

new **Horizons**

Vol 19 No 1

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addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

With around two thousand Christian denominations vying for your attention, it's easy to miss the important issues of life and religion. It's our hope that through *New Horizons* our readers will come to understand the true meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel was proclaimed by Jesus and by His apostles in the clearest of terms - and recorded for us in the Scriptures. Over the centuries that truth has been buried, dug up, buried again. Our desire is to restore the simple apostolic message. We hope you will be excited by what the Scriptures reveal about life, and the horizons beyond

Who We Are

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* is an international association of independent local assemblies - Christians who meet together for worship, instruction in the faith and fellowship. Each assembly is self-governing according to Bible principles, but co-operates through our Conference with other like-minded assemblies to work towards agreed evangelistic goals

These goals are within the framework of the commission set for his church by Jesus: "...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptising them...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). He further commanded that we "...Shepherd...[and] feed my sheep".

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature - eg our bi-monthly e-mail Newsletter OUTREACH, the NEW HORIZONS magazine, the BIBLE BASICS on-line home study course, and the 32-lesson Study Course. The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren

We cordially invite all independent fellowships of whatever size - and individuals - to associate with us in this worldwide ministry. Our *Statement of Beliefs* and a *Publications Catalogue* is available from any of our addresses or from our web site www.cgom.org. We are pleased to offer you, without charge, any of our publications

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new Horizons

Issue No 109

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Few would argue that this is not 'a time of trouble' for our world. Globally, nationally, locally and even personally we face seemingly unsurmountable challenges.

Economically, the world is on the brink of financial melt-down. *Socially*, unrest with populations on the move as they seek to improve their lives or to escape persecution—thus straining relationships and public services in reluctant host nations, and prompting a clash of values and culture, and racial tensions. Then there's the threat of climate change (however it is caused), civil strife and destructive hot wars, disease pandemics, water shortages, widespread corruption in high places.

It is recognized that man has been 'civilized' for nigh on six thousand years. Surely time enough for us to get to grips with what ails us—those outward expressions of our defiled human nature. But no, for generation after generation we time and again repeat past mistakes, never learning. *Why?*

There have, of course, been amazing advances as human ingenuity builds on existing discovery, and as we exploit more of earth's resources. Ignorance, however, still stalks the planet. Again—*why?* What is that 'missing dimension', the key to peace and prosperity?

In the Beginning

Man in his beginning, and contrary to our modern mind-set, was at the peak of his potential, in perfect harmony with his environment, capable of an endless physical life, and equipped with the mental capacity to control his environment. He walked and

talked with, and was instructed by, his Creator with whom he was in perfect fellowship. But it didn't last.

We were not created as automata—but to qualify, through our choices, to become worthy of becoming part of the Family of God in whose image we are created.

The apostle John defines the source code for our in-built operating system: '*...in the beginning was the Word*' (John 1:1). That word was spoken, the Creator face-to-face with the created—the Channel through which He communicated His perfect way.

The Missing Dimension

Paradise Lost

But faced with a choice of continuing in that perfect way as instructed by the Creator, man was seduced to follow a path of self-determination. The human mind became progressively corrupted from the perfect 'operating system' with which we were created.

The apostle Paul explains why: '*...knowing God, they did not glorify Him as God. Professing to be wise, they became foolish...who changed the truth of God into the lie, and worshiped and served the created thing more than the Creator*' (Romans 1:21-25).

Hence arose the bizarre, infantile mythology of the ancients—often based on 'heroes' from the past, often being Bible characters re-named—as they rejected the Creator's word and invented their own religions, formed their own ways to God. (Often these contained ele-

ments—eg of a dying and risen Saviour—of the true teachings originally delivered by the Creator.)

The Missing Dimension

Is it any wonder, then, that our world faces chaos? That the world's leadership blindly follow paths that lead only into a barren wilderness and to destruction? That endless global conferences achieve little? That lasting peace eludes us?

Parliamentarians may profess to daily seek God's guidance for their deliberations—but His clear principles for a peaceful and prosperous global society revealed through the Channel

of His Word is ignored, rejected as archaic and irrelevant. A channel switched off, a *lost*

Channel, a missing dimension.

