt with that puzzling relationship between grace, faith and works, a real stumbling block to those brought up with the importance of keeping the Law of Moses. (You would almost say it was bred into their genetic make-up.) Whilst our salvation was earned by Jesus on the cross and applied through God's *grace*, in the end, if our new faith doesn't result in good works, it is meaningless. He expounds what he calls the "*law* of liberty", confirming what Paul had already proclaimed (Gal. 5:1, 2Cor. 3:17):

"But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." (1:25)

But James put another slant on it, demolishing those Antinomian or Nicolaitan doctrines that misused the new-found freedom, to justify doing, or not doing, whatever struck your fancy:

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all."(2:10)...

"So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. What does it

profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (2:12-17)

He also warned them of the unbelievable damage that can be incurred by an unbridled tongue:

"And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. (3:6) ... Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. These things ought not to be so." (3:10)

There must have been feedback that all was not well overseas - quarrels (4:1) attributed to human nature, clearly showing the "prosperity doctrine", pushed by so many of today's churches, is *way* out of line:

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your (own) pleasures." (4:3 NASB)

1 PETER

Finally here was a word from the nominated 'rock' on which Jesus would build His Church (Matthew 16:18). (Actually, to be more accurate, it was the *confession*, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" (Matthew 16:16), that was to be the rock, and Simon was renamed Peter because he was the first to confess it.) Peter wrote to 'aliens' in various places, most likely Hebrews, as that was his specialty (Galatians 2:7). Like James, he was seemingly *aware* of the location of dispersed Hebrew Christians.

He explained that the expected outcome of the new Christian faith walk was the *salvation of their souls* from their perspective (1:9), and *holiness* from God's perspective (1:15). This was made possible through their redemption in Christ's blood (1:19), resulting in being *born again* of imperishable seed (1:23). The next step in their journey was to be built up as a '**spiritual house and holy priesthood**', a picture of what was required under the Law, yet in a new freedom, which was not to be abused (2:16).

He stressed the importance of all Christians having sufficient understanding of the true Gospel message, thereby being able to give a *defence* for their beliefs to anyone who asks (3:15). And for the first time, there was a hint given as to how God will deal with those who died *before* salvation in Christ's blood became available, suggesting the Gospel has been preached by Jesus Himself, even to those who are dead or in a spiritual prison (3:19, 4:6)

2 PETER

This was a type of *circular*, not addressed to a specific recipient, warning of false prophets and false teachers (2:1, 3:3, 3:16) and encouraging the readers to stick with what they had originally been taught (chapter 1). He explains why the return of Jesus may sometimes *seem* slow in coming:

"With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (3:8-9)

1 JOHN

Written by the apostle, again this was a *circular*. The early church was besieged by people (antichrists) trying to distort the Gospel message (2:18), so as to advantage themselves in whatever personal agenda they were trying to push. The same thing has happened throughout history, and is *still happening today*.

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God" (4:1)

John pointed out that we are all sinners (1:8), how our sins may be forgiven by Jesus making representations on our behalf to the Father (2:1), what our behaviour *ought* to be like when the Holy Spirit is the author of our actions (2:6, 3:9), and how to discern between these two states of being (3:16). He underlined what Jesus Himself suggested (Matthew 23:8), and what the New Covenant stood for (Hebrews 8:11), that we have *no need for anyone to teach us*, as the Holy Spirit's anointing will teach us all we need to know (2:27). All we have to do is *seek* with a heart hungry for the truth (Matthew 7:7).

Obviously this doesn't mean there is no place for teachers. If it did, I wouldn't be writing this essay. Paul told us there was such a thing as a *ministry* of teaching (1 Corinthians 12:28). But Jesus made it clear we are all *equal* brothers (Matthew 23:8), supported by Paul erasing all distinctions in the body of Christ (Galatians 3:28). I believe it means we all have a responsibility to seek revelation of truth from Jesus Himself, and put our teachers straight when they go off the rails. I believe *every* Christian has a gift from God, to be shared *freely* in order to build up His bride-to-be.

2 JOHN

This letter is unusual in that it is the only one addressed to an (un-named, 'chosen') female. There are more warnings against deceivers (v.7), and expressions of hope to see her soon (v.12).

3 JOHN

Addressed to Gaius, with whose Christian development John is well-pleased (v.3-4), basically saying he expects to see him soon (v.14).

JUDE

Very likely, Jude was a brother of Jesus, as was James. This letter was not intended for anyone in particular, but warns the entire Christian movement to beware of seducers and scoffers (v. 4, 16, 18).

