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# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## Part 1

*“Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.”* (Jonah 1:1-3)

We commence to study a book of Holy Scripture which, despite its brevity, has attracted as much contention as any other section of Holy Writ. The little book of Jonah has been, and still is, a great battle-ground of destructive textual criticism. Yet such an eminent literary authority as Charles Reade stated that: “Jonah is the most beautiful story ever written in so small a compass.”\* I find that to be quite an amazing statement, coming from a renowned secular writer. Robert Lee, the author of that most useful work *The Outlined Bible*, in his analysis of the book of Jonah writes: “It is a perfect gem and is simply full of teaching”. Sadly, by quite a few who would claim to be orthodox theologians, this fifth book of the minor prophets is held to be an allegory, having no basis in history. They might accept its divine inspiration, but deny it to be historical account of actual happenings, regarding it like the parables told by the Lord: merely a story designed to illustrate certain national and spiritual truths. Our study of this book will **not** be along such lines; even in the introductory section of this series I have no hesitation whatsoever in affirming that the book of Jonah is fact, not fiction; it is history and not fable. This will soon become apparent from the Scriptures themselves.

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\* Charles Reade (1814 – 1884) popular Victorian novelist and dramatist in “*Bible Characters*”, 1889

Jonah was a bona-fide prophet in Israel – but no prophetic utterances concerning those people are found in his book. The only part of its content which can be described as ‘prophetic’ in nature is that the Lord’s burial and resurrection are prefigured there; although this would not have been identifiable to persons of the time. Also foreshadowed in this little book is the extension of God’s mercy and grace to the Gentiles. Besides this, the writings of Jonah are unique among the minor prophets, in that these four chapters are a biographical account of the man himself and his ministry – a man who, during his life, experienced a most miraculous happening.

Merrill Unger, in his Bible Dictionary, states that: “the content of the book of Jonah is of the miraculous. It sets forth that nothing is impossible with God ... Critics commonly treat the book as legend or myth; this book is correctly evaluated as history”. The miracles of the book of Jonah are but a part of those wonders which permeate the Old Testament, as well as the New. The storm, Jonah being swallowed by a great fish, the conversion of the Ninevites, and so on, are no more incredible than the flood of Noah’s day, the dividing of the Red Sea, the cloudy-fiery pillar, manna from heaven, or the preservation of the three Hebrews in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace – indeed the whole Bible is a book of miracles.

Accepting then, that Jonah and his writings are authentic history, let the Scriptures be examined. It might be mentioned that Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, has much to say about Jonah and Nineveh in the *Antiquities of the Jews* (Book IX); and his writings, although secular, are in line with what is written in the Bible. Not that any outside confirmation is necessary, for God’s Word is truth (cf John 17:17).

*“Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai”* (Jonah 1:1). Who was this man, and at what period did he live? Compare this further reference: *“In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel began to reign in Samaria, and reigned*

*forty and one years. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord: he departed not from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He spake by the hand of His servant **Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet**, which was of Gath-hepher. For the Lord saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter: for there was not any shut up, nor any left, nor any helper for Israel. And the Lord said not that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven: but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash” (2 Kings 14:23-27).*

As previously stated, the authenticity of this man Jonah is readily discovered. He was an historical figure who lived at the time of Jeroboam II (king over the ten northern tribes of Israel) and Joash (king over Judah in the south). This was somewhere within the period 850-750BC, and soon after the time of Elisha. Some commentators suggest that Jonah immediately succeeded Elisha. It is told in 2 Kings 14:25 that he came from Gath-hepher. This was a town in Zebulun, in lower Galilee, only three miles from Nazareth. This was Jonah’s birthplace. Jonah was therefore a Galilean, and serves to prove the ignorance of the Pharisees at the time of the Lord Jesus, who said: “*out of Galilee ariseth no prophet*” (John 7:52). Those Jews claimed to know the Old Testament so well, yet did not know the place from which one of their own prophets came.

