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Who Has a Hold on Hope?  
by Elwood McQuaid

The atheists have won another skirmish. This time the victim was Warner Sallman’s famous painting, Head of Christ. But here is why they’ll never win the war.

When the Time Was Right  
by Tom Davis

Jesus came to Earth at a specific time for a specific purpose. In fact, God set many specifics in place to prepare for the arrival of His Son.

Beyond the Manger  
by Tom Simcox

From His arrival to His birthplace to His destiny, every detail involving Jesus was predetermined. His coming, in fact, involved far more than a baby being born in a manger.

Waiting for His Shout  
by Charles E. McCracken

Jesus often used the familiar to teach about the unfamiliar. As you’ll see here, He used something very familiar to teach that He will someday return.

With Justice for All  
by Chris Katulka

Not much on Earth is perfect. Peace eludes mankind, and evil seems to run rampant. But all those things will finally change when the Messiah takes His seat on the throne of David.

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Our Cover: Golden Gate, Old City Jerusalem (John Theodor/Photozion.com).

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James Showers is the executive director of The Friends of Israel.

I recently met up with a Jewish friend in Jerusalem. He had just returned from a trip to a major city in Europe. When he checked into his hotel, he was told he could wear his kippa (skull cap) in the building but was advised not to wear it on the street because identifying himself as Jewish could be dangerous.

In enlightened, multicultural Europe, it’s not safe today to be visibly Jewish. Wearing a symbol of Judaism, such as a kippa, can lead to physical attack and injury. This growing anti-Semitic spirit is what Jewish people faced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and what led to pogroms (persecutions) and eventually to the Holocaust.

In his work The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense, 20th-century Spanish-born philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” It is alarming to see anti-Semitism rising in Europe. After the savagery of the Holocaust, we’d like to think humanity has learned from its mistakes; but nothing could be further from the truth.

In 2015 anti-Semitic hatred escalated from verbal abuse and beatings to the outright murder of Jewish people in parts of Europe. Understandably, more and more Jewish people are leaving Europe for Israel, the one nation where they are free to live openly as Jews and defend themselves from their enemies.

Why is such virulent anti-Semitism reemerging in less than a century? Because the heart of man is “desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9), and the greater battle is not with flesh and blood, but with powers and principalities and “the rulers of the darkness of this age . . . in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

It is God’s conflict with Satan that is driving the upsurge in anti-Semitism. Until the Messiah returns to defeat Satan and rescue the Jewish people from his evil designs, anti-Semitism will plague the earth.

In the days of Asaph the psalmist, Israel’s enemies said, “Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation, that the name of Israel may be remembered no more” (Ps. 83:4). The same spirit lives today, as men boldly declare, “We will wipe Israel off the map!” and “Death to Israel!”

When God chose to make a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12, He designated Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob as the sole nation through which He will accomplish His redemptive plan. God’s choice of Israel made the Jewish people Satan’s unique target. Satan’s only chance to prevent God from crushing him is to keep God from completing His redemptive plan. It is Satan who influences the world to hate the Jewish people and seek their destruction.

History is repeating itself because Satan hasn’t given up on his objective to annihilate the Chosen People. But this does not let individuals off the hook for hating them. Anti-Semitism stands in opposition to God’s desire for the Gentile nations. In the covenant God made with Abraham, He promised to bless the Gentiles who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel. Anti-Semitism is the vilest form of cursing the Jewish people.

This is the season when we give thanks and remember the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, two millennia ago in the little Jewish town of Bethlehem. His birth is important because it reminds us that God will accomplish His plan to redeem His creation from the curse of sin and crush Satan, the great usurper. In His First Coming, Jesus paid the redemption price: His sinless blood, shed for our sin, which qualified Him to become God’s human representative to restore God’s Kingdom on Earth.

We look forward to His Second Coming, when He will put an end to Satan’s efforts to destroy the Jewish people and will judge the nations for the way they treated the “apple of His eye” (Zech. 2:8).

In the meantime, we are called to bless the Jewish people and stand against anti-Semitism.