REVELATION

John, the author of the Gospel by that name, was imprisoned on the island of Patmos when he had this vision, which has been the source of more debate, disagreement, interpretation and speculation than any other book of the Bible. It is a magnificent vision, explicitly revealing the eternal purpose – a bride for Jesus for eternity. It is filled with imagery and figurative language, making it difficult to be certain where the allegory stops and reality starts.

John saw Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, returning with the clouds on the 'Lord's Day' (1:10), with every eye able to see Him (1:7). First Jesus told him to address seven different churches, named after churches in existence at that time, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Many schools of thought believe these to be *not only* the straightforward meaning, but representative of church-phases over the course of history, or church *types* in action during end-times.

The vision then discloses in vividly metaphorical pictures what challenges the end-times will bring and what the eternal purpose has been all about.

There were seven seals on a book which only Jesus, the Lamb, could break (5:1-5). The sixth seal identified a total of 144,000 men, 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel, sealed as God's bond-servants and first-fruits (7:4, 14:4), followed by an innumerable multitude, dressed in white robes and seen in heaven (7:9) who have come out of "the great tribulation" (7:14).

The seventh seal opened the way for the sounding of seven trumpets (8:6), which made way for three "woes" (9:12) representing various calamities to be poured out upon the earth. The *seventh* trumpet ushered in the Kingdom of Christ (11:15), and appears to have very strong links to the *trumpet of God* in

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, describing the “Rapture” of all Christians when Jesus returns in the clouds, and the “*last trumpet*” of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, describing the same event.

The ‘seventh week’ of the prophecy by Daniel is believed to commence around this time (Daniel 9:27). It is predominantly, (but not exclusively), believed to consist of a seven year period of rule by the anti-Christ, divided into two terms of three and a half years each, generally known as the ‘Tribulation’. During the first term (13:5), there will be severe persecution of Christians who refuse to bow down and worship the “Beast” and receive his mark (13:7-18). Whilst receiving that mark facilitates buying and selling in this future scenario (13:17), it also incurs God’s wrath and eternal damnation (14:9-11). The second term finds its support mostly in Daniel’s prophecy that it lasts a week and talks about the ‘middle of the week’ bringing an ‘end to sacrifice’.

It seems obvious to me, (but not to everyone apparently), that Christians *must* be present on earth during the first term, otherwise it would not be possible for the multitude of white-robed saints in chapter 7 to have come out of the ‘great tribulation’. Nor would there be anyone left to spread the Gospel and stand up for Jesus, or even to be persecuted. Christians will flee persecution for three and a half years (12:6) by going underground. And it is sometime *during* the rule of the anti-Christ that the ‘reaping’ happens (14:12-16).

After this reaping, there will be a further seven angels, with seven plagues (15:1) and seven bowls of wrath (15:7). The true nature of Babylon will be revealed (17:5), which is frequently interpreted as being an extremely corrupt world-wide end-time church. The strongest support for that view is the call to “**Come out of her, My people**” (18:4), and to come *out* of her, most of us must be *in* her.

In chapter 19, the glorious wedding of Jesus and His Bride finally takes place after the longest and most eventful courtship in history:

"And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints." (19:6-8)

Satan will be bound in an ‘abyss’ (20:2-3) for a thousand years, while Christ reigns on the earth (20:4), after which apparently there needs to be another confrontation (20:7). But that, hopefully, will be the absolute end of it, after the final judgment (20:13) has taken place.

"Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." (21:1-4)

And, believe it or not, they actually *will* live happily *ever after!*

SUMMARY

The books of the Bible are more like Chapters in a single Book, written by a single Author. There may have been numerous penmen, but God inspired every word. He is not a God of confusion, so if He said He made the universe in six days, I believe Him. And if He is all-powerful, I think He had total control over what was included in the Bible and what wasn’t.

My search for a common thread in the Bible has born even more fruit than I anticipated. I am now utterly convinced all three Persons of the Godhead, Father, Son *and* Holy Spirit, were present at every step of the way, in every era of history and every event described in the Old and New Testaments. They are One God, inseparable, and even though there are some hurdles of intellectual logic to overcome (like Jesus telling us the Holy Spirit could not come unless He went away), there is no doubt left in my mind that these hurdles exist only because of my limited human understanding.

The Bible in a nutshell? God set the parameters of Creation, reason for being, and ground rules for behaviour in the first five books. He then inspired His representatives to record our response, which wasn't *ever* up to scratch. He then sent His nominated spokesmen to *warn* us of the consequences of our selfish actions. And finally He Himself died on a cross to *save* us from those consequences, not because we deserve it, but totally and utterly by His *grace*.