Having established Jonah’s identity, and the fact that he was actually one of God’s prophets in Israel, Jonah 1:1-2 can be connected to get further information: “*Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me.*” Here we learn that this son of Amittai was recalled from the discharge of his normal ministry in Israel amongst the chosen earthly people of God, to go to Nineveh, and there to preach amongst those Gentiles. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, and at this period Shalmaneser was the monarch, soon to be

followed by Tiglath-Pileser III, sometimes referred to in the Old Testament as Pul (as in 2 Kings 15:19). This man Pul, or Tiglath-Pileser, was an able statesman and a great warrior. His sights were fixed upon Israel, as stated in 2 Kings 15:29: *“In the days of Pekah king of Israel came Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abel-beth-maachah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and carried them captive to Assyria”*. This was the beginning of the end for the ten northern tribes; for in the sovereignty of God, Assyria was the great nation raised up for the very purpose of scattering the Jews of the northern kingdom. Note also that Pekah was king in Israel at this point, and not Jeroboam II mentioned previously. This is no mistake, for as near as can be calculated, Israel had six kings in a space of about 60 years. Of those 60 years, Jeroboam was on the throne for 41 years (cf 2 Kings 14:23); so the others only reigned for a very short time. Tiglath-Pileser was the reigning monarch in Assyria throughout most of that period, while Israel was in an unstable political state of rapidly-changing rulers. This, coupled with the fact that, spiritually, Israel was almost totally apostate, combines to show that Jonah ministered at a critical period in Israel’s history. Indeed, her end was very near, with the powerful Assyrian nation already making great inroads into her territory.

At precisely which time, there comes to this Jewish prophet a most strange command: *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it”*. This was understandably disconcerting to Jonah, and his thoughts can well be imagined: ‘Look at the state of Israel! They are in total disarray, both politically and spiritually; it is they who need my ministry. Not only that, I have been called to the prophetic office amongst the chosen sons of Abraham. Am I expected to leave my most favoured position to go in amongst a heathen, idolatrous people and minister to them?!’ This was below Jonah’s dignity. What is more, to the prophet’s mind it seemed unreasonable. He was required to go to that great city, the capital of the renowned Assyrian empire and cry against it – literally

denounce them. He was to tell those Assyrians that their wickedness had come up before His God. ‘They are not going to wear this’ reasons Jonah, ‘a Jewish prophet coming into their midst with a message of this description? Why, they hate us already! They have recently taken over much of our territory and carried away captive many of my countrymen, and for me to go into their capital city and preach would but further inflame them. It would do more harm than good. Besides all this, what are my fellow Israelites going to think of me? I have to keep in with them. Neither is that all: I am a Jew of the chosen race. I have the blood of Abraham in my veins. I have no time for the heathen. To preach to them is not for me. Although I am a God-ordained prophet, this is a command which I cannot accept.’

Let an application be made here. Jonah is not alone in this kind of reasoning; there are plenty of ministers like him today. They feel they have to ‘keep in’ with their fellow-ministers. Certain matters must not be touched upon, let alone denounced, or it would ‘rock the boat’. At all costs they feel they must engineer and maintain a semblance of unity. A preacher once said to me regarding the doctrine of election: ‘It is a biblical teaching but I would not preach it’. Many are those in today’s churches who bemoan the sad state of domestic life, with broken homes, unfaithfulness, and divorce escalating at an alarming rate – but who is publicly preaching upon these issues? To openly teach these aspects of divine truth, or to denounce the deliberate hushing up of such matters is not for them; it would do more harm than good, they think, and would offend the wider church. Although they claim to be called to the ministry, there are lines of teaching which they will not accept, and places to which they will not go in preaching: modern-day Jonahs!

The son of Amittai having reasoned thus with himself, brings us to the next verse: “*But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.*” (Jonah 1:3). There are a variety of opinions

as to the location of Tarshish. Some say that it was in Cilicia, probably the same place as Tarsus, the birthplace of the Apostle Paul; and some say it was in North Africa. Having referred to a number of books and dictionaries, the consensus of thought is that it was a Phoenician colony at the south-west of Spain, and Tarshish was the most westerly city known to people of that time. The area was renowned for its smelting works, the word Tarshish meaning ‘smelting’ or ‘refining’. Tarshish also had a very great fleet of large ships, and these vessels used to ply the seas regularly with metal ores, mined in Spain and Sardinia. Evidence of this is found in 1 Kings 10:22: “*For the king had at sea a navy of Tarshish with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Tarshish, bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks*”. This was in king Solomon’s day. Historical records show that large ships regularly sailed the Mediterranean to and from south-west Spain. This evidence ties in with that which is before us concerning Jonah.

