

# Focus on the Kingdom

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*We are preparing a new book designed to clarify the simple point that Jesus, our Lord, was a unitarian. He knew of no creed but the unitary monotheistic creed of his Jewish heritage (Mark 12:28-34). If our faith is to be built on Christ we would do well to share his definition of God. I offer here an opening section of the book for comment. I hope readers will find the thesis challenging and refreshing.*

This book is about defining who the God of the Bible is. Such a project might seem to be a rather grandiose undertaking. But my goal is narrowly defined. I intend to search out the meaning of “the One God” as the object of our Christian worship. What does the Bible mean by One God? What is meant by biblical monotheism? (Monotheism means belief in One God.) Different, disagreeing groups of Christian believers all claim to be monotheists. Muslims claim to be monotheists, a billion of them. Jews also make that claim. The great issue is: *How does Jesus and how does the Bible define the idea of “One God”?*

My investigation involves a comparison between the creed of the historical Jesus and the New Testament writers, and the creed as it has come to be almost universally understood by mainstream churchgoers, assembling with the claim to be followers of Jesus.

I believe that Christians ought to be deeply concerned that their definition of God lines up with the definition of God given us by Jesus. I am not speaking here about the *qualities* of God, that He is love and so on. I am investigating this one question: “How *many* is God?” I am inquiring of the New Testament whether Jesus ever gave his approval to the idea that God is three Persons (Trinitarianism). Or did he teach that God is one Person (unitarianism)? There is a profound difference between a one-Person God and a tri-Personal God. We need to know how Jesus defined God. If God is one Person, then the next issue is, obviously, who is Jesus? These are central questions about how the universe is constituted. We need clear and solid scriptural answers.

Credos provide the foundational constitution of Christian churches. I propose that Jesus’ creed, as recorded in the New Testament, is not that of the churches which now claim his name. The New Testament, read within its own context, never departed one iota from the creed propounded by Jesus as the opening part of the greatest of all the commandments. Followers of Christ surely want to be assured that they are following Jesus at the very heart and core of faith —

belief in God? But are they informed about how the creed of the church they attend came into existence, and have they made every effort to ensure that the church’s creed is one which Jesus would recognize and approve?

The startling evidence of standard contemporary authorities on the Bible proves our point fully. Jesus had a creed. Jesus defined who God is. Jesus said that defining God and loving that God was the most important factor in our relationship to the Creator and our hope of gaining immortality. Jesus is the one who alone has authority to define God for us. We are pledged to hearing and obeying his words on this pinnacle question of who God is.

From the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, edited by Dr. Colin Brown, the article on God: “The One God. **Belief in the one, only and unique God is an established part of primitive Christian tradition. Jesus himself made the fundamental confession of Judaism his own and expressly quoted the Shema (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29ff). This guaranteed continuity between the old and the new covenant.**”<sup>1</sup>

And what does that cardinal text propose? “The Lord our God is *one Lord*” (Mark 12:29). Not — and we must say this emphatically — “the Lord our God is *three* Lords, yet one God.” Not “the Lord our God is to be worshiped as one God in Trinity.” Such a creed was entirely alien to Jesus, and it would have at once severed the connection between the Hebrew Bible announcing the God of Israel and the Christian faith of the New Covenant. There is no such “modification” of the creed of Israel in the teaching of Jesus. The God of the Jews is the very same God as the God of the Gentiles, as Paul stated in Romans 3:29. What are we going to do with this information? Are we to continue under the umbrella of a creed which defines our God in terms which Jesus would not have recognized as valid? Can this be squared with the command of God to “Listen to My Son” (Luke 9:35)?