As a result the world stumbles to destruction, and as economies everywhere collapse and social norms break down a cry will go out for 'a strong hand from somewhere'. Global challenges undoubtedly need global solutions and an all-powerful global regime is necessary—and inevitable. But in human hands that regime will be dictatorial, oppressive, violent, ugly. And ultimately self-destructive—but, thankfully, short-lived.

Mankind no longer has the capacity to solve our problems. Our massive challenges on every front demand a *change of heart*. The missing dimension, the lost channel, is *spiritual*. It's 'not the economy, stupid'. It's not a lack of intelligence. It's not science and it's not technology. And the man-made—and largely satanic—world religions certainly have failed us.

A New World Order

Over the six millennia of human endeavor we have waded ever more deeply and unsuccessfully into the mire of human reasoning unenlightened by divine guidance. But change is coming: *'...At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart'* (Jeremiah 3:17).

Instead, led by the survivors of the family of Israel nations: *'...I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people'* (ch 31:33). With Jesus Christ at their head and empowered by God's holy Spirit they will return from a future exile to establish a model nation based on the divine Laws.

At that time *'... the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea'* (Isaiah 11:9). The prophet Micah adds: *'...But it shall be in the last days the mountain of the house [government] of Jehovah shall be established in the top of the mountains... And He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths; for the Law shall go forth out of Zion, and the Word of Jehovah from Jerusalem'* (ch 4).

Worldwide peace. Prosperity. An end to every false corrupting belief system. Hearts, minds, empowered by the in-welling Spirit of God. And Jesus Christ enthroned in Jerusalem on Mount Zion as King of kings and LORD of lords. **Ω**

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Let's Make a Religion

Increasingly the man-in-the-street becomes heartily sick of what used to be a religious festival—Christmas—though it is still stoutly defended by the church hierarchy. Fewer and fewer children have the slightest clue as to its significance, happily accepting the deluge of gifts showered on them every year, and adults are happy to join in the fun.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, recently acknowledged that this supposedly Christian festival was superimposed on the mid-winter pagan festival. He writes: *'It was pretty smart of the early Christian church to connect the birth of Jesus to an existing pagan festival. We have to recognize that a mid-winter feast pre-dates our own faith and belongs to people of all faiths and none'*.

Parties are a welcome break from routine, and a mid-winter break especially in cold and dark northern climes could possibly reinvigorate flagging spirits. However, when mankind lost touch with the Creator it was inevitable that a substitute would be manufactured for the 'parties' that God had appointed—His annual festivals, each of which has significance for our understanding of the person and mission of our Saviour (Leviticus 23).

It is now widely recognized that Jesus wasn't born at the end of December. Rather, his birth was at the time of the autumn festivals. (Request the article *The Feast of the Nativity*.)

Man-made Religion

With God out of the picture men turned to the 'host of heaven' - to worship the stars and planets. And not least the sun. Without God there developed a 'rationality deficit', and it was imagined that the declining and weakening winter sun was dying—and had by ritual to be encour-

aged back to life.

These rituals came to embrace debauched rites in which alcohol flowed freely with all its dangers for human misbehaviour. Much like the modern Christmas celebrations! But we have to ask: was it all that smart? Did the church really benefit?

Abandoned Foundation

As modern nations are finding out, if you lower the barrier to citizenship and provide hand-outs folk will happily accept. So—Christianity abandoned its foundation principles and promised everlasting life and freedom from state persecution. Christ's rigorous requirements for being in his 'church' were no longer applied, and becoming a Christian was the soft option - just say 'I believe' and you are 'in'. And you may continue with your old pagan religious practices, though we have now given them Christian-sounding names.

This was far removed from those principles laid down by God for acceptance into His divine Family. Writes the prophet Jeremiah: *'...Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the nations are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are vanity'* (ch 10:2-3).

Or, as God told Moses some eight centuries before Jeremiah: *'... take heed to thyself that you be not ensnared to follow them, after that they are destroyed from before you; and that you inquire not after their gods, saying: 'How used these nations to serve their gods? even so will I do likewise.' You shall not do so unto the LORD your God; for every abomination to the LORD, which He hates, have they done unto their gods'* (Deuteronomy 12:30-31).

cont'd p.8

**Our world is influenced and
largely controlled by an
unseen force**

Given human ingenuity it is difficult to understand how we have mismanaged the God-given abundance of resources yielded by our planet, how—after millennia of civilisation—we have brought mankind to the brink of global suicide.