The prophet was anxious to get as far away as he possibly could. Tarshish, over 2,000 miles distant, was the most remote place that came to mind; and knowing the number of ships regularly going that way, it made an obvious choice. Making his way down to the port of Joppa (now known as Jaffa), he found a boat soon to leave for Tarshish – just what he was looking for. Thus he pays the fare, boards the vessel, goes down below deck, and is soon on his way to distant climes. “*With them*” states the verse, presumably indicating the crew and other passengers.

There are a number of very significant phrases in this verse. Twice it is said “*he went down*”. How often in the study of the Scriptures are words found to have a fuller meaning than that which lies upon the surface! David “*passed over*” unto Achish king of Gath (1 Samuel 27:2); “*A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho*” (Luke 10:30); Judas “*went immediately out: and it was night*” (John 13:30). So also with Jonah, he was “*going down*” – declining from obedience. It is also stated

“*he paid the fare*” – he was not on a free outing; Jonah must pay for this! So it is with Christians who start to slide and go down; they will have to pay for it; it will cost them dearly.

There is another phrase twice mentioned in this verse, and this is the most important, yea, the most serious. The whole purpose of his action was to “*flee from the presence of the Lord*”. It should not be concluded that Jonah thought he could get into some part of the world where God was not; for as a divinely-ordained prophet he knew that God was omnipresent, that is, everywhere. The Almighty fills heaven and earth. “*Whither shall I flee from Thy presence?*” asks the Psalmist (Psalm 139:7). There is nowhere! Jonah knew this as well as David. Jonah’s purpose was to throw overboard the command which had been given; to evade and get away from that which God required of him. John Calvin in his commentary rightly states: “All flee from the presence of God who do not willingly obey His commandments; not that they can depart farther from Him, but they seek, as far as they can, to confine God within narrow limits, and to exempt themselves from being subject to His authority ... Whosoever then do not willingly subject themselves to God, it is the same as though they turn their backs on Him so that they be no more under His power and dominion”.

Is not the spiritual lesson clear as crystal? Obedience to God’s Word is the one great essential for spiritual growth and advancement, whereas disregard of God’s Word will soon bring a believer down. This will prove costly and take that person into a distant realm where the presence and communion of God is lost. Disobedience to God is the equivalent of fleeing from His presence.

Thus is introduced this man and the little book that bears his name, and in these first three verses the stage is set for all that is to follow. May God bless this to His glory, and to the benefit of the reader.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)



## FEELINGS

Jonah desired to go away from his prophetic work by journeying to an out-of-the-way place called Tarshish; and when he came to Joppa, which was the port of Jerusalem, he found a vessel bound for the place which he desired to reach. May we be taught of the Holy Spirit ... that **we may not follow our impulses to do wrong**. Jonah felt it come upon him, all of a sudden, not to go to Nineveh, but to Tarshish. “Tarshish! Tarshish!” was constantly whispered in his ear, till he had Tarshish on the brain, and go he must.

Now, I very commonly meet with persons who say, “I felt that I must do so-and-so. It came upon me that I must do so-and-so.” I am afraid of these impulses – very greatly afraid of them. People may do right under their power, but they will spoil what they do by doing it out of mere impulse, and not because the action was right in itself. People far oftener do very wrong under impulse, and I feel it needful to give a warning to any here who are prone to be so led. Our impulses are not to be depended on; our thoughts run wild. Do you say, “It came into my mind all of a sudden to do so-and-so”? And do you think this a good reason for your act? You are much mistaken. Do you say, “It flashed upon me to do so”? Do not let this be the rule of life. As well follow a will-o’-the-wisp as follow these freaks of fancy. You must never obey an impulse to do wrong. Now, in Jonah’s case, the impulse was, “go to Tarshish, go to Tarshish.” I dare say that he could have pleaded that he felt ‘pressed in spirit’ to do so. “Go to Tarshish, go to Tarshish,” was still beaten upon the drum of his soul ...

