

The meaning of Christmas and Easter

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Introduction

Christmas and Easter are celebrated throughout the world by over one billion people. For some these two events are greatly revered, while for others they are merely a good excuse for a holiday, a family gathering, or a party.

Whatever one's perspective towards these days, surely it is important to be aware of the central reasons behind these celebrations.

Why then do we celebrate:

- The birth of a Jewish boy in Bet Lehem (Bethlehem = the house of bread) in the land of Israel. At his circumcision eight days later, this baby was named *Yeshua* (Hebrew = Saviour, translated as Jesus).

Why do we contemplate or remember:

- That some thirty-three years later, while ministering as an itinerant Jewish rabbi this very same *Yeshua*-Jesus was hailed by many as the promised Messiah (Redeemer) of Israel, but was condemned to death, even though he was totally innocent. He died an excruciating death on a tree, a cross, outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Why then do we celebrate:

- That three days after His death, Jesus miraculously rose from the dead.

The short answer to these questions is:

**Yeshua-Jesus was born in Bethlehem for one central reason –
and that was to die.**

But, you might well ask: “What is the big deal about one Jewish rabbi dying, and besides, don’t we all have to die at some time?”

It is correct that we do all have to die at some point. But as for Jesus, well He was much more than just an ordinary Jewish rabbi.

In fact Jesus’ death was much more than just an ordinary death. Jesus was born specifically to die and in so doing to take the penalty of death, under which ALL of humankind is condemned.

You could then rightfully ask, “How can I be condemned to death when I have not committed any crime deserving of the death penalty?” This is a totally understandable question to ask.

The brief answer is: We all have parents and our initial position in life is determined by that of our parents. At birth none of us can determine our circumstances – these are determined by our parents. The reason we are all under the penalty of death is because of a serious transgression made by our original parents.

We were created for relationship with Almighty God

All of us, that is all of humankind, come from original parents named Adam (Hebrew = earth) and Hava (Hebrew = life, translated as Eve). Adam and Hava-Eve were created by Almighty God (*Elohim*), for one central purpose – to enjoy a close relationship with God their creator. This close relationship could almost be equated to a love relationship.

The originator of this relationship, Almighty God (*Elohim*), stated prior to the creation of Adam: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...”¹ The original Hebrew text reveals here the plural character of Almighty God, as *Elohim* is plural and, in this statement, the plural pronoun form is used three times.

This immediately presents us with an interesting question concerning the character of our creator – “How can Almighty God be a plurality of persons?” Some Jewish sages of old have stated that the plural form of *Elohim* denotes Almighty God in His attributes as ruler, lawgiver and judge of the world.² Additionally, they maintain, when *Elohim* stated: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness”, that this was

¹ *Bereshit*, Genesis 1: 26.

² See commentary for Genesis 1: 14-19 in The Stone Edition Hebrew *Tanach*.

Almighty God speaking to ministering angels.³ Neither of these explanations, however, do justice to the original text.

There are several names used in the Bible to describe this God who created the heavens and the earth and all in them. One such name is the Spirit of God who is mentioned at the very beginning of the creation narrative.⁴ There are also a number of *theophanies*, or appearances of God on earth.⁵

One very good explanation concerning the plural character of Almighty God is found in the foundational creed of the Jewish people, known as the *Shem'ah*. This foundational creed states: 'Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!'⁶ The word used for 'one' is the Hebrew word *echad* which denotes plurality in oneness, as distinct from the word *yachid* which denotes just a singular entity. Another time the word *echad* is used relates to the first marriage, between Adam and Hava-Eve. Almighty God had fashioned woman out of the side of Adam, who then stated:

"This time it is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This shall be called Woman, for from man she was taken." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife and they shall become one flesh.⁷

The male and female become one (*echad*) flesh, that is the two shall be as one.⁸ Almighty God is indeed one, but He is a plurality of persons. This is a mystery which the human mind cannot fully comprehend. The essential point here, though, is not to try and fully comprehend this mystery but to understand what Almighty God wants to communicate to us - that He and He alone is the supreme creator of all.

³ See commentary for Genesis 1: 26 in The Stone Edition Hebrew *Tanach*.

⁴ Genesis 1: 2. The most common name of Almighty God in the Hebrew Bible is transliterated as *Yahweh*. Jewish people do not pronounce this Name, so they will use synonyms such as *HaShem* (The Name) and *Adonai* (LORD).

⁵ One such example is *Malach Adonai*, the Angel of the LORD, who invariably speaks in the person of Almighty God, as in Genesis 16: 7-13. Additionally, there is also the 'man' who came to visit Abraham and Sarah as recorded in Genesis 18 and who spoke in the person of Almighty God. One very good example is when Almighty God introduced Himself to Moses in the burning bush, see Exodus 3: 2-6.

⁶ *Devarim*, Deuteronomy 6: 4.

⁷ Genesis 2: 23-24. The Stone Edition Hebrew *Tanach*. What Christians call the Old Testament the Jewish people call the *Tanach*. This is an acronym for three parts: *Torah* (Instruction or 'Law'); *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Chetuvim* (Writings).

⁸ Genesis 2: 24.

Almighty God also wants us to know that from the very outset His desire was for a harmonious relationship, initially with just Adam, then with Adam and Hava-Eve. His desire was for there to be a harmonious relationship between Adam and Hava-Eve, and subsequently between all of humankind.

Evidence that Almighty God sought relationship with humankind is not only revealed in that He fashioned Adam and Hava-Eve in His image, but that He would come and walk and commune with Adam and Hava-Eve in the Garden of Eden - indicating that He must also have had some kind of corporeal or identifiable form.⁹ This scenario strongly indicates that life in the Garden of Eden was one of peace, tranquillity and abundance.

We have now established that Almighty God (*Elohim*) is a plurality of 'persons' and that He created Adam and Hava-Eve in His image in order to have a close relationship with them. The character of this relationship is further revealed through the most amazing gift which Almighty God gave to Adam and Hava-Eve, that of free will - the ability to make their own decisions. They could decide for themselves if they wanted to have a close relationship with Almighty God or not. There were no strings attached, as with a puppeteer and his puppets. This was not to be a lopsided, controlling relationship, but a harmonious, mutual, loving relationship.

Any true love relationship is based upon trust and loyalty. But to exhibit trust and loyalty there must be a standard, even a law, to gauge such trust and loyalty. The standard or gauge Almighty God gave to Adam and Hava-Eve to determine their trust and loyalty to this relationship was just one stipulation. In the bountiful Garden of Eden Adam and Hava-Eve could eat of all the fruit – except the fruit of one tree. Just one – of which Almighty God said: "... for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."¹⁰

Such a death would result in a separation from that close, trustful relationship between them and their Maker; and then a physical death.

Obedience to Almighty God, which amounted to being trustworthy and loyal, would result in a continual, close relationship with Him (and associated blessings, such as an abundant life). Disobedience would result in separation and the imposition of the death penalty – which was the ultimate curse.

⁹ Genesis 3: 8.

¹⁰ Genesis 2: 17.

Almighty God also legally entrusted Adam and Hava-Eve with a very responsible task – to act as His regents, emissaries or stewards (ambassadors) over the created order on earth. This would be akin to a supreme king entrusting his son to be regent over a particular area of his vast kingdom. Almighty God, as ‘King of the Universe’, provided all that was necessary to Adam-Hava for proper stewardship - in addition to an abundant life. All that God required in response was loyalty - which meant obedience to just one stipulation.

Adam and Hava-Eve disobey - and bring the penalty of death upon themselves

Yet Adam and Hava-Eve were enticed by the serpent, an emissary or representative of a fallen angel named Lucifer (or Satan) and they ate from the forbidden tree. The serpent used fraud and illegitimate means to entice firstly Hava-Eve and then Adam, by misrepresenting God’s word and command. Our first parents succumbed to this fraudulent act and subsequently disobeyed the one ‘Kingdom stipulation’ governing peace and tranquillity in the Garden of Eden. This act was akin to blatant adultery in a marriage. It was the first and worst act of treason in human history, as it amounted to the surrender or handing over of the legitimate authority as God’s regents on earth, to an illegitimate authority.

What happened next set the tone for the future of humankind on earth. We are informed of Adam and Hava-Eve, that: ‘They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.’¹¹ When Almighty God asked where they were, Adam responded that he was afraid of Almighty God and hid himself. When God then asked if he had eaten of the forbidden fruit, Adam then blamed Hava-Eve, and Hava-Eve in turn blamed the serpent.¹²

There was no acknowledgement of their mistake, of their transgression, of their act of treason against their legitimate ‘King.’ Knowing what they had done was wrong, Adam and Hava-Eve should have immediately confessed their mistake and there would have been restitution. They did not, so now the damage was complete and the due consequence of this treasonable act of disobedience would come into force.

¹¹ Genesis 3: 8.

¹² Genesis 3: 10-13.

Almighty God had issued a decree, made a clear statement, that the sentence for disobedience would be death. God could not break or violate His own decree. This decree was foundational to His very own 'Kingdom constitution' and His character as the Judge or upholder of His law. Justice had to prevail – even if God the Judge desired that such a sentence would not have to be implemented. No kingdom or society can remain sound, solvent and functional if they do not uphold their own law.

This act of disobedience, of disloyalty and treason, resulted in a separation from the close relationship between Adam-Hava and God their creator. Adam and Hava-Eve effectively bought the judicial penalty of death upon themselves. This penalty of death was subsequently passed to Adam and Hava-Eve's descendants (humankind), who are all in the likeness of Adam, who are all 'in Adam.'¹³

This act of disobedience, a transgression against Almighty God's 'Kingdom constitution' is hereafter referred to as transgression, iniquity, sin, and its symptoms were akin to a disease which affected all of Adam's descendants. In short, the environment of peace, tranquillity and harmony had been infiltrated by a foreign and contrary influence and rudely disturbed.