Police investigate vandalized tombstones at the Jewish cemetery of Sarre-Union in eastern France earlier this year (Christian Lutz/AP/Corbis).
Israeli schoolgirls walk to a shelter as the siren sounds during an army drill in Jerusalem in June (Sebastian Scheiner/AP Images).

Seventy percent of all the children living in the southern Israeli city of Sderot suffer from at least one symptom of post-traumatic stress, and 50 percent continue to relive rocket trauma, according to a study by Dr. Rony Berger, a clinical psychologist at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

A blogger in Sderot described watching her daughter’s kindergarten class run out of the school and into bomb shelters, saying, “It made me cry.”

Although no outright war broke out last summer, all is not quiet on the Gaza front. Hamas has launched multiple rocket attacks into Israel, and though UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned them, the rest of the world remained silent, prompting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to lash out. “I didn’t hear anybody in the international community condemn the fire,” he declared. “I’m interested if the silence will continue even when we exercise with our full strength our right to defend ourselves.”

Netanyahu is angry because these attacks violate the truce agreed on by Israel and the Arab militants. In April, when Israelis were celebrating Independence Day, Gaza fired a rocket that exploded in an empty field near Sderot.

Other unprovoked attacks followed in May, June, July, and August. Each attack set off Israeli air raid sirens, giving citizens about 15 seconds to run to shelters. Each attack also activated Iron Dome, Israel’s sophisticated, mobile, all-weather air defense system able to analyze the enemy rocket’s projected landing and, if needed, intercept and destroy it in the sky.

Fortunately, Iron Dome (which is extremely expensive to deploy) was not needed, which could be why the international community was silent.

Or perhaps it was silent because none of the rockets, or, for that matter, the more than 11,000 rockets Gaza has launched into Israel since 2005, were directed at any country but Israel, even though every attack has been formulated to inflict as much damage to Israeli property and kill as many Israelis as possible.

According to the official blog of the Israel Defense Forces, “Over 5 million Israelis are currently living under threat of rocket attacks. More than half a million Israelis have less than 60 seconds to find shelter after a rocket is launched from Gaza into Israel. Most rockets launched from Gaza into Israel are capable of reaching Israel’s biggest cities, including Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.”

Israel takes the threat of rocket attacks seriously and understands that the first rule for any nation is to protect its citizens.

In keeping with that rule, in 2007, after Hezbollah had launched more than 4,000 rockets from Lebanon against its northern border in 2006, Israel implemented a yearly dress rehearsal for disaster called Turning Point. It is a huge, countrywide civil defense exercise that tests Israel’s ability to cope with a massive attack. It involves medical emergency services, such as Magen David Adom, fire and rescue services, and border police.

Local authorities and government ministries participate, and air raid sirens are sounded. For many Israelis, the blare of the sirens provided a brief flashback to last summer’s 50-day war with Hamas, when thousands of rockets hit Israel. So traumatizing was that war that, in Sderot, the sirens were ordered not to sound.

Sadly, dealing with rocket fire is the norm in the Jewish state. And though other nations believe Israel should just bear it, no North American or European nation would ever tolerate such attacks without retaliating. That is why Prime Minister Netanyahu is outraged and why it’s about time the international community stood with him.

by Steve Herzig, director of North American Ministries and a Bible teacher for The Friends of Israel
And we sang spontaneously. That aspect came to my attention most vividly one night as the group I was leading walked to the viewing room of a tower high above the shepherds’ fields outside Bethlehem. Through the soft moonlight shading the terraced olive groves were lights dotting the rustic little town where Jesus was born. We stood for a moment, and then someone began to sing. No one announced a selection or suggested a favorite. The songs simply came, one after another, until every familiar carol was sung. Those believers, young and old, knew them all.

I thought about the singing as the tour continued. At every significant site, everyone wanted to sing. Some didn’t do it very well, but all did it with unrestrained gusto. Then it came to me. These people had brought those songs with them over thousands of miles. Not in suitcases or satchels, but in their hearts. They were singing from their hearts. And that says a great deal about what true Christians are made of and what sets Christianity apart from virtually every other religion on the planet. This state of heart expresses the very essence of faith in Christ and the undying love He brought to Earth.