Impulses may also appear to be very self-denying. It was disagreeable to go to sea, and to leave his native land and all its associations. Yet on this point of self-denial it is easy to go wrong. A man may be worshipping self by practising what he calls self-denial. The devil can readily use this as a raiment of light under which to hide the demon of arrogant self-righteousness. Men may fast from bread that they may gorge their souls on pride.

It seemed also that he might have claimed liberty in this matter. Surely he might go to Tarshish if he liked? It is true he was a prophet; but could he not quit the service if he wished? Does God turn men into slaves that they may serve Him? Surely, a prophet may make an excursion, and take a holiday? If he did not feel happy in going to Nineveh, was it right for him to go? Have you never met with this form of argument? I have heard people speak about sacred duties in this style. Take, for instance, believers' baptism – they believe that it is Scriptural, but they say, "I never felt called upon to attend to it". As if we were not called upon to obey every command of Christ! I have heard persons say, "No doubt it is in the Word of God; but I have never felt it laid home to me". What a wicked thing to say! If I had a boy, and I gave him a command, and he told me that he did not feel it 'laid home', and therefore should not obey me, I think I should take care to 'lay it home' very soon, in a way which he might not appreciate! I believe that when Christian people trifle with known duties, their heavenly Father will soon find a rod to fit their backs. A tender conscience looks to the Word of the Lord, and longs in all things to be conformed thereto. What do you want beyond the command of God? If an angel were sent from heaven to command you to obey, the command would not be more binding upon you than it is now. The Lord has given you liberty; not liberty to sin, but liberty to obey. Never talk of freedom to do wrong. It is a horrible thing for one to say, "God loves us to be free in our service of Him; and therefore I shall not serve Him, but follow my own impulses".

At the same time, Jonah was violating his conscience, running counter to the inner life. As a servant of God, he was bound to go where he was commanded, and he was fighting against that which was to him a necessary element of life. O friends, take care of defiling your consciences! Whatever you do, never trifle with conscience. If you are going to make a gash in yourself anywhere, make it in your ear, or in your nose, but not in your conscience. The wounding of your members would pain you, and might injure your beauty; but a wound in your conscience is a far more serious matter, since it touches the centre of

life. A gash in the conscience may disfigure a soul for ever. Let conscience speak to you in all things, and do not follow fancy. Weigh the impulse in the scales of conscience; and if it is not such that conscience can guarantee it to be consistent with the mind of God, let the impulse alone. We are no more to follow vain impulses than cunningly-devised fables; but the Word of the Lord is to be our leading star in all things.

Persons who talk about their impulse will often do what they would condemn in others. This ought to open their eyes to their dangerous proceeding. If anybody else had run away to Tarshish when he was told to go to Nineveh, Jonah would have seen his wrong, and would have rebuked him with all his might. I should like to have seen Jonah analysing Jonah's case – just as David judged and condemned the rich man who took the poor man's ewe lamb, and then found that he had been judging and condemning himself. I should like to make some of you into jurymen upon your own cases. I am sure that you would censure yourselves in burning language for those very things which you now allow. How clearly would you see the disgrace of a man's running away from the plain path of righteousness because he had a miserable impulse urging him to do wrong! Why, you can see the absurdity of it now. Will you, then, go on with a like course yourself? Will you flee to Tarshish when God bids you go to Nineveh? Shall self rule? Shall the flesh be pleased?

This pretence of impulse is what none of us would allow to be an excuse if it were made the rule of conduct towards ourselves. If any person had an impulse to knock us down, we should not see the propriety of it. If he had an impulse to rob us, we should feel an impulse to call in a constable. If any man had an impulse to wrong us, we should appeal to the law for protection. In the same way, if we feel an inward incitement to do what we ought not to do, let us not be so silly and so wicked as to imagine that the law will be relaxed because of the evil movements of our mind. I think it needful to take this text and speak in this way, because I have seen several examples of men following, not the Word of

God, not the law of righteousness, but some idle movements of their own minds, to which they attached an authority which did not belong to them. I am ready to say, “How long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee?” But they half imagine that these fancies come from God, whereas God is not the author of evil desires and suggestions. It is much more likely that these thoughts come from the devil; and most of all likely that they rise from a foolish and corrupt heart. If anything says to you, “Flee to Tarshish”, when God says, “Go to Nineveh”, shut your ears against the evil impulse, and hasten to do as God bids you. What have you to do with the devices and desires of your own hearts? Are these to be a law to you? I pray you, be not among the foolish ones who will be carried about with every wind of fancy and perversity. “To the law and to the testimony,” should be your cry, and you may not appeal to inward movements and impulses.