It is not illogical to assume that there is an opposing power, an unseen malevolent spiritual force, actively working to undermine every human effort to advancement. That force is described for us in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. So let's examine our origins.

It Starts Here...

'In the beginning God...'. That has to be the starting point, for without an eternal all powerful Being without beginning and without end 'something' could not evolve from 'nothing'.

As would be expected, such a Being has a Plan—the intention of enlarging the God Family, to '...bring many sons into glory' (Hebrews 2:10). Not a race of automatons but actual spirit sons with His characteristics, His spiritual 'DNA', to reign with Him throughout eternity.

But first '...I will make me a material universe' in which these sons and daughters can grow to maturity. To facilitate this universe God first created a range of beings made of spirit (but not divine Spirit which alone is immortal, indestructible), His messengers—'angels'. In discussing the creation the earth with the patriarch Job, the LORD states '...when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?' (Job 38:7). Angels are elsewhere (Revelation 1:20) called 'stars'. Once God, billions of years ago, had created the physical earth in all its pristine beauty and bounty the angels were appointed as its overse-

The Unseen Spirit Hierarchy

ers. It was a time of testing for them—for they, too, had freedom of will.

Angel Hierarchy

Roaming 'here a little, there a little' in the Scriptures we are given glimpses of these powerful beings and find that they are arranged in a 'hierarchy'. There are untold millions and of various types, ranks and functions (Revelation 5:11).

Closest to God are the Cherubim—not cuddly children with love bows but mighty and powerful winged beings around God's throne. An example is recorded by the prophet Ezekiel: '... You were the anointed cherub that covers, and I had put you in the holy height of God where you were; you have walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire/ (ch 28:14). The cherubim, in symbol, guarded the ark of the covenant which housed the divine Law (Exodus 37:8). When our first parents were expelled from the garden in Eden, the cherubim protected access to it—perhaps until the Flood.

National boundaries are defined by God (Deuteronomy 32:8), and each 'nation' has been assigned an angelic overseer. Israel, for example, has the archangel Michael (Daniel 12:1, Jude 9) - '...one of the chief princes' implying, by his title, that he has authority over lesser angelic beings.

At another level, angels interact with humanity; they have an association with children (Matthew 18:10) for example. As their name implies angels are God's messengers, appearing in dreams and visions, and also appearing to men and women unawares (Hebrews 13:2) for comfort or pro-

tection. Such do not have wings!

The writer of the book of Hebrew discusses at length (ch 1) a major function of these angelic beings. Angels are not 'sons' of God but are created to serve those who will be so: '...Are not all angels spirits that serve Him--whom He sends out to render service for the benefit of those who, before long, will inherit salvation?' (ch 1:14).

Fallen spirits

The background of one of those covering *cherubim* is revealed though the prophet Ezekiel (ch 28). Having exposed the 'Prince of Tyre' for his ambitions of divinity, the prophet focuses on the shadowy fallen spirit called here the 'King of Tyre' who motivates and empowers him.

This 'King' is revealed as one of those *cherubim*—but one with a murky past. Records Ezekiel: '...You were the anointed cherub that covers, and I had put you in the holy height of God where you were' (v.14). More: '...You were perfect in your ways from the day that you were created' (v.15). So—a created spirit chosen by God for the highest honour at His side, and perfect.

Perfect, but only '...until iniquity was found in you'. Through self-exaltation, lifted up with pride, he sinned and 'so I cast you profaned from the height of God, and I destroy [remove] you, O covering cherub, from among the stones of fire' (v.16).

As one of the cherubim he was close to God, 'had the run' of Heaven. Expelled from access to God's heaven he was cast down to Earth. Jesus, you may recall, remarks that he '...saw Satan fall as lightning [a bright shining] from heaven' (Luke 10:18).

In a reference to these events, the prophet Isaiah (ch 14), using the King of Babylon as a type, indicates

Quotations from the Bible in New Horizons are from translations which clearly express the meaning in modern terms

that this powerful spirit being had been on earth at the time of his sin: ‘... He had ambition to ‘...*be like the Most High*’, to ‘...*go up to the heavens, to exalt my throne above the stars [angels?] of God*’.