Impressive is the fact that worshipers from around the planet are drawn to the land where Jesus lived, died, exited the tomb, and ascended back to His Father. A veritable tapestry of human-ity stretches over the sites His followers revere. It is awe-inspiring and reveals the unity of the body of Christ, which knows no borders, political conformity, or divisive cultural constraints.

And though traveling to ancient civilizations can be a fascinating and mind-broadening educational experience, it is not like going to Israel. In other places, you see artifacts and relics of ancient ways of life. But there is little beyond the stones, crumbled cities, and tombs of once-revered figures who rose to prominence, endured for a time, then left—never to return.

True Christians, on the other hand, bring with them a love not confined to an exhumation of days gone by. We bring the love of the risen, living Savior and a desire to know more of Him at every turn in the dusty road. We bring our hearts to be filled with more of Him. And we find what we’re looking for because seeing Israel opens the Book for us and helps us read God’s Word with greater depth, perception, and reverence. It is a Book that points to Him.

So we sing. And little wonder that we do. The truth that He is alive and lives within us is irrepressible, filling us with thanksgiving, love, and an expectation that surpasses anything known or knowable in any other theater of life. Jesus lives, and so do we. Amen.

by Elwood McQuaid
Dear Friends,

Christmastime is my favorite time of year. Perhaps it’s because I never celebrated Christmas when I was growing up. I was probably 10 before I even learned Jesus was Jewish. I was 30, poking around a clearance rack at Marshall’s department store, when I first heard about the Second Coming. A young woman approached me, introduced herself as a Bible college student conducting a survey for a class she was attending, and wondered if she could ask me a few questions.

“Sure,” I replied. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you believe Jesus is coming again?”

“Oh,” she said, looking somewhat puzzled as to what to say next. “Thank you,” she replied politely. Then she turned around and walked away. Clearly, she had not been trained at the Billy Graham School of Evangelism.

Today, many years later, I'm finding most people don’t know much more about the Second Coming than I did, or its monumental significance to world history.

At Christmastime we focus on the First Coming, when the great God of heaven humbled Himself to enter time and space as a human being to become the final, perfect sacrifice for sin under the Levitical system. But His birth is only half the story. His reign is the rest of the story, and that happens in conjunction with the Second Coming.

So in this issue of Israel My Glory, we give you the whole story. Our theme is Jesus Is Coming Again. Gracing our cover is a beautiful photograph of the Eastern Gate in Jerusalem, which will open again when the Messiah returns. We invite you to rejoice with us over Christ’s birth, which demonstrates His unfathomable love for undeserving humanity. And we hope you’ll give thanks with us that, because He is God and rose from the dead, He will come again and make right everything that is wrong with this wicked, profane universe. For in His resurrection and return lies the hope of the world.

Merry Christmas from all of us at The Friends of Israel. And Maranatha. Our Lord, Come!

Waiting for His Appearing,
Lorna Simcox
Editor-in-Chief
Several years ago, the pastor of a church in Northern Ireland told me of a seminary professor who advised his students never to read the book of Revelation. “No one can understand that book,” he told them.

Every book of the Bible is God’s Word, and God gave every book in language mankind can comprehend.

To understand this last book of the Bible, with all of its judgments, we must understand the first book: Genesis.

Genesis records the fact that, in eternity past, God created the heavens, earth, sea, and all that is in them. God also determined to establish a theocratic Kingdom on Earth. A theocratic Kingdom has God as its King and a representative who administers God’s rule God’s way.

God created the first man, Adam, as His representative and the first woman, Eve, as Adam’s helpmate. Then He commanded them to be fruitful and multiply. God also created different types of trees, vegetation, and animals. All the animals were tame. God looked at all He had made, and all of it was very good. God told Adam how to take care of everything He had created on Earth.

God had already created different levels of personal angelic beings in His heaven. The most exalted angel hovered over God’s throne (Ezekiel 28 describes him as “the anointed cherub who covers,” v. 14). This angel became so proud of his significance that he decided to overthrow God. He persuaded many other angels to join him in his rebellion. So God cast him out of heaven and changed his name to Satan, which means “adversary” (vv. 11–19).