C. H. Spurgeon (1834 – 1892)

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“Unbelief and the fear of man start a thousand objections to plain duties; and even pious men are capable of most absurd notions and extravagant actions, when desirous of escaping the cross, or declining obedience in perilous circumstances: nay, like Adam, they may be tempted to hide themselves from the presence of the Lord, by flight, or by vainly attempting to conceal themselves “*among the trees of the garden*”. Thus awakened sinners have sometimes removed from the preachers or companions who disquieted them, in hopes of being again easy in their beloved sinful course of life. And thus even pious ministers, when greatly opposed or discouraged, are apt to seek impatiently for removal to some other place, and to think they could do better anywhere, or in any situation, than in that assigned them by their Lord and Master. But there is in all possible cases more danger from disobeying, than obeying, God; He can arrest His fugitives by storms from without or from within; and nothing but shame and distress can come on those who flee from their proper place and work.”

Thomas Scott (1741 – 1821)

# LONG SHADOWS

## 1. Introduction

There has perhaps never been a man more thoroughly acquainted with the Jewish religion than was Saul of Tarsus. His credentials were impressive: “*circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless*” (Philippians 3:5-6); “*I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God . . . As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders*” (Acts 22:3, 5). These were no empty claims – but could be attested to by all his contemporaries: “*My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews; which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee*” (Acts 26:4-5). That such a man should ever be converted to Christ, and his name and nature so completely changed, while he was still in pursuit of Judaical extremism – is nothing less than a miracle of grace.

But the Lord had a vital work for this man to do. Paul was called to the kingdom for just such a time; as in the plan of God and under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he would be used to teach the futility and decrepitude of the Jewish system of life and worship, and with Divine authority declare it “*ready to vanish away*” (Hebrews 8:13). Thus in the epistles to the Galatians, Colossians and Romans particularly, and to a lesser extent in the other letters, these matters are addressed. Had any other preacher or penman been used of God to deliver so solemn a message, they might have been dismissed as ignorant, prejudiced, or even ‘racist’. The rustic Galilean apostles, whose conformity to and comprehension of Jewish law was fitful at best (cf Galatians 2:14) could not have performed this task; much less a Gentile convert; but for this very purpose Paul had been

raised up, and was uniquely fitted to dispute and persuade upon this topic (cf Acts 9:22, 19:8), and to convey the Word of God concerning these vital issues.

**1. It might be asked, why are such arguments necessary?** The portions of Scripture just alluded to do not make for easy reading, and to modern minds might seem to apply only to a narrow demographic of the church (namely, Jewish converts) during a brief period in history (between Pentecost when the New Testament church became established and 70 A.D. when the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple made God's purposes clear). Alas, that it is not so! God's Word is of perpetual relevance – including these teachings delivered by Paul – because sadly, those errors that invaded the church in the First Century have **not** gone away. Still they cast their long, dark shadow up to the present day, and still they are denounced as error by the timeless truth of Holy Scripture – as these articles seek to show.

Here, a note of caution must be sounded. In the interpretation and application of these parts of God's Word – as with every other – extremes are to be guarded against. Whilst some would consign Paul's letters to history, and limit them to "*a question of words and names, and of [the] law*" (Acts 18:15), others extrapolate in the opposite direction, and would make his arguments a justification for entirely rejecting the Law of God, or the Pentateuch, or the whole Old Testament, or in some cases, the very principle of legal restraint! The fallacies of Dispensationalism and Antinomianism alike subvert these epistles to their erroneous causes. This too, has been ongoing since the First Century, as the apostle Peter warned: "*our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness*" (2 Peter 3:15-17).

2. At risk of asking the Lord “*what doest Thou*”, a second question is reverently posed: if it was always the intention of Almighty God ultimately to terminate the Jewish system of religion, **why was it appointed in the first place?** Many flawed solutions have been suggested – including that God had not foreseen its failure, or that its practice is only paused, pending some future resumption. But we are not left to idle speculation, for Scripture itself gives the answers. “*Wherefore then serveth the law?*” (Galatians 3:19) – the code that prescribed every aspect of the Hebrews’ religious, domestic and national life – what purpose did it serve? The same passage gives the responses, which may be summarised as: prevention, condemnation and education.