Humankind in servitude to an illegitimate kingdom

There are few references in the Bible to the fallen angel, but he is generally known as Satan, the devil or Lucifer. The name Lucifer is derived from the Latin rendering of the term 'the morning star.' This designation is linked to a reference in chapter fourteen of the scroll or book of Isaiah, concerning an angel who had great beauty and power, but who because of his pride endeavoured to ascend even the throne of Almighty God – and was cast out of God's presence as a result.¹⁴

It would seem that not only was Lucifer cast out, but that many other angels were also cast out, in what could only be termed a 'heavenly rebellion'.¹⁵ It would seem

¹³ Romans 5: 12-18; 1 Corinthians 15: 21-22.

¹⁴ Isaiah 14: 12-15.

¹⁵ Other references apart from Isaiah 14 are found in Ezekiel 28: 12-18; Jude 1: 6; Revelation 12: 7-9; Ephesians 2: 2-3; Ephesians 6: 12; Luke 10: 18; 2 Peter 2: 4.

that in His great benevolence at creation Almighty God also gave the angels the wonderful gift of free-will, and some had willingly chosen to abuse this most beautiful gift.

There was now an entity, a force, operating in the spiritual realm which opposed Almighty God, led by Lucifer-Satan. The serpent who enticed Hava-Eve and then Adam to oppose Almighty God was the representative of Satan and his followers. The consequences of this 'heavenly rebellion' were now being experienced on earth.

Adam and Hava-Eve, as Almighty God's representatives (regents or ambassadors) to whom He had legally entrusted with authority on earth, had willingly surrendered themselves to the usurping authority of Satan. Satan had illegally gained control over them and subsequently over the destiny of humankind on earth. There were now effectively two kingdoms in operation. The legitimate Kingdom of Almighty God, a kingdom of light and life; and the illegitimate kingdom of darkness and death, which had gained this position of authority by using fraudulent and devious methods.

Almighty God institutes His redemptive plan to restore relationship

Almighty God, however, still greatly desired to have a close relationship with humankind, so He set in motion a plan to redeem or restore this relationship. This plan of redemption would require the coming of a 'second Adam' who would be completely obedient to God's 'Kingdom constitution'. This promise of a future redeemer is hinted at, even revealed, in the judicial sentence imposed upon the serpent:

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.”¹⁶

The seed of the woman (one born as a human) would bruise, crush or pound the head of the serpent - in other words, overrule the serpent's authority. In Hebrew the word 'seed' can be both singular and plural, but here the pronoun is of a singular male – “*he* shall bruise you on the head.”

¹⁶ Genesis 3: 15.

This could be a prophecy that this coming seed of the woman would not only bruise or pound the head of the seed of the serpent, but would actually overturn the judicially imposed death sentence. Some early Jewish theologians held the view that this was indeed a prophecy referring to the coming Messiah, or anointed one. One such Jewish commentary, the *Pesikta Rabbati*, stated:

As the incarnation of evil, Satan is the arch-enemy of the Messiah ... God showed Satan the Messiah, and when he saw him, he fell on his face, and cried, "Truly this is the Messiah who will bruise me..."¹⁷

If this future seed was indeed the promised Messiah or Redeemer, and if he was to overturn that judicially imposed death sentence, he would have to be an exceptional human being, even a perfect human being, who would be totally obedient to God's 'Kingdom constitution.'

In the meantime, there was a major problem on planet earth. Adam had willingly surrendered the legal authority of the world over to Satan, so if there was to be a return of this authority to Almighty God then it would need to occur in a legal manner. Almighty God could not just come and reimpose His authority. This had to be accomplished through legal means.

An early indication of how Almighty God was going to redeem His authority over the destinies of humankind followed. To ensure there was a degree of relationship, an innocent animal was sacrificially killed and its skin covered the nakedness of Adam and Hava-Eve. Although not stated, it would seem that Almighty God killed this animal. This act involving the shedding of blood signified that for the restoration of relationship a living being (in this case an animal), had to die.

This might appear a harsh and drastic act, but it signified to Adam and Hava-Eve the seriousness and consequence of their disobedience and transgression, and the cost involved in having even a degree of restored relationship. Some form of restored

¹⁷ *Pesikta Rabbati* 3: 6, cited in Riggans, W. *Yeshua ben David*, (Crowborough: 1995) p. 295. The Messiah in Jewish tradition is the Anointed One of Almighty God, the Redeemer of Israel.

relationship therefore required a substitutionary death, and this restoration was through the shedding of the blood of an innocent animal. This was a sign of Almighty God's great mercy. It indicated that He, as the Judge of the Kingdom, sought for a way to have some restoration of relationship.

Consequences of this act of 'treason'

The main consequence of Adam and Hava-Eve's act of disloyalty to Almighty God, their legitimate 'King', was that the innocent nature they shared with their creator had changed. They now had the capacity for both good and evil, a characteristic inherited by their children. This dynamic was evidenced sometime later when Cain, the first-born son of Adam and Hava-Eve, murdered the second-born son, Abel. The manifestation of that original act of disobedience thereafter spread like a disease, and resulted in these very harsh words being stated:

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain so the LORD said: "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth... for I am grieved that I have made them."¹⁸

This is a terrible indictment upon the character of humankind at that time. It reveals how far humankind had strayed from that ideal scenario for which Almighty God had created them to fulfill, of living an abundant life and enjoying a harmonious relationship together. It also revealed how deeply the disease of sin and rebellion had spread.

Yet despite this very negative scenario, throughout this period the eyes of Almighty God had been scanning humankind, seeking for an individual with whom He could further His great plan of redemption, through whom the promised seed of the woman could come.

Noah and the cutting of the covenant

Then Noah found favour in the eyes of Almighty God. God challenged Noah with a mighty commission - to build a large boat so that a remnant of humankind would

¹⁸ Genesis 6: 6-8.

be saved from an impending judgement of water. Noah obeyed Almighty God's commandment – and through him a remnant of people, his family, were preserved from what became known as the Flood. All humanity thereafter was descended from the three sons of Noah - Japheth, Shem and Ham.

Almighty God then promised He would never again destroy the inhabitants of the earth (despite the intents of man's heart being evil), and the world would never again be flooded. To confirm these promises God entered into (literally 'cut') a covenant with Noah, the sign of which was the rainbow.¹⁹ The first stated covenant relationship between Almighty God and humankind was with Noah.²⁰

Covenant – the legal avenue for bringing about redemption

The imposition of the death sentence following the act of disobedience of Adam and Hava-Eve was a legal sentence. The annulment of this sentence and restoration of relationship, therefore, would also require a legal arrangement. The legal mechanism to bring about this restoration of relationship would be covenant.

The custom of making legal agreements in antiquity was known in the Bible as 'cutting a covenant' (Hebrew = *karat brit*), and in many ancient societies as a blood-agreement or suzerainty treaty. Covenants, or suzerainty treaties, had a number of elementary features, beginning with the coming together usually of two parties or groups, one usually stronger (the suzerain) and the other weaker (the vassal or servant). Then there were discussions relating to the conditions which both parties desired the other to accept. Often this amounted to conditions from the stronger party to the weaker, and a major factor related to obedience or loyalty to the conditions. The weaker party would need to give total allegiance to the stronger party and if necessary, break all other political agreements; while the stronger party would agree to protect the weaker party.

Once these arrangements were agreed upon the more formal part would begin, with the killing of animals and shedding of blood. In many situations the slain animal was then divided in half and the representatives of the two groups or parties

¹⁹ Genesis 8: 21; 9: 1-17.

²⁰ The relationship between Almighty God and Adam and Hava-Eve is what could be termed 'inferred covenant', as many of the components of a covenant relationship are present.

(or nations) would walk up and down between the two portions. They would often recite these words, or the very act would infer the same: “May it happen to me as has happened to this animal if I break this agreement.” In antiquity no-one walked lightly on the blood of the covenant.²¹

This act could have been synonymous to the swearing of an oath, with obedience (or loyalty) to the covenant invoking blessings while violation (or disloyalty) to the covenant would invoke curses.

The two halves of the slain animal(s) would then be cooked and presented to both groups entering into the agreement. This was an extremely important part of the entire process, as it revealed that previously there had been two parties, two groups, two nations, but now they are one (*echad*), bound together in covenant-union. This is evidenced in that they were eating together of the same animal and often from a common bowl.

Although the destinies of the two entities were now linked through being one in covenant-union, each party, nevertheless, retained their distinctiveness. In a marriage covenant, the husband remained a male and the wife remained a female. Also, between two nations, the great king (or suzerain), remained the greater political entity and the lesser king (or vassal), remained the lesser political entity. Yet their destinies were now closely linked. To break or violate such an agreement was akin to treason.

The entire covenant making process was then often completed by the exchange of gifts, which were reminders to each party of the commitment each had made to the other, as for example the exchange of wedding rings. The actual swearing of an oath (in addition to the act of passing between the portions of the animal) would occur at the very end. The entire proceeding would be enacted in the presence of witnesses, and these were usually the gods (or God) of the tribe or nation.

Once such an agreement, treaty, covenant had been sealed with an oath then not even the senior partner could ‘open’ the seal and alter the conditions. A new and

²¹ Hebrews 10: 29. For further information see Crombie, K. *In Covenant with Jesus* (Heritage Resources: Mundaring 2013). Available at kelvin@heritageresources.com.au

supplementary agreement or covenant would be required if new conditions were deemed necessary.²²

An inspirational Baptist minister in Britain in the nineteenth century named Charles Spurgeon once wrote about covenant:

ALL GOD'S dealings with men have had a covenant character. It hath so pleased Him to arrange it, that he will not deal with us except through a covenant, nor can we deal with Him except in the same manner.²³

Rev. James Packer, a renowned Anglican theologian in the twentieth century wrote:

A covenant relation is one in which two parties are permanently pledged to each other in mutual service and dependence (example: marriage)... Biblical religion has the form of a covenant relation with God.²⁴

The essence of a covenant union is that each party is now co-dependent with the other – they were effectively *echad*; while the character and integrity of both parties were now bound to maintaining the conditions of the covenant. Promises made in the covenant or agreement were then bestowed, passed on or transferred to designated descendants.