I very much doubt whether most churchgoers have given this fundamental question much thought. The traditional definition of God as three in one dominates the church scene as unquestioned dogma. Open discussion of the traditional creed is unusual. If it is challenged, strenuous attempts are made by church authorities to insist on its truth. But church members have typically heard no sermons on the origin or meaning of the proposition “God is three in one.” In most cases they cannot defend this concept against opposing points of view. They have simply

<sup>1</sup> Vol. 2, p. 73.

been told to write off as “cult” anyone who questions the received definition of God. They are mostly entirely unaware of the steady stream of opposition which has objected to belief in God as one, yet inexplicably three at the same time.

I am convinced that “false belief holds the minds of men and women in bondage. Truth liberates them.”<sup>2</sup> We cannot afford to hold false beliefs, especially on such central questions about the God of the Bible and the God of Jesus. Above all, we need to be clear and confident about who God is. We all need to be sure that when we speak of God we are speaking of the same God whom Jesus called God. Above all we need as Christians to have the assurance of Jesus’ approval for our creed.

Jesus defined God for us in a famous creedal statement. But are churches really listening to Jesus’ definition of God or have they abandoned his view for a traditional idea of God which Jesus would not have accepted?

As a Christian I accept the foundational truths of our faith as revealed in the Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament. I believe the Bible provides solid divine authority for the truth-claims made for the Christian faith. It is obvious to me that Jesus and the apostles viewed the Bible as divine revelation, a perennial guide to human beings struggling in a fallen world. Jesus was the ultimate “biblicist,” asserting that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35) and conducting a full-length Bible study about himself, his true identity, from the “law, prophets and writings” (Luke 24:44).

Paul of course was equally solid in his conviction about the inspiration of the canon of Scripture. For him God had “breathed out” the sacred writings, which consequently represented the mind or spirit of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Scripture was a divine library designed to instruct us in the will of God. Paul, as an Apostle of Jesus, claimed to be speaking under inspiration.

I am thoroughly persuaded that the New Testament writers spoke the truth when they report, with one voice, that Jesus proclaimed the saving Gospel of the Kingdom, and invited all who came to him to prepare as royal family for royal office in the coming Messianic rule on earth. He died for the sins of the world and to ratify the New Covenant, and three days later came back to life. I am convinced that he left his tomb, and was visibly and tangibly present with those who had known him before his crucifixion. I am pledged to belief in the non-negotiable historical fact of Jesus’ return to life, as an indispensable pillar of genuine Christianity. Behind the amazing drama of the supernatural origin from a virgin, Gospel-preaching and healing ministry of Jesus, his crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and promised return

to initiate a new political and social order on earth is the unseen hand of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who was also the God of Jesus.

I have no reason to suppose that the resurrected Jesus was imagined by his followers. They had no motive at all for lying about what their senses had taught them to be factual and true. In an unvarnished way they affirm that they “ate and drank with him [Jesus] after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:41). “God raised him from the dead and he appeared to those had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people” (Acts 13:30, 31). I believe that on the basis of the testimony of those who lived closest to these events and were able to report them accurately. I have no reason to think that Luke, for example, was inventing fairy tales when he recounted the events of Jesus’ supernatural beginning in Mary, preaching ministry, and execution at the hands of cruel, bigoted Romans and Jews. Luke has been proven over and over again to be well informed with his knowledge of history and contemporary affairs. He gives no indication that he has abandoned his intention to report historical events, or drifted off into mythology, when he tells us that the resurrected Jesus delivered a six-week course of instruction on the Kingdom of God to his chosen students (Acts 1:3).

Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch presents the Christian facts in a transparently simple way, commanding our attention and belief. I find Paul here totally convincing.