To speculate—this cherub, together with those angels under his authority, may have been commissioned by God to prepare the Earth for mankind. He suborned these—perhaps one third of the angels (Revelation 12:4)—to rebel with him. They have since been earth-bound ‘...*God did not spare sinning angels, but thrust them down into Tartarus [a place of restraint—earth], and delivered them into chains of darkness, being reserved to judgment*’ (II Peter 2:4, Jude 6, I Corinthians 6:3).

Plan for the Ages

In preparation for the creation of mankind, planet Earth had been created perfectly fitted for him—as recorded in Genesis 1:1. The next verse describes a solar system in ruins, as Satan’s rebellion spilled over into the physical realm. The rest of the Scriptures refers to a re-furbished Earth on which man was created. The cherub—identified as Satan—had supreme authority, a position not disputed by Jesus: The Devil ‘...*showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.*’ (Matthew 4:8-9).

Had Adam qualified, Satan would have been deposed, but he now remains ‘...*the god of this world*’ (II Corinthians 4:4) and ‘...*the prince of the power of the air*’ (Ephesians 2:2) until the One who did qualify returns—Jesus the Messiah.

A New Order

Until that time Satan and his angelic supporting cast (the ‘devils’) seek to disrupt the divine plan by (successfully) infiltrating all human systems—government, economics, education, justice, social structures,

moral norms. And, not least the world’s religions, not excluding Christianity.

He continues to lust for and actively work towards supremacy over mankind, and seeks to bring about global unity under his sole control. He has his willing human helpers—they walk among us—who pass the torch from generation to generation until their vile goal is attained! Just as Satan tempted Jesus—unsuccessfully—he tempts with power and riches men of vastly inferior character. They are easy meat for such a powerful being: ‘...*your adversary the Devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking someone he may devour*’ (I Peter 5:8).

The ‘utopia’ Satan will rule over is one of total domination, persecution and murder of all who oppose—as described in Revelation 13.

A Pattern for the End-time

There’s an example of an ancient king whose world dominion eventually destroyed him: ‘...*The most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour: And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down*’. But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him’ (Daniel 5:18-20).

Daniel sheds further light on this

unseen opposition, explaining that there are evil spirit ‘princes’ over nations (they move in when a nation and its rulers depart from God). Michael, for example—‘...*one of [God’s] chief princes*’ (Daniel 10:13) encountered the (fallen spirit) ‘Prince of Persia’ who was obstructing an angel from conveying God’s prophetic message to Daniel.

The apostle John reminds us that Satan, that rebellious spirit that is ‘...*the god of this world*’—in control of the ‘Beast’, that end-time world empire—will for a brief period just before the return of Christ be successful in imposing his overt rule to the detriment of true believers: ‘...*And all dwelling on the earth will worship it, those whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain, from the foundation of the world*’ (Revelation 13:8).

It is with these dedicated Christians, who are ‘...*written in the book of life*’ that Satan will at that time confront: ‘...*it was given unto him [the Satan-inspired world ruler] to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations*’ (v.7).

Be Faithful

Because we have spurned the one true God our world is increasingly controlled by these fallen spirits. Christians are under pressure—from the media, from government, from family and friends, from religious leaders—to conform.

As wrote the apostle Peter: ‘...*Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world*’ (I Peter 5:9).

Not easy, but through daily communication with our heavenly Father and our Lord Jesus, through daily immersion in His Word, we can indeed resist. We must remain faithful, constantly *cont’d p.8*

Annual Festivals 2015

Lord’s Supper	April 2 <i>after sundown</i>
Unleavened Bread	April 4—10
Pentecost	May 24
Trumpets	September 14
Atonement	September 23
Tabernacles	Sept 28—Oct 4
Eighth Day	October 5

In With the New...

Are you a New Testament Christian? Should you obey the Old Testament laws?

Many Christians who are desirous to live by 'the whole word of God' are troubled by the evident differences between the lives of believers in the New Testament era and God's faithful before the time of Jesus. Are the Old Testament practices universally to be observed by Christians?

Of course, the so-called 'moral law'—the Ten Commandments—is accepted as a guide to behaviour in both eras. Though too many—most—Christians will exclude the fourth of these instructions, the seventh day Sabbath!