The calling of Abram (Abraham)

Despite Almighty God having displayed His greatness and sovereignty through the Flood, it was not long before the descendants of Ham, Japheth and Shem began to manifest the same evil inclination as was apparent before the Flood. It was clearly apparent that the disease resulting from Adam's disobedience was deeply embedded within the nature of humankind.

²² An example of this is found in the scroll or book of Esther when the king of Persia could not revoke his edict to destroy the Jewish people, but had to issue another edict permitting the Jewish people to legally defend themselves. Esther 8: 8.

²³ Delivered on 4 September 1859, by Rev. C.H. Spurgeon, at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens. Quoted in www.spurgeon.org/sermons, No 273.

²⁴ Packer, J.I. *Knowing God*, (London: 1973), p. 139.

In time the descendants of Noah began to exert their independence by building a huge tower, or monument, at Babel, endeavouring to reach Heaven itself.²⁵ Why would they do such an act? Perhaps they wanted to show they could 'reach Heaven' through their own human efforts, similar to the entity described by Isaiah, who stated: 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'²⁶ On both occasions it would appear that pride was a key motive.

At this point Almighty God intervened, and dispersed the peoples from the region of Babel, and thereafter they spread to the four corners of the earth. Almighty God now sought after another man with whom He could 'cut covenant' and further His great plan of redeeming humankind.

He sought for a man like Noah, who would trust and obey His call, someone who would be willing of their own choice and volition to give allegiance to Him. If someone was fully committed to being under the authority and allegiance of the usurping ruler, Satan, then they would not be willing to hear, obey and follow the voice of the true king, Almighty God. After all, one cannot serve two suzerains, two kings, two masters.

The eyes of Almighty God fell upon Abram, better known as Abraham. From this one man Almighty God was going to bring forth a nation which would be consecrated to Him, and through this servant nation the promised seed, the individual redeemer, the second Adam, would come.

The outworking of this plan of redemption was based upon a number of foundational promises which Almighty God bestowed to Abram (Abraham). These promises included:

- A land, the land of Israel
- A people, the people of Israel (today the Jewish people)
- That all families on earth would be blessed through him

²⁵ Genesis 11: 1-9.

²⁶ Isaiah 14: 14.

- That those who blessed him would be blessed, but those who cursed (opposed) him, would be cursed.²⁷

These promises, though, were conditional upon Abram obeying God's call, to leave his home land (his 'comfort zone') and go to the land of Canaan (the land of Israel). This he thankfully did. After some time in the land, however, Abram complained to Almighty God that he had no heir to whom he could transfer these covenant promises. Almighty God then confirmed that one born from his own loins would be his heir.²⁸

Almighty God said to Abram: "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."²⁹ But in response to this clear affirmation from Almighty God concerning the land, Abram responded: "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?"³⁰

At this point Almighty God confirmed the promise of the land to Abram in the most meaningful and legal way known in antiquity – through the 'cutting of a covenant'.³¹ Almighty God bound Himself by a covenant oath to the nation of Israel in the land of Israel.

Why, though, did Almighty God call Abram and bequeath to him the land of Canaan through the cutting of a covenant? Why? - because Almighty God's plan to redeem or bring humankind back into a personal relationship with Himself would be worked out on *terra firma* (land) - and the land of Israel is the key geographical location where this plan of redemption will be worked out.

But why would **this** particular portion of land become the inheritance of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their physical descendants? The land of Israel lay in the most geographically vulnerable location in the entire world. It lay at the crossroads of three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe, on or near major trade routes, which were coveted and fought over by many empires and entities. Its very location meant it would always be a geo-political buffer zone, placed between great empires of the north (Assyria, Babylon, Persia) and a great empire of the south (Egypt); as

²⁷ Genesis 12: 1-3.

²⁸ Genesis 15: 1-6.

²⁹ Genesis 15: 7.

³⁰ Genesis 15: 8.

³¹ Genesis: 15: 9-21.

well as between great empires of the west (Greece and Rome) and great empires of the east, (Persia and Parthia).

The very location of the land of Israel as the geographical or physical 'land between empires' meant it would always be a land of conflict. It was in fact to be the epicentre where the spiritual conflict in the heavenlies between the Kingdom of Almighty God and the kingdom of darkness, would be fought on earth.

Abram desired for these covenant promises to be transferred to an heir, one from his own loins. He had an elder son, Ishmael, born to the maid-servant of Abram's wife Sarai (Sarah), as Sarai was barren and beyond normal child-bearing age. Ishmael was not God's choice. Sarah then gave birth to a son, Isaac – a son of promise who was born in an unnatural, even 'miraculous' way.

The covenant promises were then transferred to Abraham's son Isaac, and then to Isaac's second-born son Jacob (also known as Israel). God chose to bestow these promises to these younger sons – even though it was not the cultural norm. All three of these patriarchs lived in or near the ancient city of Beersheba in the Negev region of the land of Israel.

Israel enslaved in Egypt and the exodus at Passover

Despite these covenant promises, however, Jacob-Israel and his family left the land of covenant promise due to a famine and went down to Egypt. There they joined Joseph, a son of Jacob-Israel who had been unjustly sold into slavery by his older brothers. Ultimately the entire people of Israel were enslaved by the emperor or pharaoh of Egypt.

After some four hundred years in Egypt, mostly in slavery, the children of Israel cried out because of their bondage – and Almighty God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.³² He then introduced Himself to Moshe (Moses) and called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the land of covenant promise.³³ Almighty God revealed Himself to Moses from within a

³² Exodus 2: 23-25.

³³ This collective group were called the Hebrews, the Israelites, the children of Israel and later the Jewish people.

burning bush – another *theophany*, or appearance of God.³⁴ Moses, ultimately, obeyed the call, and now became Almighty God’s representative man.

Pharaoh, though, was reluctant to let his slave population depart, so Almighty God revealed His power through ten plagues or judgements against Egypt. Through these acts of judgement God revealed that He was Israel’s legitimate king (or suzerain), and that He was redeeming or bringing back to Himself a people which rightfully belonged to Him.

These plagues were the outworking of God’s wrath or judgement against the nation of Egypt which was persecuting the descendants of Abraham, God’s covenant partner. Not only was Almighty God the legitimate king (or suzerain) of Israel, He also had a responsibility as the senior covenant partner to come to the rescue of the descendants of his junior covenant partner (Abraham) – particularly as they had now cried out to Him for deliverance.

The last of the plagues or judgements was the death of the first-born in Egypt. Almighty God instructed the Israelites to kill a year-old lamb (sheep) and place its blood on the doorposts and window sills and the angel of death would pass over those homes. If the Israelites acted in obedience they would be spared, but if they didn’t obey, they would suffer the same consequence as the Egyptians - death.

This final plague, or judgement, known thereafter as Passover, convinced Pharaoh to release his Hebrew slaves. They departed in such haste that the bread never had time to rise. This exodus from Egypt was to be remembered each year thereafter and is known as the feast of Passover (and sometimes also as the feast of Unleavened Bread) and the story of this deliverance is told through the eating of the Passover meal.

The collective people of Israel viewed this event as the beginning of their national identity – of how a nation was redeemed out of slavery. It was a shadow of a much greater redemption from a far worse form of slavery, and it revolved around the vicarious (substitutionary) death of a pure, unblemished, innocent lamb.

³⁴ Exodus 3: 2-6. The Exodus narrative is covered in Exodus chapters 4-14.

Almighty God and the nation of Israel enter into a covenant relationship

The final act of the exodus from Egypt was when the people miraculously crossed the Red Sea. When they arrived on the Sinai side, they sang a song in which they acknowledged that Almighty God effectively was their king.³⁵ Now that the nation was in the Sinai desert they would require the necessities of life and Almighty God, as their 'suzerain' king and the senior covenant partner, provided water and food as required.

With Moses acting as the human representative, Almighty God then introduced Himself to the collective nation and presented them with His terms and stipulations for entering into covenant relationship with them. God outlined the 'constitution' of His Kingdom, a 'constitution' based around ten major commandments. These stipulations began with these profound words:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before Me."

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God..."³⁶

Then followed the remainder of the Ten Commandments, and afterwards more supplementary commandments, numbering some 613 *mitzvot* or commandments in total. Once these terms and stipulations were recited to the people, they as a collective entity, stated: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!"³⁷

Almighty God had given His stipulations, His requirements, to the collective nation of Israel and they had collectively accepted them. Total obedience to these stipulations would result in blessings – but disobedience would result in curses. Known thereafter as the *Torah*, these were life-giving instructions for how to live a good, healthy and blessed life in the land of Israel; and to reveal the absolute

³⁵ Exodus 15: 18. In the original Hebrew the word used for reign is *morlech*, from the same root as *melech*, king.

³⁶ *Shemot*, or Exodus 20: 2-5a.

³⁷ Exodus 24: 7.

holiness of Almighty God. Israel was now Almighty God's servant nation, through whom His individual servant, the promised redeemer, would come.