God sees human life, death, suffering and existence from a perspective totally different to ours. He is mainly concerned with eternity and which of us will spend it with Him. Whether we live one day on this earth or thirty-thousand, is almost irrelevant. He is absolutely sovereign, enfolded in majesty, far greater and magnificent than our human brain can ever conceive. He knows *exactly* why He created us and placed us on this planet He made. He knows His own purposes intimately and hasn't swayed from those since the beginning of Creation. And it is only those purposes that give any significance to the miserably insignificant creatures that we are. He *demand*s that we recognize this and bow down in awe to Him, acknowledging His unsurpassed omnipotence, incomprehensible greatness and wisdom, eternal existence and immeasurable holiness. He inhabits the praises of His people and justifiably expects to be exalted and enthroned by them as Lord of lords and King of kings. His righteousness is so far beyond our human comprehension, we could never hope to get an inkling of the concept. And our own understanding of what is good or bad is *so* flawed and limited by our human ability to reason, no one in this world could ever hope to come close to even imagining what the true nature of God is like.

There are many complex themes in the Bible. Like the one where we are all His children and become joint heirs in His Kingdom. It is perfectly valid and true, but one which, with lopsided emphasis, is likely to make us focus on ourselves and what we can get out of it. Or like the one where all Christians are interdependent members of one Body, with Christ as the Head. And the head, as we know, controls all the bodily functions. Absolutely true, and very, very important, but not one I have been able to identify as a common theme in all the books. But there is one theme that seems to emerge everywhere I look, the one where God made us to be a Bride for Himself, an eternal partner in a love-relationship of unimaginable quality.

The Bible, from cover to cover, never loses the plot. It reads like an epic romance novel, of a divine being pursuing a mate. No matter how many penmen He used to get His message across, the central theme presses forward inexorably to an unavoidable conclusion. He made us to worship and adore Him with a Bride's love only He can empower. The *only* thing we have any control over is our own heart, and whether that heart is for Him, or for ourselves. If our heart is for ourselves, we occupy His throne and we inevitably end up worshipping *anything* other than Him, and we cannot possibly or reasonably expect to have any part in His eternal Kingdom. A selfish heart opens itself up to unmentionable evil influences from the unseen world. What stands out like a sore thumb throughout the Old *and* New Testaments, is that *God will not tolerate unfaithfulness*, which can range anywhere from idol worship, to refusing to get off the throne in our heart that is rightfully His, to simply not wanting to be One with Him.

Yet from the very beginning, our hearts *have* been for ourselves. Rivers of blood have been spilled, lakes of tears have been shed, billions of lives have been lost, in pursuit of our own agendas and rebellion against His eternal purpose. We can argue until we are blue in the face, trying to justify ourselves, making excuses for the way we behave, pretending we are better than He makes out. But it is all to no avail. He *knows* we are sinners. He *knows* we are imperfect. But He has also provided the one and only way to become acceptable in His sight – Jesus, His only begotten Son died on a cross to save us from ourselves. Jesus *is* God. God Himself died on a cross to save us. And it is only His saving Grace that

gives us a ticket into eternity. *Our only possible contribution towards this miracle of salvation is a heart that cries out for Him.*

Over the course of history, God has courted His bride with an ardour of passion, going through phases of getting to know us (He created us with a myriad of different personalities and character traits), assessing our potential (He tested us throughout the Old Testament, giving us every opportunity, hoping beyond hope we would fall in love with Him), *then falling in love with us Himself, and sacrificing Himself to make it work.*

And aren't *we* much like that in *our* affairs of the heart? We are a mere insignificant allegory of God's love affair with the human race, but in a very small way it helps us understand God's intentions. We meet a potential mate and we assess their qualities for suitability as a life partner. Do we like the way they look? Is there chemistry? Do we make each other laugh? Do we like the same things? Do we share the same values? Can we communicate? Are they likely to be faithful? Is the feeling *mutual*? Then we fall in love and overlook all their shortcomings, all the things that are going to make life hard, all the things about which one day we may say, "I should have known better!" And we make a decision of the heart. We ignore the warnings of our mind. We throw caution to the wind. We take a step forward and declare *our* hand first, making ourselves totally vulnerable to getting hurt and rejected.