“From this man’s [David’s] descendants **God**, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, **Jesus**. John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; and as John was completing his course, he would say, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.’ My brothers, children of the family of Abraham, and those others among you who are God-fearing, to us this word of salvation has been sent. The inhabitants of Jerusalem and their leaders failed to recognize him, and by condemning him they fulfilled the oracles of the prophets that are read sabbath after sabbath. For even though they found no grounds for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him put to death, and when they had accomplished all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and placed him in a tomb. But **God** raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. These are now his witnesses before the people. We ourselves are proclaiming this good news to you that what **God** promised our ancestors he has brought to fulfillment for us, their children, by raising up **Jesus**, as it is written in the second psalm, ‘You are my son; this day I have begotten you.’ And as for the fact that he raised him *from the dead* never to return to corruption he declared in this way, ‘I shall give

<sup>2</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, p.196

you the benefits assured to David.’ That is why he also says in another psalm, ‘You will not suffer your holy one to see corruption.’ Now David, after he had served the will of **God** in his lifetime, fell asleep, was gathered to his ancestors, and did see corruption. But the one whom **God** raised up did not see corruption. You must know, my brothers, that through him forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, [and] in regard to everything from which you could not be justified under the law of Moses, in him every believer is justified. Be careful, then, that what was said in the prophets not come about: ‘Look on, you scoffers, be amazed and disappear. For **I** am doing a work in your days, a work that you will never believe even if someone tells you’”(Acts 13:23-41).

I find Luke’s and Paul’s courtroom testimony style, plentifully backed by biblical quotation, compelling and rational. I have taught the New Testament for many years, working through the text word by word in a classroom setting, perusing the Greek originals, consulting the best biblical scholarship available in English, French and German. The New Testament displays those noble qualities of honesty, purity, courage and zeal which commend themselves and win our approval in other fields of endeavor.

It is of course eminently likely and reasonable that the great Creator would not leave His creatures in ignorance about His plan for humanity. He has in fact revealed His Plan through Holy Scripture and supremely and finally in Jesus’ Gospel preaching and teaching and that of his Apostles. The victorious resurrection of Jesus simply validates the whole story.

It would be much harder for me to believe that the Bible writers were fraudulent. What motive did they have for creating such a brilliant hoax, if that is what the New Testament story about Jesus and his followers really is? Imagine if their story was deliberately false. What could they possibly gain by reporting with joy their conviction, based on face to face contact with Jesus who had come back to life after being killed, that **God** had performed a marvelous creative miracle by restoring the crucified **Messiah** to life? If God had created man in the first place, what objection could one have to His bringing a man back to life? Why would those heroic early Christians incur the wrath of hostile religious and secular leaders by trading on what they knew was a grand falsehood — that their beloved leader had been restored to them visibly three days after he died?

Though I believe with a passion the extraordinary and yet eminently sane claims of the New Testament writers, I have the strongest reservation about what the Church, claiming to be followers of Jesus, *later* did with the faith of those original Christians. I believe that history shows an enormous difference between what has through the centuries come to be known as the Christian faith and

what we find reported as first-century Christianity. I think that a radical deterioration and distortion took place soon after the death of the Apostles, John, who died around the end of the first century, being the last of them.

Proof of the significant change in the belief system which overcame the post-biblical Christians is nowhere more obvious than in the *shift* which occurred in the matter of **defining who God and Jesus are**. The heart of Christianity as it was first brought to us by Jesus was permanently and adversely affected. I think that the Church suffered severe damage when the One God, the Father of the Lord Jesus, was turned into two and later three, and the human Jesus was obscured. I think I can demonstrate the radical change for the worse which took place, by simply citing the clear evidence of what Jesus had said about God and himself in relation to God, and comparing it with what the *later* institutionalized Church, after centuries of struggle and often violent argumentation, proclaimed as its view of God and Jesus.

As is well known the “correct (‘orthodox’) view” about God and Jesus was finally set in stone in the so-called Church creeds, notably at the council of Nicea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451. This was only after centuries of chaotic argumentation. Even after Chalcedon disputes over how to describe who Jesus was continued and according to the frank admission of contemporary experts in the history of Christianity “the demand for a complete reappraisal of the church’s belief in Christ right *up to the present* is an urgent one” (Grillmeyer).