Then, in accordance with known principles, animals were sacrificed and the blood was collected. Moses then sprinkled the blood on the people, and said: "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made (in the Hebrew = 'cut') with you in accordance with all these words."³⁸ This covenant is known thereafter as the Sinai-Mosaic Covenant, and was distinct from the previous covenant cut with Abraham - having different conditions and promises.³⁹

The collective nation of Israel had pledged themselves by a covenant oath to Almighty God and taken on a heavy responsibility by agreeing to be **fully** obedient to the stipulations of Almighty God's 'Kingdom constitution'. There were severe consequences for being disloyal to their senior covenant partner or 'suzerain king', the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁴⁰

In the event they could not keep these terms, these commandments, Almighty God provided a mechanism for forgiveness and temporary restoration of relationship, that of substitutionary sacrifice. If an individual, or the collective nation, committed infidelity (broke covenant or sinned) they should die. They could, however, bring an animal which would be a substitute for them, and the death of the animal would be instead of their own death. An officiating priest would kill the animal and its blood would be administered in a particular manner at the altar.

Provided the act was done with a repentant (or pure) heart, Almighty God would forgive the offender of their act of covenant infidelity and there would be a 'partial' restoration of relationship. These sacrifices would occur at a specially constructed enclosure called the Tabernacle, in the midst of which was the Holy of Holies where the *Shekinah* glory of the invisible God was present.

God's ultimate purpose in redeeming a people out of slavery is revealed in His words relating to the Tabernacle:

³⁸ Exodus 24: 8.

³⁹ This covenant was confirmed and amended later, prior to Israel's entrance into the land of Israel, as recorded in the scroll or book of *Devarim* - Deuteronomy.

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 28.

“...that I might dwell in your midst.”⁴¹

God’s ultimate desire has always been for a relationship with humankind. This was a beginning point, even a template, for the ultimate and complete restoration of that relationship. Complete restoration could not occur, however, until the cause of the initial separation – disobedience and treason and the resultant penalty of death - had been judicially and legally nullified and overturned.

Entering the land of covenant promise

En-route to the land of covenant promise the Israelite people continually disobeyed Almighty God’s requirements. As a result they had to keep wandering in the wilderness of the Sinai desert. After forty years of such wandering and learning more about their senior covenant partner (Almighty God) the people were led into the land of covenant promise by *Yehoshuah* (Joshua = Saviour). Prior to entering, Moses stated to the people:

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel.⁴²

So, from the beginning there was a strategic relationship between the land and people of Israel and the nations of the world. This strategic relationship is linked to God’s universal plan of redemption.

In the land of Israel, however, the people found it constantly difficult to obey the stipulations of Almighty God’s ‘constitution’ – as revealed in the *Torah*.⁴³ For some four hundred years they sometimes enjoyed the blessings of obedience, but on many occasions they endured the consequences of disobedience.

Throughout this period Almighty God called forth various leaders, known collectively as judges, to lead Israel. Two such judges, Samson and Samuel, had exceptional, almost miraculous births.

⁴¹ Exodus 25:8. The word ‘dwell’ could also be translated as ‘tabernacle.’

⁴² Deuteronomy 32: 8.

⁴³ *Torah* = shoot an arrow [in the right direction] or hit the mark. It is a manual for how to live a good and healthy life in the land of Israel. It is often called the Law, which can give a negative connotation.

Despite many such fine leaders, inconsistency of good leadership ultimately caused the people of Israel to cry out for a king to lead them, a king *like all other nations*; a king who could be their representative before Almighty God. Almighty God gave them a king like all other nations. His name was Saul, who was a large man - the type of king *they* sought after. But Saul was not God's choice, and he did not succeed. God had other criteria for the king He desired.

A covenant 'cut' with David from Bethlehem – and David's battle with Goliath

The eyes of Almighty God then fell upon David, a young shepherd boy from the village of Bethlehem in Judah. David obeyed God's call, and through Samuel the prophet God anointed him to become *His* appointed king of Israel. This relationship was confirmed by God 'cutting a covenant' with him.⁴⁴ In the eyes of his family and especially his brothers, however, David was the most unlikely person to be the anointed one (Hebrew = *mashiach* = messiah) of Israel.⁴⁵

The future redeemer of Israel and of humankind would now come from David's family. Thereafter the destinies of David and his descendants were intertwined with the collective nation of Israel.⁴⁶

This destiny was clearly evidenced shortly after when David fought against a representative Philistine named Goliath. The pagan Philistines were the arch enemies of Israel, and came to battle against Israel. Instead of both armies being locked in battle, each army would select one warrior who could be their representative. In this fight between the two representative warriors, the winner would win the battle on behalf of his army, his nation – and his gods, or God.

The Philistines had their warrior but the Israelites did not have a representative warrior – in fact the Israelite soldiers were in fear. When hearing of this terrible indictment upon his army, his nation and his God, the young David volunteered to be the representative Israelite. He did not have to, as being a mere youth he was not a trained soldier. David nevertheless volunteered to step out of his 'comfort zone' and to battle the Philistine giant.

⁴⁴ 1 Samuel 16; Psalm 89: 3-4.

⁴⁵ The English translation of Messiah = Christ.

⁴⁶ 2 Samuel 5: 1-3.

Neither the Philistines or the Israelites fully expected the young and inexperienced David to defeat Goliath, as David did not fit the requirements of what everyone expected of a conquering warrior. Yet David defied all the odds – and defeated Goliath.

What is most interesting in this scenario is that when all the Israelite soldiers (who until that point had been in fear) witnessed David winning the battle, they suddenly arose, shouted and pursued the retreating Philistines.⁴⁷

The question could rightfully be asked: “What gave those Israelite men the right to now ‘bask’ in David’s victory and be full of gusto? After all they had previously been in fear and contributed nothing at all to David’s victory.”

Indeed, humanly speaking they had no right. Yet because David was their representative man, and David won the victory on their behalf, then they did have a legal right. David’s victory was their victory - despite them having contributed absolutely nothing to that victory.

If ever the concept of *hesed* (grace), of unmerited favour, was appropriate, then it was this situation. The men of Israel had no right whatsoever to enjoy freedom from impending slavery – for had David lost the battle then the Israelites would have become subservient, even slaves, to the Philistines. But the victory was 100% won for them by their representative man, David - God’s anointed one.

David accepted as king of collective Israel

It took some time before David became king over collective Israel. This occurred at Hebron, south of Bethlehem, where the leaders of collective Israel and King David ‘cut a covenant’ together. The men of Israel said of David: “Behold, we are your bone and your flesh...”⁴⁸ These were almost the same words that Adam said when Hava-Eve was formed out of his body. The principle was that now the destiny of the nation of Israel and of David and his descendants were intertwined. They were essentially *echad*.

Thereafter if David and his successors lived in obedience to Almighty God as stated in the stipulations of God’s ‘Kingdom constitution’ as outlined in the Sinai-Mosaic

⁴⁷ 1 Samuel: 17: 52-53.

⁴⁸ 2 Samuel 5: 1-3.

covenant, then the nation would be blessed and would prosper. If, however, the Davidic kings did not live in such obedience, the nation would suffer negative consequences – even temporary exile from the land.

David consolidated the twelve tribes of Israel into a cohesive nation and about 1004 BC (BCE) he established Jerusalem as the political and spiritual capital of the Kingdom of Israel. His son Solomon succeeded him and built a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem where Almighty God could be worshipped and where acts of covenant infidelity (sins, iniquities) could be atoned through substitutionary sacrifices. As was the case with the initial Tabernacle, there was no idol or image of the invisible God of Israel in the Temple.

Consequences of covenant disobedience

Yet despite the greatness and wealth of David and Solomon, they and the collective people of Israel continually broke God's kingdom requirements and suffered national consequences as a result. The most serious consequence was the division of the Kingdom of Israel into two - the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). Despite the occasional reign of good kings in the two kingdoms, covenant infidelity continued and instability and lack of peace prevailed. Such covenant infidelity was often associated with idolatry and the worship of foreign gods.

Many of the people became despondent and sought for consistent good kings who would live in obedience to God's covenant stipulations. During such times of despondency Almighty God continually spoke through prophets, calling the leaders and the people back to living in covenant obedience. Isaiah prophesied of a coming king who would be perfect - who would even be God Himself.⁴⁹ Isaiah also stated that a descendant from David's family (the root of Jesse, David's father) would be a *nes* – which can be translated in Hebrew as a 'miracle.'⁵⁰

Almighty God also revealed through the prophet Jeremiah that a king would come who would be God Himself, as stated:

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch;

⁴⁹ Isaiah 9: 6-7.

⁵⁰ Isaiah 11: 1-5, 10.

And He will reign as king and act wisely
And do justice and righteousness in the land.
“In his days Judah will be saved
And Israel will dwell securely;
And this is His name by which he will be called,
The LORD our righteousness.”⁵¹

The term ‘LORD’, is *Yahweh* in the Hebrew, one of the names used of Almighty God.

Almighty God also spoke through the prophet Isaiah promising a coming man who would take Israel’s sin and iniquity upon himself, and who would be a guilt offering (*asham*).⁵² This was such a profound prophecy that one could imagine some Israelites thinking: “Could this possibly be the second and perfect Adam who will save and redeem Israel?”⁵³

Then Almighty God proclaimed through Micah the prophet there would be a future king or ruler who would come from Bethlehem in Judah, and whose origins were from eternity past.⁵⁴

One profound statement from Almighty God came through the prophet Jeremiah, promising He would ‘cut’ a new covenant between Himself and the collective people of Israel. This new covenant included the forgiveness of sin and iniquity and that Israel would ‘know’ Almighty God from the least of them to the greatest of them. This speaks of the restoration of relationship, for in Hebraic thought to ‘know’ does not necessarily mean head knowledge but refers more to having a close relationship.⁵⁵

Despite these encouraging words, acts of unfaithfulness to the terms of the Sinai-Mosaic covenant continued, including idolatry and the worship of foreign gods. This covenant infidelity and disloyalty to their ‘suzerain king’ (Almighty God) resulted in severe judgement and about 722 BC (BCE) the Assyrian Empire

⁵¹ Jeremiah 23: 5-6.