God is like that too in His dealings with us. In the Old Testament, He assessed us and got to know our shortcomings. *It certainly wasn't love at first sight*, but He did fall in love with us at some point, declared His hand and is now, in a way inconceivable to the human intellect, vulnerable to rejection. And boy, have *we* given Him a hard time! Yet He is willing to overlook all our faults and failings and asks for only one thing – that the feeling be *mutual*. Do we really want to love Him for eternity? Is our heart truly for Him? If it is, He'll take care of all the rest.

Are we IN love with Him?

Does He mean enough to us, for us to leave that forbidden fruit hanging on the Tree? Are we prepared to leave the relative security of enslavement in Egypt, to embark on a search for the Promised Land? Are we prepared to leave exile in Babylon, to take on rebuilding of the Temple? And when we arrive in Jerusalem, will we be more concerned about reconstructing our own dwellings than His? Are we more secure in the imperfect and unsatisfactory surroundings that we know, than in the unpredictable promises of the unknown? Are we ready for total commitment, abandoning all idols in our life? Will we be prepared to answer the call to "come out of Babylon, my people", when the time arrives. Are we prepared to make a stand against evil right now, at the possible cost of our lives? Are we willing to get off that throne in our heart with His name on it?

The Bible calls for us to get out of our comfort zone. And it calls for total, uncompromised dedication to the only deity Who has ever had the qualifications to be a true God. His name is **YAHWEH**. His name is **I AM**. His name is **JESUS**. There is no other. He wants our love. But it must be genuine and complete.

And if we make that total commitment, life could actually get a lot *harder*, rather than easier. We will feel bound to do things we might never have contemplated before. We will need to adjust our value systems, our boundaries, what we will tolerate and what we will not stand for. Finding ourselves in a cesspool of conflicting agendas, we will inevitably be called upon to make life-changing decisions, or compromise our faith and let down our Saviour. There is no middle ground for many of these issues. Persecution may result. We are in a battle with spiritual forces we barely comprehend. And the only way to win is to learn to become dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than rely on our own strength. Good and evil are still in a battle, even though the war has already been won.

'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing'. (Edmund Burke, 1729 –1797)

It is high time that the good Christian men and women amongst us stand up for Jesus and display the *courage and faith* to give Him our all. The world around us is being corrupted by an overwhelming pervasion of selfishness, which ultimately gives permission to the triumph of evil. No matter what people tell us, it's not getting better; it is getting *worse* at a mind-boggling pace.

CONCLUSION

So here we are again, like all the multitudes that came before us over the last six thousand years, faced with the question: "*Will you believe?*" It's really a *process*. Without faith it is impossible to please Him, so He has woven that essential element into the Gospel – salvation calls for a step of faith on our part. Will we believe in God, when we have no absolute proof He even exists? Then we face the next dilemma: "*Do you want to spend eternity, married to Jesus?*" If you believe, but don't fancy Him, don't bother pretending, because God knows your heart. But if your heart leans towards Him, there is still another hurdle to overcome – how *much* do you care for Him? Is it enough to want to give up your life?

The process of spiritual re-birth calls for a surrender, a letting go of the reins, a submission of your will to the will of a Higher Being. You will no longer be in control of your life, but He will be. However, it is not even quite as simple as that. There is another factor. It is not just about letting go, but about stepping down. *It's about you getting off the throne inside your heart that has His name on it*. Billions of humans, over the span of six millennia, have been unwilling to pay that price.

We do *so* want to be like Him, just not by becoming One with Him, thank you very much, *only* if we can do it *without* surrendering our independence.

Getting off that throne is never accomplished in an instant. We struggle with our fallen human nature most of our Christian lives. But to start off the process, we must recognize we *are* sinners, we *are* selfish to the core, and we *are* determined to remain independent. So we must *repent* from that human condition and ask Him to deal with it, as it is totally beyond us to do it ourselves. We are saved by the *grace* of God, not by anything we have accomplished or done right.

When we reach that point, the point where we are convicted of our utter sinfulness and corruption, where we get a real-time appreciation of our own unworthiness, that's when we get a touch of that central principle in God's universe: *forgiveness*. Unless we forgive others, He cannot forgive us. Unless we accept everyone He has accepted, we cause havoc and division in Heaven and become like a cancer in the Bride's body. But when it is driven home how *much* we have been forgiven, suddenly it becomes easy to forgive.

And the tears begin to flow profusely.

And finally there is the *invitation*. We may believe with all our heart and mind. We may be truly sorry for the way we've been. We may want to spend eternity as His Bride, be prepared to let go of the reins and step down from His throne. We may be willing to forgive anything and anyone who has ever caused us grief. But nothing will happen unless we *invite* Him into our repentant heart. It is up to us to open the door. There is no way He will ever force it open:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20)