But what of all those other laws? Jesus made clear that the *written* law given through Moses was active: '*...Until the heaven and the earth pass away, in no way shall one iota or one point pass away from the Law until all comes to pass*' (Matthew 5:18). What has '*...come to pass*'?

What about the laws regarding *sac-rificial offerings*? Few would dispute that these have no place in the Christian era. (Though we are to be ready and willing to sacrifice in other ways.) *Laws of uncleanness*? These regulated access to Temple worship, so no longer apply until there is renewed Temple worship. (Though the principles apply—personal hygiene, *etc*) *Dress code* for Priests? The New Testament priesthood are all those in whom dwells God's holy Spirit. Such dress is redundant.

The Israelites also used '*remembrancers*'—written portions of the Law inscribed on the entrances to their homes, and on parchment which was attached to foreheads and arms—'phylacteries'.

Sabbath is a specified twenty-four hour time slot at the end of a busy week, and appointed in his beginning for all mankind by the Creator. For about 2500 years there are no recorded instructions as to how to observe the day—other than it is to be set aside for rest and worship of God as the Creator of all—it is '*...sanctified*'. (Genesis 2:3, Exodus 20:11)

Around 1500BC God established a model nation, Israel. To protect the seventh-day Sabbath and to emphasize its importance He set boundaries as to how a physical people should observe it.

Both Houses of Israel were exiled from Palestine for their disregard for the Sabbath. On their return the chastened House of Judah added extra restrictions beyond those applied by God.

For Christians, God's Law is '*...written on the heart*' (see Proverbs 3:3, 7:3), internal, no less important but applied according to each Christian's growing understanding as we are informed by our study of the Scriptures. (Remember, it is *God's* Law, not a control mechanism dreamed up by Moses.)

Then there is a stream of Law applied to the nation of Israel for its proper governance, as in Exodus. They regulated marriage, for example. Or were to do with health and

safety, or criminal justice. These laws are echoed in our own day—often by inferior versions and, as noted by the apostle Paul (Romans 13), their application is delegated by God to the appointed ruling authority.

Such law Christians are obliged to observe: '*... Obey the rulers who have authority over you. Only God can give authority to anyone, and he puts these rulers in their places of power. People who oppose the authorities are opposing what God has done, and they will be punished*' (vv.1-2). The exception here is when man's law is in conflict with God's: '*...we ought to obey God rather than men*' (Acts 5:29).

There are, too, laws respecting *worship*—when, where, how. God specified the dates for His festivals, and these are unchanging (Leviticus 23). But in conversation with a Samaritan woman Jesus tells her: '*...an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem*' (John 4:21). No longer are we tied to a specific central location, for '*...where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst*'.

At the same time we are urged to fellowship with like-minded brethren: '*...let us consider one another, to incitement of love and of good works, not forsaking the assembling together of ourselves, as is the custom of some, but exhorting, and by so much more as you see the Day drawing near*' (Hebrews 10:24-25).

We must each be diligent to learn every possible lesson from the Scriptures—both Old and New Testaments. But change has come: '*...for the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*' (John 1:17). **Ω**

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

WEDDINGS IN THE CHURCH

Marriage within the Churches of God needs to be viewed in contrast to the general trends of society as a whole. We try to follow a Biblical pattern, but too often are caught up in the secular or religious distortions of marriage. Any change to the received pattern will require a shift in our perception. This Guidelines addresses the Wedding Ceremony.

Marriage is joyous, and the wedding ceremony should reflect this. There are few requirements, derived from Scripture, for a wedding: expression of mutual consent, exchange of vows (the marriage contract including a 'dowry?'), celebration, State registration. In Israel certain practices, not necessarily recorded in the Scriptures, became tradition, eg a canopy, the veil, procession, ring, fine clothing, witnesses, feasting (for seven days) and rejoicing. They were symbolic. In Israel a blessing was pronounced on the bride by the families, expressing the hope that she would be fertile.

But weddings today are, increasingly, considered as a 'fun thing' – frivolous in dress, in location, in ceremonial, in choice of music. So - many pastors face a dilemma when asked to 'perform' a wedding, especially when the couple is unknown to them.