⁵² Isaiah 52:13-52:1-12.

⁵³ This prophecy is so profound in fact that later generations of Jewish leaders actually forbade it from being read in the synagogues!

⁵⁴ Micah 5:2.

⁵⁵ Jeremiah 31: 31-37.

conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and the people were sent into exile. They were dispersed among the nations, and for the most part lost their distinctive identity.

Many pious individuals from the northern tribes, though, had moved to the southern kingdom of Judah over the centuries and Judah became a representative of collective Israel. But Judah also consistently disobeyed the stipulations of the Sinai-Mosaic covenant, so from about 598 BC (BCE) the Babylonian Empire began taking them away into captivity to Babylon. This process culminated about 586 BC (BCE) when Jerusalem and the Temple were both destroyed.

Such an exile had been foretold – if the nation continued in covenant infidelity. But, restoration from exile had also been foretold, which is understandable as the character and integrity of Almighty God is linked to the keeping of His covenant promises. Interestingly Isaiah had prophesied of a second restoration from exile, a restoration from the four corners of the earth which would be akin to a *nes*, a miracle.⁵⁶ Yet concerning this first exile Jeremiah had written that the duration would be just seventy years.⁵⁷

Exile in Babylon – and Daniel in the lion’s den

While in captivity in Babylon the people of collective Israel (mostly Judeans) remained as a cohesive entity, although some did move further afield, and thus began what became known as the Jewish *diaspora*, or dispersion.

One Jewish exile named Daniel (Hebrew = God is my judge), however, was chosen as a candidate for leadership in Babylon – and excelled. Then about the year 539 BC (BCE) the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians. Daniel was given a position of authority in the new regime – but others became jealous of his abilities and success and plotted to undermine him. This they did by deceitfully manipulating the Persian king, Darius, to issue a decree that no-one was to worship any other god except for Darius.⁵⁸

Daniel, however, continued to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and his detractors uncovered him in such an act of worship. Darius desired to spare

⁵⁶ Isaiah 11: 11-12.

⁵⁷ Jeremiah 29: 10; Daniel 9:2.

⁵⁸ There is debate in scholarly circles relating to the exact name of this king.

Daniel, but even he as king could not break the seal and alter his own edict. Daniel, an innocent man was wrongfully defamed and sentenced to death and was cast into a den full of lions. The pagan king of Persia was distraught, and stated: “Your God whom you constantly serve will himself deliver you.”⁵⁹ Thereupon: ‘A stone was brought and laid over the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signet rings of his nobles, so that nothing would be changed in regard to Daniel.’⁶⁰ Daniel’s fate was sealed. He would certainly be killed.

Yet the following morning King Darius went to the cave and to his amazement and delight he found Daniel was alive. Daniel stated: “... they have not harmed me, inasmuch as I was found innocent before Him; and also toward you, O king, I have committed no crime.”⁶¹

Daniel, an innocent man, was sentenced to death because the king could not break his own law or edict. Yet he was spared death. Stated another way, he was miraculously delivered from death, as he was an innocent man.

Restoration from exile – the first time

Some Israelites in Babylonian exile, including Ezekiel, believed Almighty God would fulfil His covenant promises and restore the people to the land of Israel.⁶² One intercessor who petitioned Almighty God in prayer and reminded Him of the promise given through Jeremiah, was Daniel.⁶³

Then about the year 538 BC (BCE) the Persian emperor, Cyrus, decreed that a remnant of the captive Israelites be allowed to return to the land of Israel. These returnees became known as the Jewish people, and the southern region of the land of Israel became known as Judea. Much later Jewish settlers moved north from Judea and occupied the Galilee, which was part of the land of covenant promise entrusted to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

⁵⁹ Daniel 6: 16.

⁶⁰ Daniel 6: 17.

⁶¹ Daniel 6: 22.

⁶² Ezekiel’s prophecy of restoration also seems to refer to a second restoration. See Ezekiel 36: 24-27.

⁶³ Daniel 9: 9-22.

This restoration by Cyrus could have been due to a combination of benevolence and geo-political strategic considerations. Persia, like any of the previous northern empires such as Assyria and Babylon, was apprehensive of the southern empire of Egypt. They could, therefore, place a sizeable garrison force on their southern border, or they could alternatively populate the 'buffer zone' (the land of Israel), with a nation who would be allied to them. This way their strategic southern border could be secure.

If this was the rationale, then having the Jewish people in the land of Israel would make geo-political sense. Additionally, to ensure the returning Judeans remained loyal to Persia, only a remnant of Jewish people were permitted to return to Zion. Most remained in Babylon, as a surety or 'good behaviour bond'.⁶⁴

The returning exiles did not find the situation easy in the land of Israel, as foreign peoples with no rights to the covenant promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had moved into and usurped control over the land. Ultimately, through such men as Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, those Israelites who returned were able to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem and even to rebuild the Temple. They were also encouraged and exhorted by prophets such as Malachi, Haggai and Zechariah.

The Jewish presence thereafter was consolidated and life for the people revolved around alignment to two major ecclesiastical streams, ultimately known as the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Conquests by the Greeks and Romans

About the year 332 BC (BCE) Alexander the Great from Macedonia-Greece came onto the scene and defeated the Persian Empire. This incursion marked the first major European or western influence into the East. The Greeks attempted to force their western political and religious systems (known generally as Hellenisation) onto the peoples of the East. This included hedonistic culture and a pantheon of new gods, both of which were anathema to conservative Jewish people. Since the return from Babylonian exile conservative Jewish people were determined to never again be seduced into idolatry and the worship of foreign gods.

⁶⁴ What is of particular interest is that well before this first restoration from exile occurred the prophet Isaiah had already written of a future *second* restoration – from the four corners of the earth. Isaiah 11: 10-12.

After Alexander's death about 323 BC (BCE) his huge empire was divided among his generals, and the land of Israel initially came under the Greek regime in Egypt. The land of Israel, however, continued being a strategic and contested 'land between empires' and ultimately the Syrian-Greeks to the north conquered the land about 198 BC (BCE).

The process of Hellenisation (or cultural and religious universalism) now increased, especially under a dictatorial emperor named Antiochus Epiphanes IV. An attempt to totally eradicate the Jewish faith system and worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob resulted in an uprising about 167 BC (BCE), led mostly by Judah the Maccabee of the Hasmonean family.

Ultimately the Jewish forces defeated the Greeks and their sympathisers. They captured Jerusalem and re-dedicated the Temple which had been desecrated. This event was thereafter remembered each year and known as *Hanukkah* or the festival of dedication or light.⁶⁵

Real peace and harmony, however, never followed. Civil and faith-based turmoil continued for the following century and more. This dynamic once again highlighted that, despite Jewish 'autonomy' in the land of covenant promise, the 'disease' of disobedience and disloyalty to Almighty God was still operating within the hearts of humankind.

All the geo-political events in the land of Israel were being closely observed by the new imperial power in the West – Rome, which ultimately took control over the land about 63 BC (BCE). The Romans were a pagan power, and many of the pious Israelites resented being controlled by a political entity which did not esteem or recognise the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Tensions mounted in the land, and many eagerly sought the coming of a military leader from the family of King David (but of the character of Judah the Maccabee), who would oust Rome and redeem Israel. This forthcoming redeemer they called messiah – the anointed one.

The birth of *Yeshua ben Yosef* (Jesus the son of Joseph)

During this period Roman control over the strategic land of Israel was enacted through a dictatorial puppet king named Herod. Resentment towards Herod and the Roman presence continued to increase among a large segment of the Jewish

⁶⁵ For the fuller context see the book of 1 Maccabees; John 10: 22-39.

population. There were minor attempts to upset Roman rule, but Rome was determined to suppress any possible uprising and instability on its eastern border, lest an opportunity be provided for her geo-political rival, the Parthian Empire, to enter the region.

It was in this unsettled environment that about the year 6 BC (BCE) a Jewish couple in Nazareth in the Galilee named Yosef (Joseph) and Miriam were pledged to be married. Miriam (translated as Mary) was visited by an angel who stated:

“Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”⁶⁶

Mary, understandably, was in shock, and responded: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”⁶⁷ In the Hebrew this is translated as “... how can this be as I have not known a man?” In Hebraic society to have sexual intercourse is ‘to know’ someone, just as in Genesis 4: 1: ‘Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain...’ In the original Hebrew it says: ‘And Adam knew Hava...’

This was an incredible prophecy over this young Jewish lady, that her child would be the Son of God and would be a Davidic king ruling over the people of Israel. Although Isaac, Samson, and Samuel were all born somewhat miraculously, a virgin birth was unprecedented – although such a matter had been foretold by Isaiah the prophet.⁶⁸

When informed that Mary was pregnant, Yosef (Joseph) was going to quietly ‘send her away’. But then the Archangel Gabriel visited him and said:

⁶⁶ Luke 1: 30-33.

⁶⁷ Luke 1: 34.

⁶⁸ Isaiah 7: 14. See also Matthew 1: 18-25; Luke 1: 26-36. Although the original context of this verse relates to a particular historical situation, yet often there is embedded within a statement a deeper prophetic inference, a *remez*, or hint. Here the original Hebrew word used is *almah*, a young woman, but the Bible reveals that invariably a young woman was a virgin (*betulah*).

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”⁶⁹

These were incredible prophecies over the yet to be born child - that He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and would be the representative Israelite who would save His people (the Jewish people) from their sins. When added to the words spoken to Miriam that He was to be a Davidic king ruling over Israel, this unborn child indeed had quite a destiny ahead of him.

If this forthcoming baby was to be a ruler over Israel, then according to the prophet Micah He would have to be born in Bethlehem. Micah had prophesied that the origins of this forthcoming ruler ‘will be from early times, from days of old.’⁷⁰ The original Hebrew states that his origins are ‘from the days of eternity.’