Satan decided to seize God’s theocratic Kingdom. He persuaded Adam, whom God had appointed to administer His rule on Earth, to join him in his revolt. Adam’s fateful decision catastrophically changed the earth, and God’s theocratic Kingdom disappeared.

Animals became wild. Some became killers of other animals, and some became killers of people. People became plagued with murder, war, disease, and death. In addition, the soil’s fertility decreased, making man’s work to produce food more difficult.

Many centuries later, God sent His Son to Earth to take upon Himself humanity through birth. God sent Jesus to be “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45). Satan recognized Him as the last Adam who could restore God’s theocratic Kingdom and tried to persuade Jesus to join him in his revolt against God.

One of Satan’s most significant attempts is recorded in Luke 4:5–7: Satan took Jesus to the top of a high mountain; showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time; and said to Him, “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours” (vv. 6–7).

Jesus replied, “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve’” (v. 8).

Genesis reveals (1) how God established His theocratic Kingdom by creating planet Earth, the first Adam, Eve, animals, and plant life; and (2) how Adam lost God’s theocratic Kingdom by following Satan’s lead to disobey God.

Revelation reveals God’s plan to restore His theocratic Kingdom by (1) judging Satan’s human and angelic followers; (2) imprisoning Satan and his false prophet for 1,000 years; and (3) having Jesus, the last Adam, gloriously return to Earth to reign for 1,000 years.

Genesis and Revelation are like bookends, holding together God’s plan and purpose for Earth. Understanding this basic truth will help you understand far more clearly the entire Word of God.

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** To understand how Satan’s determination to be God has affected all of world history, read Dr. Showers’ outstanding book What on Earth Is God Doing? available through The Friends of Israel.

*by Renald E. Showers, author and international conference speaker for The Friends of Israel*
MEXICO—“We’ve never heard of this before.” “I can’t believe this is happening.” “We’ve been working on issues in Mexico for years, and this is the first time anyone has brought this up.”

For nearly three straight days, these were the responses members of International Christian Concern (ICC) heard in meeting after meeting on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, as they began to tell the story of persecution in Mexico.

Despite the fact that hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Christians each year face their utilities being cut off, their lands seized, physical and sexual assault, and eventually forced displacement from their homes because of their faith, persecution in Mexico is something only a relatively few people know about.

The persecution often happens in remote areas, and the news media is disinterested in reporting on it. So ICC has launched a targeted effort to make key members of Congress aware of a story that has been left untold.

Conservatively, ICC estimates there are at least 70 cases of religious persecution, each involving 20 to 100 individuals in just the five states of Chiapas, Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero. These figures only represent cases that state governments are willing to admit exist; the actual number is likely far higher.

In nearly every case, persecution begins when local leaders decide too many members of a village have become Christians and they would either have to reconvert or begin contributing financially to religious festivals. When members of the minority refuse, a series of persecutions begins that can last for weeks, months, or even years.

First, water and electricity are cut off. Then children in the Christian community are barred from attending school, and families are blocked from public cemeteries, leaving them nowhere to bury their loved ones.

Eventually, if the Christian community doesn’t succumb to the pressure and the government doesn’t intervene—which it usually does not—the death threats and physical attacks begin. The end result is forced displacement.

The Christians flee, often taking only what they can carry with them. Their land is seized, and their homes are confiscated or destroyed.

Mayor Pedro Cruz Gonzalez of the San Juan Ozolotepec municipality heads the list of violators after forcibly barring some Christians from their church building and later ordering the church to be bulldozed. A year later, Gonzalez stripped 50 Christian families of the right to vote.

Religious persecution is now considered one of the major factors behind displacement in Mexico.

ICC prepared as much evidence as possible to present on Capitol Hill, knowing it would be an uphill battle to demonstrate just how severe and widespread is the persecution taking place in America’s backyard. From photos of jailed believers to testimony from persecuted families to copies of agreements actually signed by state and local government leaders forcing Christians to pay fines and hide their faith in their homes, ICC made sure there was little room left for disputing the facts.