This book hopes to make some small contribution to that much needed overhaul of the basic structures of “received” Christianity. I want to show you that the alteration which affected the very core of the belief system of Jesus and his earliest followers has had tremendous and far-reaching effects on the history of religion. Whole bodies of believers in God have been set in opposition to each other because of disagreement over the most important of all theological questions: Who is God? And who is Jesus? And what is his relationship to the God of the Bible?

The issue to be dealt with in these chapters can be boiled down to this: Does Jesus’ transparently simple and scriptural declaration that “the Lord our God is one Lord” (Mark 12:29) really warrant the centuries of disputation as to who God is, or have churches simply rejected their Jewish founder and Savior at the most fundamental level? Is Jesus’ creed negotiable for any reason? Is Jesus’ statement about the identity of God really that hard to understand? Is it really some incomprehensible mystery?

Is there perhaps also a deplorable anti-Semitic prejudice against accepting the Jewish Jesus and his creedal definition of God? If so, the Church needs to confess this and reach out in reconciliation to others whom it has rejected as “heretics.”

What I am *not* saying is that we can understand everything about God! What I am proposing is that God *has* clearly revealed to us in the Bible how *many* He is. Agreement on this question could vastly ease the tensions now existing between major religious groups. A start could be made towards seeing who the real God is, “the only true God” as Jesus called Him (John 17:3), and what He has revealed in His Son Jesus.

Are not Christians supposed to be following Jesus Christ, and if so, why are they not unanimously reciting *his* creed? Could it be that a departure from Jesus’ creed brought on the Church an inevitable confusion — a penalty for disturbing the proper understanding of who God is? Does the New Testament sanction thousands of differing and disagreeing denominations?

I propose that the Church, driven in some curious way by a distaste for things Jewish, has jettisoned the very Jewish creed of its Jewish founder and Savior, Jesus. The results of the giant ecclesiastical muddle which has ensued are visible all around us. Church history is replete with embarrassingly obvious disputes, excommunication, even killings, all over the question of who God and Jesus are.

Christianity is hopelessly divided into thousands of competing groups. Billions of Muslims and Christians have mutually exclusive understandings of who God and Jesus are. And Jews along with Muslims are forbidden by their adherence to unitary monotheism to make common cause with Christians who claim that the Jewish Messiah who has come (and is coming again) *was God. For Jews and Muslims that would obviously imply belief in two Gods, and belief in two who are God is not monotheism. That would be a clear departure into paganism. It would amount to the sin of idolatry.*

My thesis is certainly no new invention. Scholars of the first rank,<sup>3</sup> past and present, have in their various ways made the same complaint as I offer in this book, but their works are read mostly by specialists, and their words seem seldom to make any impact outside the world of academia. The average pew-sitter knows little or nothing about what they have said. Nor do most churchgoers seem to care much about how they came by the beliefs they hold. Somehow the fact that so many good people have held those traditional beliefs for thousands of years seems to make them unquestionably true. A soporific approach to matters of what is often disparagingly called “doctrine” seems to have overcome the church community. Very few who sit in church hear sermons explaining how and why it is that they gather

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<sup>3</sup>Interested readers would enjoy tracing the anti-Trinitarian passion of Sir Isaac Newton, the poet John Milton and Christian philosopher, John Locke, and of course thousands of other “dissenters.” The literature is vast.

under the auspices of a triune God. Nor do they know the chaotic history and the interminable wrangles which led to the accepted creed. This they do not know: that the concept of God as three Persons was not taught continuously from the New Testament onwards. The Trinitarian idea of God emerged as fixed dogma only after a prolonged struggle lasting for several centuries. The victorious party was not necessarily in the right. The victorious party suppressed the protests of its opponents. The question about who God is ought at least to be open for reasoned discussion on the basis of biblical and historical facts. Those who know that God demands that we love Him with all our “minds and strength” should feel the need to be informed. To do less is to risk being deceived.