Then, quite incredibly, the Romans called for a census to be taken, and residents of the territories, including the Galilee, were required to return to their ancestral homes. Joseph and Mary would need to return to the ancestral home of David, which was Bethlehem. As the winter in the land of Israel is very harsh it would seem unlikely that a census would be called in December.

Regardless of the exact date of the census, they returned to David’s town of Bethlehem. There, in a manger in an obscure location, perhaps a cave, Miriam gave birth to a baby boy. Nearby there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks during the night (a further indication that this birth was probably not in the middle of the winter), similar no doubt to how David would have been watching over his father’s flock nearby some 1000 years before. Fittingly it was to shepherds that an angel appeared and declared to them: “... for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”⁷¹ What a serious statement to be made to a group of mere shepherds!

Some years later a Jewish man named Yonathon (John) penned these profound words concerning the true identity of this Jewish child: ‘And the Word became flesh

⁶⁹ Matthew 1: 20-21.

⁷⁰ Micah 5:2, Stones *Tanach*.

⁷¹ Luke 2: 11. Christ is the English translation of *Mashiach*, Messiah.

and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.⁷² A Hebraic rendering of this statement is that God came to ‘tabernacle’ or ‘dwell’ among mankind – which reminds us of the purpose behind the establishment of the Tabernacle in the Sinai.

According to Jewish custom the baby boy was circumcised on the eighth day, whereupon He was named *Yeshua*⁷³ and thereafter known as *Yeshua ben Yosef* (Jesus the son of Joseph). Then, in accordance with the requirements of the *Torah*, His parents presented baby Jesus before Almighty God at the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after his birth. An aged man named Simeon took the baby in his arms and proclaimed:

“LORD, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
Which you have prepared before the face of all peoples,
A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.⁷⁴

This profound prophecy foretold the future destiny of this Jewish baby. He would be the saviour of all peoples; He would be a light to the Gentiles or nations; **and** He would be the glory of God’s covenant nation of Israel.

After this event wise men (seemingly from Gentile backgrounds) came from the East seeking the new-born King of the Jews.⁷⁵ Such news troubled King Herod, who was not genuinely Jewish – his father had been an Idumean convert to Judaism. Herod set out to destroy this would-be Jewish king. Joseph and Mary, having been warned in a dream, took refuge in Egypt.

After the death of King Herod an angel of the LORD appeared and instructed Joseph: “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel; for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother,

⁷² John 1: 14. New Testament.

⁷³ *Yeshua* is translated from the Hebrew as Saviour.

⁷⁴ Luke 2: 29-32.

⁷⁵ Matthew 2: 1-2.

and came into the land of Israel.⁷⁶ Thereafter Yeshua-Jesus grew up in the insignificant village of Nazareth in the Galilee region.

Jesus undergoes *mikve* – ritual immersion (or baptism)

About the year 24 AD (CE) Jesus came from the Galilee region to the Jordan River (probably in Judea). There He underwent ritual immersion, known as a *mikve*, administered by his relative, Yonathon (John – ‘the baptist’).

The Jewish ritual immersion, *mikve*, was for purification and was also part of the procedure for when a Gentile converted to Judaism.⁷⁷ In that period being a Gentile was synonymous to being a pagan – one who sacrificed to demons, worshipped idols and performed other ungodly acts. Professor Marvin Wilson describes what the original purpose of *mikve* (undergoing immersion or ‘baptism’) represented:

... once Gentiles come to faith in the living God of Israel, they no longer stand on the side of those whose lives revolve around heathen, idolatrous practices. Proselyte baptism was a graphic reminder of this fact. The candidate ... immersed himself in the waters, symbolically cleaning himself from antecedent defilement. His past behind him, he emerged to take his stand with the people of Israel.⁷⁸

John’s immersion, or ‘baptism’ was not for Gentile converts, but was intended for Jewish people who wanted to renew their commitment to God and turn away from acts contrary to covenant living. Many people came to John, but discerning the heart motives of some of these he proclaimed:

“You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to ourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Matthew 2: 20-21. It is important to note that here the land is named ‘the land of Israel’, not Palestine as it is often erroneously named. In 135 AD (CE) the Romans changed the name to ‘Syria Palestina’ in order to erase the Jewish connection to the land of covenant promise. Palestine is a derivation of Philistia, which was the representative pagan entity in Biblical times.

⁷⁷ The *mikve* procedure was later adopted by the Church and became known as baptism (*baptismo*).

⁷⁸ Wilson, M. *Our Father Abraham*, p. 22.

⁷⁹ Luke 3: 7-8.

John (the immerser or baptiser) made it very clear that being of the physical seed of Abraham (and thereby recipients of most of the promises attached to the Abrahamic Covenant) did not automatically make a person right with God. Right standing with God came only through confession of sins and repentance – accompanied by the offering of a sacrifice - as the Hebrew Scriptures had stated.

Jesus came to John to also be immersed or ‘baptised’, not for personal confession and repentance, but, as He stated, “... to fulfil all righteousness.”⁸⁰ In other words, to be completely identified with humankind. Upon seeing Jesus come to him John stated:

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.’ I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptising with water.”

And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him...”⁸¹

When the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus a voice from heaven proclaimed, “You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased.”⁸² These acts were made in public, and it could be said that Jesus began His public ministry at this point when the Spirit came upon Him. In former years such an Israelite, be they a judge, a king, a priest or a prophet, then set about challenging Israel’s apostasy, defeating Israel’s enemies, leading Israel as a nation, and representing Israel before God. Jesus now set about to achieve all of the above. He was to be *the* saviour-redeemer (*Yeshua*), *the* king, *the* priest and *the* prophet.⁸³

Jesus withstands the temptations of Satan

The first assignment in Jesus’ earthly ministry was to confront Israel’s biggest enemy – Satan. Following His baptism Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness (as Moses had been), for forty days of prayer and fasting. At the end of this time Satan attempted three times to entice Jesus into disobeying Almighty God and by doing so to give His allegiance to Satan. These temptations came by offering Jesus:

⁸⁰ Matthew 3: 15.

⁸¹ John 1: 29-32.

⁸² Mark 1: 11.

⁸³ As Yeshua-Jesus was from the tribe of Judah he could not be a priest according to the Sinai-Mosaic covenant. But Jesus was a priest according to the order of Melchi-zedek. See Genesis 14: 18; Psalm 110: 4; Hebrews 6: 20 – 7:10.

- Bread to eat
- Authority over the kingdoms of the world
- To fall from the Temple and be saved by angels.⁸⁴

On each occasion Jesus rebuked Satan by quoting from the *Torah* (the Hebrew Scriptures) and proclaimed His allegiance and total loyalty to Almighty God. Jesus knew the 'constitution' of the Kingdom of Heaven (God)⁸⁵ as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, and applied them in the right context. Whereas Hava-Eve and Adam succumbed to the temptations of the serpent (who operated under the inspiration of Satan) and did not rightly apply the Word of God, Jesus rebuked the temptations and trusted totally in the Word of God.

What was possibly the most significant of the temptations was the offer by Satan for Jesus to have authority over the kingdoms of the world, by stating: "I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if You worship before me, it shall be Yours."⁸⁶

All authority over the kingdoms of the earth had indeed been handed over to Satan – by Adam and Hava-Eve. By defying Satan's temptations, and thus doing what Adam did not do, Jesus now had established legal authority *on earth* to be the rightful and legitimate regent of God. Jesus could now be, legally speaking, the spokesperson of God on earth. This, however, was not the main purpose for why Jesus left the 'comfort zone' of heaven and came to earth.

Although Jesus was the unique Son of God, He ministered on earth by the anointing and presence of God's Spirit. God's Spirit was now upon Him, and through the power of the Spirit He had defeated Satan, the usurper regent over earth. One is reminded of how David under the anointing of God's Spirit went forth and defeated Goliath. David's credentials to be the king of Israel were established at that time, although the legitimate coronation occurred many years later when representatives of 'all Israel' entered into covenant with him at Hebron.

Jesus now had legal authority to proclaim the full extent of God's Kingdom. At this stage, however, Satan still had authority over the lives and eternal destiny of the sons and daughters of Adam, as these were still under the judicial sentence of death due to Adam and Hava-Eve's initial transgression and act of treason.

⁸⁴ Matthew 4: 1–11; Mark 1: 12–13; Luke 4: 1–13.

⁸⁵ Orthodox Jewish people refrain from pronouncing the name of God, so they use various synonyms, such as *HaShem* (The Name), and would preferably use Kingdom of Heaven instead of Kingdom of God.

⁸⁶ Luke 4: 6-7.

If there was to be a judicial solution to this death sentence over mankind, then God as the Supreme Judge would need to legally and justly commute this sentence. But how could this be done? The only possible way would be for Jesus, who had now become the legal regent over earth, to also become the head over humankind – who until this point were still under the dominion and authority of Satan.

There was only one legal possibility to achieve this - through covenant. Once two people or entities enter into covenant one with another then their lives and destinies become united. The best example of this is the marriage covenant, where the two become one flesh.

We can also find some similarities in the covenant between David and Jonathan⁸⁷ and when the leaders of the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron. There they stated to David, “Indeed we are your bone and your flesh.”⁸⁸ David and they then ‘cut a covenant’, and the destinies of both entities, the people of Israel and King David were thereafter united.

It would appear at this stage, the only legal way Jesus could bestow what He had now gained (becoming the legal regent of God’s Kingdom on earth) to the sons and daughters of Adam, would be through them being united with Him in covenant. Hereafter Jesus had a three-fold mission in Israel:

- 1) To teach and expound the true nature of God’s Kingdom (of the abundant life the sons and daughters of Adam had missed out on since their expulsion from the Garden of Eden).
- 2) To seek people who would be willing to follow Him and become united with Him in covenant.
- 3) To ultimately take the death penalty, under which humankind was condemned, upon Himself.