To try to help the brethren in Mexico, ICC has started a grassroots campaign and produced a petition with 2,500 signatures so far, calling on the Mexican government to protect its Christian communities. ICC also is asking supporters to call the Mexican embassy in Washington to protest what is taking place. It also has launched a social media campaign on Twitter and Facebook in Spanish and English.

For more information, go to tinyurl.com/ICC23meX.

by International Christian Concern (persecution.org)
Who Has a Hold on Hope?

Atheists chalked up another win in August when the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) forced the Royster Middle School in Chanute, Kansas, to remove a print of Warner Sallman’s famous 1941 painting, Head of Christ. The FFRF claimed the painting, which had hung on a wall by the school entrance for more than half a century, endorsed the establishment of Christianity as an official state religion.

The portrait was brought to the FFRF’s attention by a lone disgruntled individual who took a picture of it and forwarded it to the foundation. The fact that almost everyone in the town of 9,200 people and 30 churches approved of the print was inconsequential.

The portrait was hung at the middle school in 1956 in memory of a student, Duane Eastburn, a 14-year-old ninth grader who collapsed in the gymnasium and died there that year. Funds for the portrait reportedly came from the Student Council’s small budget, and a
small brass plaque on the frame notes that it was placed as a memorial to Duane Eastburn.

**A Hopeless Credo**

The Chanute, Kansas, incident raises a question that demands an answer, one that could be posed to every God-denying militant in the Western world. If the FFRF were required to place a plaque honoring young Duane, what would it say?

Perhaps it would bear the words of the late Anne Nicol Gaylor: “There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell.”

Ms. Gaylor was the principle founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and her public life reflected her two passions: atheism and abortion. Among her celebrated lawsuits was *Gaylor v. Reagan*, contesting then-President Ronald Reagan’s declaration of 1983 as “The Year of the Bible.”

So what does the FFRF actually offer humanity? To Duane Eastburn and the billions of others who have passed into eternity, the organization and its atheist fellow travelers would only have only been able to say, “We have no hope.” Instead of Warner Sallman’s depiction of Jesus, which celebrates hope, they could only hang the morbidly hopeless, atheistic message that the here-and-now is all there is.

One wonders why, in a society tolerant of virtually every stripe of deviant behavior and bizarre conduct imaginable, would some people campaign to destroy faith? Faith poses no threat to them. In fact, true believers promote peace, tolerance, and social stability—qualities that built America and the West into the greatest societies the world has ever known.

To take pleasure and a type of perverse satisfaction in forcing the removal of a memorial to a 14-year-old boy seems incomprehensible. Such actions merely confirm the grave ramifications of the contest for the hearts and minds of human beings.

**Down-With-Christmas Crusade**

This is the peak season for atheists and their ilk to gird for battle. Now is when these self-appointed warriors against God wield their swords wildly, trying to annihilate all evidence of Christian reverence and celebration.

One of their primary centers of activity is the Wisconsin State Capitol in Madison, where the FFRF maintains a sign declaring the commemoration of Christ’s birth a contemptible delusion. The full text of the plaque reads,

*At this season of THE WINTER SOLSTICE may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.***

While the FFRF trumpets denial, some of its compatriots turn to mockery. Also posted at the Wisconsin State Capitol is a large poster sponsored by the Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Bearing an image of tangled spaghetti, the copy reads as follows: “BEHOLD THE FLYING SPAGHETTI MONSTER. HE BOILED FOR YOUR SINS! BE TOUCHED BY HIS NOODLY APPENDAGE BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE!”

The eruptions of anti-God, anti-Christian vitriol that we will witness across America over the coming weeks embody more than a faux intellectual argument over the separation of church and state. They represent an all-encompassing, impassioned aggression aimed not only at the exercise of religion in the public arena, but at every church, Christian organization, and professing Christian believer as well. Above all, they are attacks on Jesus Christ and all He embodies.

**No Contest**

In reality, the atheists, humanists, and agnostics have little chance of universal success. Despite the fact that many of our “progressive,” liberal academic institutions and social revisionists are aquiver with the current fad of godlessness, several factors forecast their downfall:

1. **They are decisively outnumbered.** For example, the Freedom From Religion Foundation boasts a membership of “more than 22,500.” According to a 2014 Pew Research poll, 70.6 percent of Americans still say they believe in Jesus Christ. That means seven out of every 10 people in the United States (population 321.6 million) in some way identify with Christianity.