Conflict can arise, for example, when a minister isn't happy with the suitability of a marriage on any of several grounds. Do the couple understand marriage and its potential ups and downs, joys and pains, times of prosperity and its times of distress? What if either party is divorced once - or more often? Or a serial adulterer? Or if it's a 'marriage of convenience' – for example, to ensure citizenship? Or a 'forced marriage' as in Islamic circles? What if it's a teen fantasy? Or there's an abusive or a criminal background? Or he or she is a 'gold-digger'? What of a huge age

difference, or incompatible background, or a 'mixed' marriage? What if it's a same-sex couple seeking Christian marriage? Or if one (or both!) partners are 'trans-sexual'? *Is the pastor responsible – and to whom - in any degree should the marriage fail or its legality is questioned?*

[* *Trans-sexuality* is a post-natal psychological phenomenon, and often patients ask for the surgery/hormonal treatment to be reversed. They are just as 'tortured' in their acquired sexual role. Conducting a marriage for a trans-sexual is in effect joining two people of the same sex. In Britain – and elsewhere – proposed legislation will permit the right to change the birth certificate. So you won't know!]

In counsel before a marriage, the church elder should when necessary make clear any reservations he may have. However, it is the couple's own responsibility to make the final decision. The assembly leadership is an interested third party only, whose role is to prepare a Christian couple for life-long marriage. A suggested outline for godly counselling *before* a proposed marriage is available.

Pastors would be better, it seems, not to touch a wedding ceremony with the proverbial barge-pole! On the other hand everyone expects a pastor or priest or minister to conduct the ceremony. It's part of Western Christian culture.

Yet such involvement in a marriage is certainly *not* fully Biblical. The arrangements for a wedding, in the Biblical context, are a matter for both involved families, though there are also State legal considerations. The couple should seek to involve both sets of parents, though the latter are likely to favour a traditional 'white wedding', with clergy officiating.

But the involvement of 'clergy' in a wedding ceremony is a tradition born of the enhancement of control by the medieval church priesthood and does not derive from Scripture. *Consider* the following:

- "According to ancient patriarchal custom, marriage among the Israelites was the affair of the parents..." (C F Keil: *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, v.2, p.167)
 - "Marriage [in Israel] , being a private affair of the parties and their respective families, required no public ceremony religious or otherwise for its legalisation" (E Neufeld: *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, p.148)
 - "The human joy of a Roman bridal procession was denounced [by the church] as obscene, and the church regarded the marriage-rite as a ceremony to be conducted by its own ministers in an attitude of great gravity" (Joseph McCabe: *The Influence of the Church on Marriage and Divorce*, p.59)
 - "Marriage [in medieval Christian Europe] was still a civil contract - there was no obligation to be married in church until many centuries later - and it was dissolved on civil grounds" (*ibid.* p.79)
 - "The obligation to marry in church [*ie* a priest officiating] was not imposed until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, and until that date even Romans [Catholics] married without a religious ceremony" (*ibid.* p.94)
 - "In Rome itself marriage remained until the sixteenth century a domestic rite" (*ibid.* p.116)
 - "Luther saw that the conversion of marriage into a sacrament was an ecclesiastical trick designed to increase the control of the Papacy" (*ibid.* p.150)
 - in Judaism it is not required that a rabbi officiate at weddings the Scriptures have no direct instruction for a wedding ceremony – or for church involvement in it
- cont'd p.8***

**See also the articles
*Spend a Lifetime – Together***

So You Think You Know God?

Brutal, barbarous, controlling, unforgiving—all descriptive of the God of the Old Testament? That's the impression many—including some Christians—have of the Creator. What is He really like?

The God of the Old Testament—'JHVH', 'Jehovah'. 'LORD'—is often contrasted with Jesus who is perceived to be 'longsuffering', 'gentle', 'loving', and 'compassionate'. However, we might first examine what the Scriptures say about *him*!

There's no doubt Jesus is indeed all of the above—but there is another side to his character. He 'told it like it is', strongly condemning the Pharisees, for example, as hypocritical and uncaring, avaricious, iniquitous (Matthew 23). And he was known to express righteous anger.

At His return Jesus is portrayed as a warrior King (Revelation 18), supervising the destruction of all remaining opposition to His rule, slaying the wicked, imposing His Law over all the earth.