Jesus’ ministry as an itinerant rabbi

Thereafter followed about three years of public ministry where Jesus, as an itinerant rabbi, taught about the Kingdom of God (Heaven) and provided the correct interpretations of the *Torah*. Providing correct interpretations at that time

⁸⁷ The son of King Saul, with whom David ‘cut’ a covenant. 1 Samuel 18.

⁸⁸ 2 Samuel 5: 1.

was referred to as 'fulfilling the law', while giving improper interpretations of the *Torah* was generally termed 'destroying or abolishing the law.'⁸⁹

Many Israelites thereafter believed Jesus was the promised redeemer or Messiah of Israel. Although many devout followers were women, Jesus specifically called twelve men, who are regarded as apostles or disciples. Some of his followers, however, were looking to Jesus to be a warrior King Messiah who would oust the Romans, just as Judah the Maccabee had ousted the Syrian-Greeks.

Jesus taught the principles of the Kingdom of God (Heaven), and demonstrated these principles through many miracles, including healings and deliverance from demonic oppression. He taught on serious matters, but nothing was as profound as when He equated Himself with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, by referring to Himself as the Son of God.⁹⁰

Many Jewish people found this very difficult to understand and accept – without fully understanding that Almighty God is in fact a plurality of persons as revealed in His name at creation, *Elohim*. What Jesus' presence did reveal, however, is that even though through the previous millennia Almighty God often revealed Himself through *theophanies*, or appearances, and had walked with Adam and Hava-Eve, here He was actually walking and relating continually with His creation in the land of Israel.

The main purpose for Jesus leaving the 'comfort zone' of heaven and coming to sin-ridden earth, though, was not to teach and heal. On occasion Jesus alluded to the main purpose for why He came to earth - which was to die for the sins (covenant infidelity) of Israel and humankind. This Isaiah so clearly prophesied in the 53rd chapter of the scroll or book bearing his name, where it was stated: 'But the LORD was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief; if he would render himself as a guilt offering.'⁹¹ For an individual Israelite to be a guilt offering he would need to be an extraordinary person; he would indeed have to be God in the flesh, as only God is pure enough to be a perfect guilt offering and not be infected by the disease of sin.

⁸⁹ Bivin, D. *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus*, (Holland, Missouri: 2005), pp. 93-94.

Wilson M. *Our Father Abraham*, (Dayton, Ohio: 1989), p. 117.

⁹⁰ John 3: 16-18.

⁹¹ Isaiah 53: 10.

Jesus in Jerusalem for the Passover celebrations

About the year 27 AD (CE) Jesus departed from the Galilee and headed towards Jerusalem for the Passover celebration together with many of his close followers. On the way He again told his followers that while in Jerusalem He would be arrested, tried and then executed (by crucifixion) – but that after three days He would rise from the dead; and that His life would be a ransom for many.⁹²

A ransom is the price paid to retrieve or redeem something which belongs to you, such as money paid to release a kidnap victim. What then did Jesus mean by stating that he was to be a ransom for many?

As Jesus came atop of the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem, He mounted a small donkey and His followers began to hail Him as the coming king, echoing the sentiments of two Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Zechariah hundreds of years before, who stated:

“Say to the Daughter of Zion,
‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”⁹³

Then His followers shouted a well-known Messianic proclamation: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”⁹⁴

Jesus, however, knew most of His own people (the Jewish people) would reject Him as their King Messiah, but He also knew they would ultimately accept Him as such. Several days afterwards He said to the people of Jerusalem: “... you shall see me no more till you say ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”⁹⁵

This future time is likely synonymous to what the prophet Zechariah prophesied some five hundred years previous: “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for him as one grieves for his only son, and grieve for him as one grieves for a firstborn.”⁹⁶

⁹² Matthew 20: 17-19, 28; Mark 10: 33-34, 45.

⁹³ Matthew 21: 5, citing Isaiah 62: 11 and Zechariah 9:9.

⁹⁴ Matthew 21.9, echoing Psalm 118: 26.

⁹⁵ Matthew 23: 39; Psalm 118: 26.

⁹⁶ Zechariah 12:10.

The reason why Jesus knew He would be rejected by most of the ecclesiastical leaders and common people was because He understood His destiny – and they did not. It was God’s will for Him to firstly take the penalty of death which was upon all Israel and upon all humankind, just as Isaiah had prophesied some 700 years before, by stating:

But the LORD was pleased to crush him; if he would render himself as a guilt offering ... My servant will justify the many, and will bear their iniquities...⁹⁷

Jesus knew that only later, at some future time in history, would the nation of Israel recognize and accept Him as their redeemer, their guilt-offering, their King Messiah.

Jesus institutes Jeremiah’s the new covenant

The climax of Jesus’ time in Jerusalem began when He partook of the Passover meal together with His followers, particularly with His eleven closest followers, known as the disciples. At this point Judas had departed in order to betray Jesus to some of the ecclesiastical leaders. After the main meal Jesus took the third of the four cups which are drunk at the meal, and declared: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you.”⁹⁸ Jesus was alluding to the new covenant promised by the prophet Jeremiah some 600 years previous.⁹⁹

Jesus was saying that He was the representative Israelite for the institution of this new covenant that Almighty God was going to ‘cut’ with the nation of Israel – through which there would be the forgiveness of sin and iniquity. For a covenant to be instituted, however, there would also need to be the spilling of blood. Additionally, if sins were to be forgiven, there needed to be the vicarious sacrifice of a pure and unblemished lamb to fulfil this requirement according to the *Torah*.

Jeremiah’s prophecy also stated that Israel would ‘know him from the least of them to the greatest of them.’ To ‘know’ in Hebraic thought denotes relationship. Relationship between Almighty God and humankind - Israel and the nations - though could never occur until the barrier separating them was dealt with. This barrier was the judicially imposed penalty of death. The original act of treason in the Garden of Eden had to be legally overturned.

⁹⁷ Isaiah 53: 10a, 11b. Many Jewish leaders claim this refers to the nation of Israel, which is also a Servant of Almighty God. But grammatically this portrayal can only refer to an individual servant, and not to the corporate servant, the nation of Israel.

⁹⁸ Luke 22:20.

⁹⁹ Jeremiah 31: 31-37.

After the meal Jesus and His disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was arrested by men sent by some of the Jewish ecclesiastical leaders. Then at a mock trial He was condemned by those Jewish religious leaders present of the trumped-up charge of blasphemy. As the death penalty could only be passed by the civil authorities, the next morning He was taken before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. There He was ultimately charged with the trumped-up charge of treason – that He set himself up as a rival king to Caesar. The penalty for treason was death.¹⁰⁰

Jesus takes our death penalty

Although He was innocent on both counts, Jesus was nevertheless sentenced to death and was subsequently brutally (but willingly) executed on a wooden beam, a cross, outside the walls of Jerusalem. Above His head Governor Pilate had these words inscribed: ‘The King of the Jews’ in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.¹⁰¹

Interestingly in the *Torah* it is written that whoever is hung on a tree is under a judicial curse.¹⁰² Jesus was indeed a cursed man – even though He was totally innocent of the charge of treason. He was a cursed man because He hung vicariously on behalf of all humankind. He was in fact paying the price for that initial act of treason in the Garden of Eden and of its dastardly consequences.

Some 700 years previous Isaiah had prophesied:

‘Surely our griefs he himself bore,
And our sorrows he carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon him,
And by his scourging we are healed
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us had turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on him.’¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ John 19: 13-16.

¹⁰¹ The four Gospels have slightly different wording, but the common words are ‘The King of the Jews.’ Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19.

¹⁰² Deuteronomy 21: 22-23.

¹⁰³ Isaiah 53: 4-6.

While on the cross Jesus said of His persecutors: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.”¹⁰⁴ Then he said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”¹⁰⁵ and finally: “It is finished.”¹⁰⁶ Then He died. Being an Orthodox Jew of the time Jesus’ main language was most likely Hebrew, with probably a good amount of Aramaic (some of which the New Testament has retained). It was not Greek. The Hebrew word which Jesus possibly used, which is translated as *tetelestai* in Greek and “It is finished” in English could have been *nishlam*.

The root for *nishlam* is *shalem*, the same root as for *shalom* and *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem). In Israel today this word is used when completing a payment – and therefore it does literally mean – ‘paid in full.’ But what exactly is paid in full? It is the ransom price required to release the prisoners from prison, to set the captives or slaves free.

This time the freedom was not from physical slavery as in Egypt and associated with the Passover lamb. The ransom price paid through Jesus substitutionary death was to set humankind free from the greater slavery, from being subjects to the ‘kingdom of darkness’. This sentence had been in-force since that act of disobedience and treason in the Garden of Eden.

But to whom was this ransom price paid? The ransom price was paid by Almighty God to Himself, to satisfy in full His own legal requirements. Just as King Darius could not change his own edict but had to allow the law and set judgement to be instituted against Daniel, so too Almighty God could not change His own law – even though His heart yearned for relationship with Adam and Hava-Eve. The only solution to satisfy the legal requirements of His own ‘Kingdom constitution’ was for God to take this punishment upon Himself.

Now whoever heard of something as incredible as this? This was, in the eyes of the worldly systems, foolishness. Yet it reveals the very character of Almighty God, exposing His deep love for humankind and of His strong desire for restored relationship - for ALL to see. It was 100% pure grace or of unmerited favour towards humankind.

Everything is now finished, brought to completion. There is now perfect *shalom*, perfect peace – and this has happened in the City of Shalom – Jerusalem. In other

¹⁰⁴ Luke 23: 34.

¹⁰⁵ Luke 23: 46.