Jesus warned almost daily about the dangers of ecclesiastical traditions. He knew how easily they can pose a threat to divine revelation in Scripture. Jesus observed that God, his Father, was seeking men and women to worship Him within a framework of spirit and truth: “Those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:26). This would mean that acceptable service to God must be informed by revealed truth and not marred and rendered ineffective by untrue tradition, however hallowed and cherished.

A wise scholar, the late Professor F.F. Bruce, observed this in correspondence with me many years ago: “People who adhere to belief in the Bible only (as they believe) often adhere *in fact* to a traditional school of interpretation of *sola scriptura*. Evangelical Protestants can be as much servants of tradition as Roman Catholics or Greek Orthodox, only they don’t realize it is tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Being an evangelical “born again” Christian is in itself no guarantee that one has learned the Christian faith from the Bible rather than traditions imposed on the Bible.

Surprisingly, it seldom seems to occur to faithful members of churches that their own fundamental “taken-for-granted” may be entirely at odds with the teaching of the one whom they claim as the pioneer and originator of their faith, the Messiah Jesus. That striking mismatch between Jesus’ definition of who God is and the almost universal definition of God on the books of mainline Christianity should be a matter of concern for all who claim that the Bible is the only ultimate standard for believers. I am confident that a glaring difference in the definition of the Deity authorized by Jesus and the definition required by church members today is demonstrable. The facts are not very complicated, though they have become dauntingly complex because of a massive departure from the “simplicity” presented by Jesus himself. His creed — his definition of the true God — is lucidly simple. It asks simply to be believed.

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<sup>4</sup>Correspondence, June 13, 1981.

Creeds remind us of the basic framework of our religion. They are a statement of belief in concise form reminding those who gather in church week by week of the substance of their convictions about God, Jesus and salvation. Many of us remember for a lifetime the words of the creeds we recited dutifully in church. Not that we necessarily understood what we were saying, but our weekly utterance seemed to have gained an untouchable sanctity by its sheer antiquity, and by the immense learning and weight of unbroken tradition with which apparently it was backed. How many of us could have explained how it was that “Jesus descended into hell”? That seemed to be the last place he ought to have gone to, in view of what we understood by “hell.” No one bothered to explain the complete shift in meaning which had taken place in the word “hell.” In the case of Jesus, it meant in Scripture simply that he had gone to the place of rest where all the dead are. The Church seemed somehow to tighten its grip on us by allowing the creeds to transmit an atmosphere of mysticism, even incomprehensibility. Perhaps they were really not meant to be intelligible. Could religious belief really be so rational and logical that it could be conveyed in intelligible words?

On the other hand Jesus seemed to reason and dispute in a tight logical fashion as he sought to defend his claims against fierce opposition. Jesus obviously argued from the Bible, the Old Testament of his time. Would not a Christian do the same thing?

Christianity, it is assumed, is based on the recorded teachings of Jesus, who claimed to be the Son of God and Messiah and who congratulated his leading disciple for his brilliant God-given insight in recognizing him as such: “the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of God” (Matt. 16:16-18). On that impregnable rock foundation Jesus promised to build his Church. He thus provided the central basis for sound views of who he was, guarding against the ever-present threat of rival “Jesuses,” distortions of his true identity or other claimants to religious devotion.

The New Testament world of thought may well seem strange to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Do we still view the battle for truth as a constant life and death struggle? Jesus and Paul obviously did. Neither Jesus nor Paul was advocating just good morals or a refined humanism. People are not persecuted and hounded for such programs. Yet Jesus warned his followers that they would have to take up their cross daily, and he meant the cross of crucifixion. They would have to expect opposition from “the establishment” which had proven so intractably hostile to him as the Messiah of Israel. Most startling of all, Jesus foresaw the worst form of persecution arising from a religious quarter. “The time will come when anyone who kills you disciples of mine will think they are doing a holy service for God” (John 16:2). Such a

situation can arise only if a huge deception of religious people has occurred.