Not so gentle, then.

But this is not a change of character, for it is amply proven that the God we encounter in Old Testament times, known as JHVH (in the King James as LORD) is indeed the one born in Judaea some two thousand years ago, and called—Jesus.

And for all the apparent mayhem in those (pre-Christian) days He was the same gentle, loving, longsuffering and compassionate Being. This aspect of His character is fully manifest in Jesus of first century Judaea.

As the '*...only-begotten son*' of the Father (John 1:18) Jesus shared the

Father's characteristics and by

appearing in human flesh—a real human (Hebrews 4:15, Romans 1:3)—he demonstrates the Father's true nature as evidence for us. He is '*...the express image of His essence*' (Hebrews 1:3).

Bad Reputation

So—why the bad reputation? Why do even Christians ignore these fundamental aspects of the nature of the Old Testament God? Are the Old Testament scriptures not part of divine revelation—the unveiling of His true nature?

Surely it is a failure of *our* understanding! Could we, perhaps, be misinterpreting that notable text from John's Gospel—*ch* 3:16?

Whatever you may think of the pedigree of Jesus this text does say that this same God who ethnically cleansed the earth (the Great Flood of Noah) and nations (eg the Canaanites) '*...loved the world*'. But we also read: '*...I am He, and there is no god with me. I kill, and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is no deliverer out of My hand*' (Deuteronomy 32:39).

A Gracious God

Jehovah passed by before [Moses] and proclaimed, Jehovah! Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty

Exodus 34:6-7

You, O God, are God full of pity, and gracious, long-suffering, and rich in mercy and truth

Psalms 86:15

You, Lord, are good and ready to forgive, and rich in mercy to all those who call on You

Psalms 86:5

God is Sovereign!

Nations and empires come—and go. It seems random, as if we are swept along on the tide of history. But '*...know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He will*' (Daniel 4:17).

And not just nations, for He is a free agent in the exercise of choice in the lives of individuals. He chose Jacob, for example, over Esau: '*...Two nations are in your womb; even two peoples shall break from your body. And one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger*' (Genesis 25:23). **cont'd p.8**

'God' Defined

A dictionary definition of 'God' is '*...A being of supernatural powers and attributes, believed in and worshipped by a people*'. It is a generic term variously interpreted by different religions or individuals.

As wrote the apostle Paul: '*...For though there are those who are called gods, whether in Heaven or in earth (as there are many gods and many lords), but there is to us only one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we by Him*' (I Corinthians 8:5-6).

One 'God'—but a 'family' called 'God' consisting of Father and Lord and '*we by Him*', His children. Both Father and Lord share, in Old Testament times, the name JHVH, Jehovah. They exist, in both Testaments, in perfect harmony—both with identical but distinct personalities.

Spirit Hierarchy ...cont'd from p 4
 holding before us the vision of our glorious future as sons and daughters of the Almighty God, reigning over a world transforming under the wise and firm guidance of the one who did resist, who did overcome the death-dealing power of the Adversary—our Saviour, Jesus, through whom, alone, there is salvation.

Whatever may befall us in the flesh we can be sure that *'...I am with you always, even unto the close of the age'*. Ω

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Make a Religion...cont'd from p.2

And not just the prophets, for Jesus himself warned: *'...in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. For forsaking the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men'* (Mark 7:7-8). Those 'traditions of men' in the substitute Christianity of today added to God's prescribed form of worship such trivia as rabbits and eggs and decorated trees and men in red body suits. And as did the much condemned King Jeroboam they deliberately altered the *times* of the festivals to coincide with pagan practice, thus separating themselves from the one true God.

No, Archbishop. It wasn't very smart! Ω

Weddings ...cont'd from p.6

- marriage is not, however, merely secular: God is involved in a Christian marriage. Whether or not an elder officiates at the ceremony does not affect this
- The bride and groom (and their families) should work out a ceremony that will be special to them
- a suggested ceremony can perhaps be drawn up by the elders

Conclusion: An elder need not feel obligated to conduct a wedding ceremony – or indeed give 'a blessing'. There must, of course, be *proper registration* with the State authorities.