¹⁰⁶ John 19: 30.

words, God's plan of redemption was completed – a pure and innocent man (akin to a pure unblemished lamb) was dying in place of all of humankind to restore true peace and relationship with Almighty God.¹⁰⁷

Jesus' innocence is proven – He rose from the dead

Jesus body was taken down from the tree, the cross, and laid in a nearby tomb – literally a cave. A large stone was rolled in front, which was sealed, and the entrance was guarded by Roman soldiers. For all intents and purposes His body would rot and decay, as had His ancestor David not that far away.

But then in total vindication of His innocence (similar to Daniel), and proof that He was completely obedient to the *Torah*, to the 'Kingdom constitution' of Almighty God, that He had legally paid the penalty of death which was upon humankind, Jesus rose from the dead three days later.¹⁰⁸

*The death and resurrection of Jesus was the greatest act of love ever witnessed in human history. It revealed the depths that Almighty God was willing to go to bring humankind back into personal relationship with Himself. As no mere human being could ever pay the price to be released from the sentence of death, God Himself had to pay the ransom price to satisfy His own judicial requirements. Jesus truly was the Son of God - as one of the Roman soldiers declared when Jesus died.*¹⁰⁹

Jesus, the seed of the woman, the sacrificial lamb and the representative Israelite, had paid the penalty of death in full.¹¹⁰ Just as David had won the battle against Goliath as a representative Israelite and all Israel benefitted from David's victory, so Jesus had won the battle against a far greater enemy – sin, Satan and death. Now all Israel and all humankind can benefit from His victory.

Many more Jewish people believed thereafter in the resurrected Jesus. They repented, that is, they changed their allegiance or converted from being 'in Adam' and entered into covenant-union with Jesus, that is, they became *echad* or one with Him.¹¹¹ Not only was the penalty of death over them legally rescinded, but they also received the infilling of the Holy Spirit (God's presence) and the promise of

¹⁰⁷ Isaiah 52:13-53: 1-12.

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20.

¹⁰⁹ Mark 15: 39.

¹¹⁰ Genesis 3: 15; Isaiah 52:13-53: 1-12; Jeremiah 31: 31-34.

¹¹¹ Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Luke 22: 20.

eternal life.¹¹² This was proof they were now in a restored relationship with their Maker.

The ascension of Jesus – and focus for His followers

Forty days after His resurrection Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. On that occasion His followers asked Him: “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus responded: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”¹¹³

Jesus did not say that God’s kingdom purposes for the nation of Israel had now been negated by His coming. If this was the case then Jesus would have contradicted God’s own character which is bound up with His word and covenant oath. Jesus merely said that God the Father alone knew the ‘times and seasons’ and the task of His followers was now to take the message of what He had accomplished by His death and resurrection out from Jerusalem to all nations and people groups.

At that point Jesus ascended into heaven in a cloud and His followers gazed steadfastly at His departure. Then, as written in the book of Acts in the New Testament: ‘... two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”’¹¹⁴

The focus for Jesus’ followers thereafter was:

- Firstly, and most importantly, to inform individuals about the death and resurrection of Jesus and to encourage them to change their allegiance from being ‘in Adam’ and enter into a personal relationship with Almighty God through being in covenant-union with Jesus.
- Secondly, to look for and anticipate Jesus’ ultimate return to the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem where He would reign in glory as the King Messiah - over redeemed Israel and over the redeemed from the nations.

¹¹² Romans 5: 12-19; Hebrews 9:13-15.

¹¹³ Acts 1: 6-8.

¹¹⁴ Acts 1: 10-11.

The message of Jesus goes out to the non-Jews, the Gentiles

The followers of Jesus were initially given various names, such as 'the Way', or the 'Nazarenes', but they were in effect 'Messianic Israel' – the remnant within the nation of Israel who recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah and redeemer.

Non-Jews (Gentiles) then also became followers of Jesus, that is, they changed their allegiance and entered into covenant-union with Him. They were first called Christians at the city of Antioch.¹¹⁵

A number of these former Gentile followers were actual slaves. Although becoming a follower of Jesus did not alter their human status (they remained as slaves), yet through the principles of covenant they were now 'set free', as they were one (*echad*) with Jesus. For those in covenant-union with Jesus, Almighty God sees no differences – they are all the same, be they Jewish or Gentile, male or female, slave or freedman.¹¹⁶ Their true identity from Almighty God's perspective is they are one (*echad*) with His Son, *Yeshua*-Jesus. Such is the beauty of covenant-union, which was dynamic and revolutionary, within both the Jewish and the Gentile worlds.

One Jewish man who strongly opposed 'Messianic Israel' was named Saul, later known as Paul. Saul, who had played a role in the murder of a Jewish follower of Jesus named Stephen, was on his way to Damascus to arrest and bring other Jewish followers of Jesus back to Jerusalem to stand trial. While on the way a voice spoke to him from heaven:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.¹¹⁷

Jesus not only revealed Himself to Saul, but He also revealed a very important principle of covenant. When anyone, Jew or non-Jew, accepts Jesus as Lord and Saviour then that individual enters into covenant-union or oneness with Jesus, who although a circumcised Jew in the flesh, yet is also the incarnate Son of God. If such a follower is persecuted or harmed then the persecutor is acting against God

¹¹⁵ Acts 11: 26.

¹¹⁶ Galatians 3: 28.

¹¹⁷ Acts 9: 4-5.

Himself. That is a very dangerous position to be, and is a reminder of the dynamics that Pharaoh and the Egyptians faced.

Saul then changed his allegiance and entered into covenant-union with Jesus, and became the main ambassador of the Kingdom of God (Heaven) to the Gentile or non-Jewish world. These former Gentile followers of Jesus became partakers of the hope of 'Messianic Israel.' Paul in his letter to the new covenant community in Ephesus spoke of Gentile-background Christians as being part of the Commonwealth of Israel; while in his letter to the new covenant community in Rome, he equated them as being wild olive branches grafted into the natural olive tree – which is 'Messianic Israel.'¹¹⁸

Although these Christians from Gentile-backgrounds received those wonderful promises of the New Covenant (the annulment of the death penalty, the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life), they did not inherit all the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Only one such promise given to Abraham related to the Gentiles – that all the families on earth would be blessed through Abraham. The other promises, concerning the people of Israel and the land of Israel, do not apply to the Gentile followers of Jesus.

Almighty God's covenant promises to the people of Israel, including the new covenant, would ultimately be consummated in the land of Israel. During this future period the Jewish people, living in the land of Israel following a second restoration from exile, would: recognise the one they had pierced; call out 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.'; all come to 'know' Almighty God in a personal way; and acknowledge Jesus as the glory of Israel. Such a time, when all Israel would be saved, would truly be like 'life from the dead.'¹¹⁹

Almighty God inspired the prophet Ezekiel to write while in Babylonian exile of such a time, stating:

¹¹⁸ Ephesians 2; Romans 11. These new covenant communities of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Yeshua-Jesus are also known by the Greek word *ecclesia*, translated as church.

¹¹⁹ Romans 11: 11-32.

“For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God.¹²⁰

A challenge to all peoples

Although Almighty God’s great plan of worldwide redemption is centred upon His covenant nation of Israel, it is equally for all the peoples of the world. Concerning this broader plan, Paul while preaching in Athens in Greece stated:

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...¹²¹

Paul was proclaiming a message which although originating from Jerusalem in the land of Israel was indeed destined for the ends of the earth. He continued with his profound message:

Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man, whom God raised from the dead.¹²²

¹²⁰ Ezekiel 36: 24-28.

¹²¹ Acts 17: 24-28a.

¹²² Acts 17: 29-31.

That man whom God raised from the dead is *Yeshua*-Jesus. All humankind will be judged in accordance to their attitude to Jesus.

Yet in an effort to divert attention away from themselves some individuals might easily respond: "What about all those who have not heard of Jesus?"

Well Almighty God, who is the Supreme Judge of the world, alone knows the hearts of all people and the ultimate judgement for all peoples is in His fair and more than capable hands. The essential matter concerns each individual who has heard of the name of Jesus, and more importantly, has heard of what He has done.

According to a basic understanding of the Scriptures there are only two possibilities here; either an individual will reject the testimony about Jesus and continue living in allegiance to Adam, or such an individual will willingly change their allegiance from being 'in Adam' and enter into covenant-union with Jesus. In other words, they would revoke that original act of 'treason' in the Garden of Eden and give total loyalty to their true King. Jesus made His position very clear on this matter by stating to a Jewish audience: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."¹²³

So why then do we remember, contemplate, celebrate Christmas and Easter?

The central reason is because through these events Almighty God revealed His great love for humankind by coming to earth in the flesh. He did this solely to overturn that act of treason in the Garden of Eden and its subsequent terrible consequences, particularly the death sentence; and to restore a broken relationship with humankind. Such a restored relationship brings light and abundant life to those who willingly desire it.

If you are seeking such a restored relationship with your Maker and Creator, then all you need do is to repent, or honestly confess in your heart and declare with your mouth that you believe that Almighty God loves you so much that He sent His only

¹²³ John 14: 6.

begotten Son, Jesus the Messiah, to earth, to take upon Himself the penalty of death which was upon you.¹²⁴

Confess that you believe Jesus rose from the dead, which confirms that the ransom price for your redemption has been paid in full. State that you desire to change your allegiance from being 'in Adam' and you want to be in covenant union with Jesus. Ask Almighty God to send His Holy Spirit to dwell in you, Whose presence confirms that you are no longer under condemnation; but that you have been set free; and that you have inherited the gift of eternal life.

Once you have made this confession you are, as Jesus declared to a leading Jewish religious leader named Nakdamon (Nicodemus), 'born again of the Spirit.'¹²⁵ You are now a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven (God), and have been entrusted with an important task as an ambassador for this Kingdom. The most important and wonderful season of your life is about to begin.

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¹²⁴ See Romans 10.

¹²⁵ John 3: 1-21.