### **Jesus the Messiah and Son of God**

Jesus, our New Testament records report unanimously, claimed to be the Messiah promised by his own Hebrew heritage in the Hebrew Bible, that library of writings we call the Old Testament, whose limits Jesus defined precisely as “the Law, prophets and the writings” (Luke 24:44). These documents Jesus obviously treated as a repository of divine, authoritative truth about what his God, the Creator and the God of Israel, was doing in the history of human kind. Jesus’ central role in the unfolding divine plans was his unique position as “the Christ, the Son of God.” Based on the understanding of that staggering truth his own followers were to be united in one Church, the assembly of the faithful (Matt. 16:16-18).

One cannot go more to the core of the issue than by reminding ourselves of what Jesus considered absolutely primary and fundamental. Our loyalty to Jesus demands that we take him very seriously when he spoke of the rock foundation of the Church he founded. Jesus was intensely interested in who Peter thought he (Jesus) was. Various public opinions were held, but Jesus wanted to assure himself that Peter had the absolute truth about the identity of Jesus.

It is at this point that Jesus could have said so easily, “I am God, and on this rock I will found my Church.” That affirmation appears to be required today for membership in the mainline churches. But Jesus said nothing at all like that. Once again we suggest that the churches have betrayed their rabbi and master by departing from Jesus’ own clear definition of what is fundamental to faith. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus inquired of the leading Apostle, Peter. “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” was Peter’s confident reply. This correct creedal answer delighted Jesus: “Blessed are you, Peter. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven. On that rock foundation I will build my Church.” Could anything be clearer than the mind of Jesus on this central question? Surely not. Not a hint or word about Jesus being God Himself! Jesus is the Christ. He is the Son of God.

Lee Strobel in his well-known investigation of the Christian faith spoke with an evangelical professor, Ben Witherington. The conversation proceeded as follows. Strobel said, “Jesus tended to shy away from forthrightly proclaiming himself to be the Messiah or Son of God. Was that because he did not think of himself in those terms or because he had other reasons?” Ben Witherington replied, “No, it’s not because he did not think of himself in those terms. If he had simply announced, ‘Hi, folks; I’m God,’ that would have been heard as ‘I’m Yahweh,’ because the Jews of his day did not have any concept of the Trinity.

They only knew of God, the Father — whom they called Yahweh, and not God the Son or God the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

Two comments are necessary. Yes, Jesus exercised a restraint before the public about his identity as the Messiah. But he left not a shadow of doubt in the minds of his chosen followers about who he was. We have just seen that Jesus viewed the understanding of him as the Christ, *the Son of God*, as the essential basis of the Christian faith, the rock creed. Peter was congratulated for his insight. The New Testament confirms that truth every time it refers to Jesus as the Christ, which of course happens over and over again.

Secondly Witherington unconsciously concedes that belief that Jesus *is God*, a member of the Trinity, is impossible according to the records of Jesus’ teaching. He is absolutely right when he states that if Jesus had said, “I am God,” he would have meant “I am Yahweh, the God of Israel.” The claim to be the God of Israel would have been nonsensical. No Jew could possibly have understood it, much less accepted it as true. Nor did Jesus believe he was Yahweh. He claimed to be Yahweh’s Son.

And Strobel is absolutely right to say that Jews of Jesus’ day knew nothing of a Triune God. Such a concept would have been a radical and shocking, even blasphemous, innovation. This is essential background information and fact, as we proceed with our investigation.

Jesus himself claimed in conversation with a Jew, as we have seen, that he subscribed to the Jewish unitary monotheistic creed, the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4). The *Shema* proclaimed that God is one Person. That really settles the whole issue we are discussing. Jesus is on record as reciting and affirming the strictly monotheistic creed of the Jews (Mark 12:28-34). He also said “that salvation is of the Jews” and “*we Jews* know whom we worship” (John 4:22). And everyone should know that it was not a Triune God. Amen, indeed, to Strobel’s correct statement: “The Jews of Jesus’ day did not have any concept of the Trinity.” But neither did Jesus! He believed exactly the same as his colleague Jews about the central affirmation of Judaism, that God is a single Person. The creed of Christ Jesus ought to be the creed of the Christian Church. That it is not should be cause for alarm. Jesus was a unitarian, believing that God the Father alone was truly God (John 17:3). That God is “one Lord” (Mark 12:29).