**Prevention** “*It was added because of transgressions*” (Galatians 3:19). At a very basic level, if the Jewish nation, comprised of sinful humanity, was to survive for 1,500 years “*till the seed [namely, Christ] should come*”, without disappearing in a maelstrom of iniquity and anarchy, then rules, and a means of government, must be imposed upon them.

**Condemnation** “*the Scripture hath concluded all under sin*” (Galatians 3:22); “*what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God*” (Romans 3:19). Still more widely, the existence of God’s Law upon Earth, with its unobtainable standards of righteousness, and unmitigated condemnation of sin, leaves the whole of humanity without excuse, and foretells their sentence when brought to final judgment.

**Education** “*Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ*” (Galatians 3:24). Pre-eminently, the Law acts as great sign-post to the Lord Jesus. God in His wisdom and mercy raised up a nation upon earth, to serve as a two-millennia-long object lesson in spiritual truth. To Holy Spirit-enlightened eyes, the history of that people, and the laws imposed upon them, teach a rich variety of truth, including: the nature of self; the sinfulness of sin; the inability of the Law to save; of God Himself, who, if His holiness and righteousness could be reduced to a system of rules,

would be forever impossible to attain unto, but who is pleased to act according to grace; and of Christ and His work, typified and prophesied in innumerable ways by countless figures, who stands at the 'end of the Law', as its great object and fulfilment.

3. If the pattern imposed by God during the Old Testament period served these beneficial purposes, **why should its continuance pose any problem?** Might not some Jewish ordinances be usefully combined with New Testament church order, and maintained in perpetuity? Where is the harm in that? The inspired language of the Apostle leaves us in no doubt: "*O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth ... Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain*" (Galatians 3:1, 4:8-11); "*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ*" (Colossians 2:8). Here, the rites and ceremonies of Judaism are called weak, beggarly and worldly. They are placed in the same category as the 'enchancements' of the occult, and the worship of the false gods of Greece and Rome, which many Galatian converts had formerly venerated.

The point is clear. When God commands us to 'do', it is a sin if we do not comply. When God commands us to 'desist', it is a sin if we do not cease. In regard to the practices of the Jews, God had long previously limited their duration "*until Shiloh come*" (Genesis 49:10). He demonstrated man's inability and the Law's fragility in the very moment of its declaration – for while the commandments were being dictated on Sinai's summit, the people were already transgressing them at its base. The conditionality of those arrangements, and threat of their cessation, was pronounced by practically every prophet from Moses onwards. By Jeremiah God spoke of a New Covenant to come, which words denoted



the oldness and impermanence of the former (cf Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:7-13). There could be no mistaking God's purposes, and no excuse for persisting.

The words translated as 'elements' and 'rudiments' in the verses quoted are instructive and pertinent. They should be understood in the sense of 'elementary' and 'rudimentary' – for this is how poorly the Jewish system compares to the full revelation of truth afforded by the Lord Jesus Christ. When teaching infants, very simplistic object lessons may be used: arithmetic performed with blocks or beads; the notes of the musical scale represented by different colours – these will serve for a beginning. Quickly however, the limitations of these schemes become apparent; these modes of instruction are a hindrance rather than a help when higher concepts need to be grasped. The thought of an advanced student regressing back to such childish gimmicks is as shameful as it is ridiculous; but this is the language God uses in rebuking Christians who retain, or revive, or revert to, these primitive forms that He has revoked.

Paul's own testimony was this: "*when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things*" (1 Corinthians 13: 10-11), reckoning his greatest Pharisical achievements as loss, when compared to the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus (cf Philippians 3:6-9). Many others, it is feared, fail ever to 'leave the principles and go on to perfection', desiring instead to be in bondage to a dead system.