We should, of course, counsel brethren regarding godly principles – especially on the permanence of marriage – before *and* after a wedding. Church support for newly-weds is vital. But whether or not to marry is a decision to be taken by the couple, as is the form and conduct of the ceremony. [*A study outline on Marriage Counselling is available: Guidelines 8(A)*]

In sum: Marriage has clear analogies with the spiritual – Christ and the Church – but the 'joining' belongs to the secular. God has engaged and set in motion the process, but has not joined individual marriages: 'what' and not 'who'. There is no Biblical reason for the church leadership to be involved. All the brethren in an assembly – not just the pastor – should be supportive of the newly-weds. Ω

Know God? ...cont'd

And now, in the Christian era?: *'...you see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty'* (I Corinthians 1:26-27).

There is nothing random with God! He has a plan—a plan being worked out meticulously over millennia. His fundamental nature is unchanging: *'...the same yesterday, today and for ever'* (Hebrews 13:8). And *'...I am the LORD. I change not'* (Malachi 3:6).

God—the one and only God—is revealed in His Word as loving and compassionate and patient with mankind. But nothing will stand in the way of His plan and His purpose. Ω

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Why Does God Kill?

MiniStudy

WILL YOU LIVE AGAIN?

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2)

Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment (John 5:28-29)

The rest of the dead lived not until the thousand years should be finished (Revelation 20:5)

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming (I Corinthians 15:22-26)

To many it is inconceivable that death ends everything - forever. Surely there's more to life than our brief three score years and ten. The concept is almost universal. We like to think that our experiences count for something long-term. Indeed this longing for life beyond the grave permeates the major faiths. Christians and Muslims each in their own way seek Heaven. Buddhism merges us into the Deity. The Hindu faith brings us back to a physical existence up or down the scale of life according to our deeds. And many New Age religions subscribe to this latter notion of re-incarnation. In fact there are elements of truth in all these views

- All the major faiths promote their religious writings as divinely inspired and true. This ministry bases its beliefs firmly on the Christian Bible which we believe is the true and final Word of God (Jude 3)
- If man is simply the work of blind chance and not the work of an all-powerful Divinity who has a plan for us then this physical life is all there is: *'...bringing many sons unto glory'* (Hebrews 2:10)
- That plan entails the creation of 'clay models' who will be transformed by divine energy into spirit beings. Man is made of 'clay' - *ie*, the elements of the earth (Genesis 2:7)
- When our physical life ends it's *not* the end. God's plan includes - for every one of us: Jew, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, animist, atheist - a return from the dead: a resurrection (John 5:28-29)
- The harvest seasons are an analogy for God's plan for us. Jesus is the firstfruits (I Corinthians 15:20) - the first to be transformed from physical life to spirit life by resurrection from among the dead
- There follows *'a kind of firstfruits'* (James 1:18). These are those who in this life commit to follow the firstfruit - Jesus - and have received God's Spirit: *'...These are the ones following the Lamb wherever He may go. These were redeemed from among men as a firstfruit to God and to the Lamb'* (Revelation 14:4)
- This *firstfruits* harvest, relatively small, will be resurrected from their grave at the return of Jesus: *'In a moment, in a glance of an eye, at the last trumpet; for a trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed'* (I Corinthians 15:52). They will live again, never more to die
- What about the rest of mankind - all those since creation, dead and alive, of every race, of every religion and none? They, too, will live again, but in the flesh: *'But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were ended'* (Revelation 20:5)
- The *'thousand years'* - the *'millennium'* - begins with the return of Jesus as *'King of kings and Lord of lords'*: the political and religious Head of mankind
- Every one of us has to come before Christ's judgment seat to answer for our conduct (II Corinthians 5:10). For Christians that time is *now* - an on-going assessment overseen individually by the Father (I Peter 4:17)
- For all others it is the *'White Throne Judgment'* (Revelation 20:11-15) at which they will have opportunity to believe the Gospel - to have their names *'written in the Book of Life'*
- Those who then continue to reject God's plan in the Gospel are forever removed in an earth-enveloping conflagration (II Peter 3:7). Lacking God's Spirit they will die and be burned - just like refuse in the Valley of Hinnom - (Gk: *Ge'henna*, 'hell' in KJV) - Jerusalem's refuse dump. Compare the fate of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10)

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