The issue is very clear. How faithfully has Jesus’ understanding of God and of himself as the Messiah been relayed to us over the many centuries since Peter uttered his historic words about the critically important identity of Jesus as Christ and Son of God? (Matt. 16:16-18). I

want to propose that essential elements of that rock foundation of truth have been lost to churches. The transmission of the most central of all spiritual information, the identity of God and of Jesus, has suffered a subtle and amazing distortion. And this perversion of original truth was well under way as early as the middle of the second century, a little over a hundred years after the death of Jesus. Earlier, the apostles had battled hard against the various counter-ideas which threatened to obscure who God and Jesus are. Soon after their death, with the stabilizing power of apostolic authority removed, a subtle invasion of new and contrary views of Jesus and his identity, as well as the identity of God affirmed by Jesus, took place.

The results of that *later* theological thinking, enshrined in the creeds, continue to hold sway over the minds of countless dedicated churchgoers. They are mostly unaware of the shift in understanding at the heart of the faith which has taken place. They have been persuaded in large numbers to believe that the New Testament they carry to church, containing the very teachings of Jesus and his agents the Apostles, supports the same teachings as they have learned in church. I think that assumption needs to be challenged in the interests of plain honesty and the need for us all to share the mind of Christ.

A whole school of professional opinion, remarkably confirmed by American, British and German Bible specialists of current times, backs my central thesis that what we now have as “the faith” is in important respects quite unlike the faith known to Jesus, the faith which his half-brother Jude urged the faithful to cling to tenaciously in the face of opposition which *in the first century* was attempting to undermine “the faith once and for all delivered to the holy people” (Jude 3).

If you are prepared to accept the New Testament records as a faithful account of the teachings of the Jesus of history, Jesus of Nazareth, are you willing to search out Jesus’ view of the authentic orthodox creed? Does our acceptance of Jesus as “lord” extend to a willingness on our part to accept and embrace with enthusiasm Jesus’ teaching about who God is?

That would not seem to be unreasonable, unless of course we invest in the “Church” the right to supersede the opinions of Jesus. That could not be, you may say. But don’t be too sure that such a transference of authority from Jesus to “Church” has not in fact occurred. It is safer to inquire of the original documents themselves which are now so readily available to us. Calling Jesus “lord” presumably means believing and obeying his teachings, especially in the matter of the central creed which defines God. ✧

<sup>5</sup>*The Case for Christ*, p. 133.

## An Issue of Prophecy

### Where Do We Expect Psalm 83 to Be Fulfilled?

by Stephen Cook

We don't need to find modern-day descendants of the Amalekites; we need to identify who occupies the territory which the Amalekites occupied at the time Psalm 83 was written. We won't find any Philistines living anywhere today, but we do find a hybridized group of Egyptians/Syrians/Jordanians living in the territory of Philistia and calling themselves by the Latinized/Anglicized name for Philistia (Palestine).

The territories occupied by the nations/tribes named in Psalm 83 are roughly as follows: Edom in modern Jordan; Ishmaelites in modern Saudi Arabia; Moab in modern Jordan; Hagrites — the territory bordering modern Jordan and Saudi Arabia; Gebal — probably modern Golan Heights and nearby in Syria; Ammon in modern Jordan; Amalek in the modern Sinai peninsula and the Negev; Philistia — modern Gaza Strip, part of the Palestinian authority; Tyre in modern Lebanon; Assyria — modern Syria and Iraq.