4. This being said, it might then be asked: **why do these things hold any attraction?** We can perhaps understand the challenges faced by Jewish converts to the early church, for whom the transition was neither easy nor immediate, concerned to do right in the sight of the Lord. But why would gentile believers, in lands remote from Judea, with no previous history, be drawn in by foreign codes of practice, painful procedures and strange rules of conduct – which they had no obligation

to obey? Still more inexplicably, why do 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western Christians, removed from these events by thousands of miles and thousands of years, perpetuate the same errors? Several reasons can be given:

**Materialism.** The Jews' religion consisted in countless physical things: from tabernacles, temples and veils; mitres, robes and ephods; priests, Levites and scribes; altars, lavers and tables; down to snuffers, basins and spoons. The corresponding laws were equally practical: "*touch not, taste not, handle not*" (Colossians 2:21). Fallen humanity is fixated with the material world, and craves those things upon which the biological senses can rest. This corruption in human nature explains why the Jewish order survived as long as it did, proved so difficult to part with, and continues to be aped by the Christian church. 'Faith alone' is easier said than done; especially when sight and sense are asserting themselves.

**Egotism.** One of the purposes of the Jewish system was to demonstrate its own inadequacies. There was no rule given which could impart life to its adherents (cf Galatians 3:21); the need for constant repetition of the rituals only demonstrated their ineffectiveness (cf Hebrews 10:3); the whole law testified to the fact the righteousness would have to be obtained by another means (cf Romans 3:21). But this did not prevent generations of misguided and self-confident persons from attempting the impossible. The sect of the Pharisees (to which Paul once belonged) were one example – who went to incredible lengths to achieve, as they imagined, salvation by works. Here was another way in which an onerous and burdensome process still held an appeal – it pandered to man's sense of pride and self-sufficiency, and seemed to offer the prospect of saving oneself. Modern Christians likewise are desperate to add to their faith some ritual, tradition or form, in which to boast themselves.

**Nationalism.** Still, the practices of Jewry might have sunk into their appointed obscurity and remained there, were it not for certain events

in the Fourth Century, namely, the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. After some 300 years of the New Testament church's existence, there arose this disastrous scheme to unite it with the State. There is no precedent or authority in the Scriptures whatsoever for any such thing – it is alien to the Gospel, and totally at variance with the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. Thus the promoters of this dreadful plan were obliged to look elsewhere – and finding in the Old Testament an example of national and religious union, plundered the grave of Judaism for their ghastly creation. Thus in the Roman church arose temples and altars, priests and singers, high days and holy days, mitres and vestments, incense and candles – dead works reanimated. And these spectres would go on to haunt every major Christian sect, every church that incorporates a nation in its title – be it Roman, Anglican, Scottish, Dutch – and many more besides.

5. These points having been made, the reader might enquire, **why is it necessary to reiterate these warnings?** Surely the errors of Romanism are widely known; few truly evangelical Christians are deceived by Anglicanism; so are such cautionary words even necessary? It is one of the Devil's commonest tactics to have people believe that, whatever God's word might say, it is really spoken to, or intended for, someone else – whether the Judaising faction in First Century Galatia, or Fourth Century Rome, or the Sixteenth-Century Church of England. However, it is the contention of this author that the message of the New Testament Epistles on this subject is essential for today's churches – particularly in the United Kingdom. Personal observations and experience over recent years have prompted the writing of these articles. For among numerous supposedly 'reformed', 'conservative' and 'evangelical' congregations, these age-old errors are found to persist, and many are 'falling by the same example'.

Take an average, independent, non-denominational church in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain, which preaches the doctrines of grace, the gospel, and believers' baptism. Such a fellowship will likely claim to uphold the

separation of church and state – but at the same time, be voting for political candidates, agitating for statutory enforcement of Christian values, and adulating monarchs. They would reject the notion of priests and bishops, ecclesiastical officers and regalia – while at the same time bestowing titles and salaries upon their ministers, and even distinguishing items of clothing. They would not countenance the Liturgy, Prayer Books, or services by rote – and yet carefully observe the liturgical calendar with its services for Christmas, Easter, and maybe Advent, Lent, Pentecost, Ascension, and Harvest as well. They may profess to be baptistic – while conniving at the errors of Covenant Theology, performing ‘blessings’ on infants, and giving an unbiblical significance to biological children and families. They might describe Judaism as a false religion – while also believing in the wholesale salvation of its adherents at a future date. These are some of the contradictions rife within ‘evangelicalism’ today.

Were the Apostle Paul to attend such a place, with its formulaic services, and temple-like psalm singing, ‘dry christenings’ and patriotic prayers, professional churchmen preaching as dictated by the times and seasons – he might be forgiven for thinking that the New Testament Epistles never reached the British Isles, while the errors of Galatia clearly had. For this is not Biblical church order as taught by the Apostles. This is not ‘The Faith once delivered to the saints’. These are ‘the rudiments of the world’, ‘weak and beggarly elements’ – still afflicting the people of God, and polluting their worship of Him.

In the forthcoming series of articles, it is hoped to address some of these matters more specifically – trace their origins and highlight their dangers. The choice of title is intentional. Just as a small object may cast a disproportionately large shadow, even so certain aspects of the Old Covenant (which applied for only a few centuries), have a benighting effect upon the church two millennia later. May the Lord in mercy ‘lighten this darkness’ with His truth.

R. J. Steward

## EDITORIAL

The ‘North-South Divide’ is frequently spoken of in the political discourse of the UK. It has reference to the social and economic disparity observed between the more metropolitan south, where the capital is located, and the provincial, post-industrial north. Its consequences are seen in relative wealth, opportunity, and life expectancy, and it is the source of some prejudice and contention within society. It is of interest to note that certain other countries around the world have witnessed a similar geographical phenomenon. Ancient Palestine was another example of this. The capital, Jerusalem, lay to the country’s south, in the territory of Judah and Benjamin; while in the far north of the land were the tribes of Asher, Naphtali, Zebulun and Issachar – frequently threatened by the incursions of hostile neighbours, and much diminished in consequence.

To this northern locality, the region of Galilee belonged – a despised area from earliest times. Upon completion of the temple, with aid from Hiram king of Tyre, “*king Solomon gave Hiram twenty cities in the land of Galilee. And Hiram came out from Tyre to see the cities which Solomon had given him; and they pleased him not. And he said, What cities are these which thou hast given me, my brother? And he called them the land of Cabul unto this day.*” (1 Kings 9:11-13). The untranslated word ‘Cabul’ has the sense of ‘displeasing’, ‘worthless’ or ‘sterile’. In later generations, Isaiah spoke of the “*dimness*”, “*vexation*” and afflictions small and great, which had historically ravaged the area, to the extent that Galilee was described as “*of the nations*” – i.e. largely occupied by foreign invaders, and “*the land of the shadow of death*” (cf Isaiah 9:1-2).

But the same prophecy speaks of a great light shining upon that place – the fulfilment of which is plain to discover. For the incarnate Son of God, born of a woman, found in fashion as a man, was brought in infancy by His earthly parents “*into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth*” (Luke 2:39). There was nowhere more insalubrious in all of Palestine,

prompting that reproachful – though inaccurate – remark: “*out of Galilee ariseth no prophet*” (cf John 7:52); and none of its towns were more disreputable than Nazareth, hence the pejorative question: “*can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?*” (John 1:46). There was no coincidence in the choice of location. The inspired gospel writer states: “*He came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.*” (Matthew 2:23). There is no obvious original for this prophecy, but it has been suggested that ‘Nazarene’ was so well-known a byword and slur, that words like Isaiah 53:3, “*He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not*” might easily have been abbreviated as in Matthew’s quotation. In these geographical and historical details is seen the scale of humiliation which the Lord endured in the work of salvation, who willingly, and in every possible way, “*made Himself of no reputation*” (Philippians 2:7).

The locality to which the Lord came might have been especially reproached in the relativistic thinking of men, yet in the sight of a Holy God was only typical of the entire fallen planet. For: “*the whole world lieth in wickedness*” (1 John 5:19); “*the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together*” (Romans 8:22). Were these Galileans sinners above all, because they suffered such things? No indeed. They are representative of all humanity. Wherever each of our readers may live, they cannot boast themselves of place or venue. We are all as Nazarenes. Yet Christ has condescended to men of low estate, and shared our name and condition, that He might save and raise us to glory.

“We saw Thee not when Thou didst come  
To this poor world of sin and death;  
Nor yet beheld Thy cottage home,  
In that despised Nazareth;  
But we believe Thy footsteps trod  
Its streets and plains, Thou Son of God.”