The important thing to notice, I think, is that the Psalmist here lists a group of nations/tribes which immediately surround Israel on all sides. The nations of Ezekiel 38, on the other hand, are a great distance from Israel, although they too are found in all directions. While the Gog and Magog of Revelation 20:8 is probably a prophecy about a different event, John picks up the point from Ezekiel that this confederacy comes from the four corners of the earth. There is no correspondence or overlapping between the nations of Psalm 83 and Ezekiel 38.

What I see by comparing the main prophecies of the final conflict is this sequence: An invasion of Israel by her immediate neighbors (Ps. 83; Zech. 14; Ezek. 35; Joel 3) — an inner circle of nations. Jerusalem is taken captive (Zech. 14 and Ezek. 35). The Lord returns and delivers Jerusalem, and defeats Israel's surrounding enemies, and establishes his Kingdom on a renewed earth. Israel dwells in peace and safety, without walls or gates (Ezek. 38:8, 11). There is an invasion of Israel by an outer circle of nations — from the four corners of the earth (Ezek. 38). The outer circle of invaders is defeated. The Kingdom expands peacefully (Psalm 72).

It's significant that both the inner and outer circles of nations described above are all Islamic nations (the false prophet of Revelation?). It's also interesting that the only list of 10 confederate nations or tribes anywhere in Scripture is in Psalm 83. These may be the 10 toes of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, or the ten heads or ten horns mentioned elsewhere. ✧

## A Visit to the Philippines

Barbara and I set off from Atlanta to Los Angeles and then, via a long 12-hour stint on Cathay Pacific Airlines, to Hong Kong. Having a few hours spare there we ventured into the city, found rather little English communication (my Chinese is non-existent!) but were driven at breakneck speed via double decker bus to a local market. I was able to take in a Buddhist temple which reminded me very much of the Roman Catholic churches which pervade the Philippines. The same dingy atmosphere, the same candles, and the same statues of various figures, Buddha or Mary. From Hong Kong we proceeded to Cebu City in the island of Cebu which is one of 7,000 islands comprising the Philippines.

American culture has made its impact here, although the religion is predominantly Catholic from the islands' founders. Mary presides in taxis, airports and stores. TV is full of religion including massive coverage by Seventh-Day Adventists and a local "star" Quibuloy, who is reckoned by his millions of followers to be in some special sense the "anointed and appointed Son of God." Devoted fans express their loyalty.

Two days stand out for us. In Davao we spent a day dealing with the coming Kingdom of God on earth. It is amazing how difficult this can be for folk who seem transfixed with the idea that "heaven" is our home and that Jesus never really comes back to the earth, but just "visits" to take the righteous to their real home in celestial places. But we made some progress. More difficult was the proposition we put to them that "the Lord our God is one Lord" (Mark 12:29), a clear enough testimony one would think to the single personality of God, the Father of Jesus. But here we encountered some opposition. However literature is backing up our visits and some were reflective and possibly open to the idea that Jesus is the Son of God, not God Himself, which would destroy his own confession and affirmation in Mark 12:28-34.

It is a joy to find keen, well-instructed Bible students in far off places. In Manila a splendid group of ex-Worldwide Church of God and other people gathered for a whole day. They had been devouring the liberating teachings about the New Covenant, freedom from those aspects of law which divided Jews from Gentiles, and they were eager to explore the equally liberating concept that God is One Person and Jesus the uniquely begotten Son now elevated to a glorious position at the right hand of the Father. We are dispatching lots of books for follow-up. A stable group is already in place there in Manila with great prospects of growth and progress. We are planning to move our radio program into that area. While in Cebu City and Davao we visited two radio stations and were given a half hour of live time on radio. It is amazing how easy it is to speak about the Kingdom of God, Jesus and the One God to people for whom these are alien ideas! We are grateful for all the prayers offered for our trip and we plan to return, God willing.

Security at the airports was unprecedented. For this we are thankful, but one cannot help reflecting on the tragedy which is our world, in which every human being must be suspected of being a bomber ready to destroy. We need the Kingdom of God on earth. ✧