2. **They bring a message of despair.** They try to convince people that the atheistic life holds hope, promise, and expectation when it really encapsulates the complaint of the ancient heathen: “We go down in death, but we make no return in the morning.”

Death without a blessed destiny is not a message of hope but, rather, a grim reminder of a line from William Henley’s poem *Invictus*: “Beyond this place of wrath and tears/Looms but the Horror of the shade.”

3. **They are no match for the Lord of lords and the eternal benefits He will surely deliver.** When the swaddled Christ Child was placed in a loving Jewish mother’s arms more than 2,000 years ago, the world was given a new beginning—one that fulfilled every jot and tittle of what the prophets of old promised.

He was a Child of promise unlike any other. He was destined to be a King—one of quite a different kind. Someday He will return to assume His earthly throne in a literal Millennial Kingdom. Until then, He reigns in the hearts and lives of innumerable believers the world over.

Because Jesus came to Earth and endured the cross, He fulfilled every hope-sustaining promise enumerated in God’s Word to those who believe. And, amazingly, the spiritual treasures He imparts are not restricted to the rich,
powerful, and privileged—which is man’s way of doing things—but to individuals like you and me.

He promised peace; we have it.
He promised comfort; we have it.
He promised a law of love to live by; we have it.
He promised security; we have it.
He promised His presence, never to leave us; we have it.
He promised eternal life; we have it.
He promised a home in heaven; we have it.

Are these things real? Ask the countless millions of believers who have received them in their own lives over the millennia. Inquire of those still streaming to Him and finding new life. They’ll tell you in one burst of affirmation. What Christ offers is real for now and forever. His is a story that never grows old.

I was in Jerusalem on Christmas Eve many years ago. I rose extremely early because it was my departure day, and I wanted to be home in time to celebrate Christmas with my family. As I looked out my hotel window, day was breaking over the city. Nothing seemed to be stirring.

To my right, strung from the tower of the YMCA building, was a string of Christmas lights. Far off in the dawning winter sky hung a single bright star. As I stood there, mesmerized by the sight, it was as though time had receded to the morning when God became man, a few miles down the road. And I was thankful.

Within hours, I’d be home, surrounded by a happy family, all living to the full the “joy to the world” of Christmas. And it was all real because Jesus made it real. We love Him, and we love one another with something far beyond the emotion of the moment.

To all the atheists, humanists, and agnostics: We pray for you with genuine compassion for what you are missing now and what you will never know without faith in Jesus Christ after you pass from this life.

Scripture says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (Jn. 6:37). Christ has never rejected anyone who has come to Him, and I can guarantee He won’t start with you.

Merry Christmas!

Teach Your Children and Grandchildren How Kids Lived in Bible Days

Written from a child’s perspective, this delightful book features 12 colorful, carefully researched chapters geared for 5-year-olds and up. You’ll learn about ancient Jewish customs and the fascinating artifacts found in the land of Israel. Work together on activities at the end of every chapter. Even includes instructions for baking your own biblical bread!

Filled with stories, archaeology, and fun!

$24.99
Pastor Abedini Still in Prison in Iran

Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American Christian pastor detained in Iran since 2012, has become the international face of the Islamic Republic’s brutal persecution of Christians. Pastor Abedini, a convert from Islam, refuses to renounce his faith despite torture.

He was arrested by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps while visiting relatives and building an orphanage in the city of Rasht. Initially placed under house arrest, he was transferred to Iran’s notorious Evin Prison and later to Rajai Shahr Prison, which reportedly is even more dangerous.

Tiffany Barrans—international legal director for the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a law firm and social activism organization that has represented Abedini and his family since shortly after his arrest—told JNS.org, “Originally, he was housed with those convicted of murder. Now he is housed with the political prisoners.”

“Saeed is anything but political,” she said. “He really truly was there building an orphanage and doing humanitarian work.”

Barrans said Abedini has been forced to live in horrid conditions and has been given no protein or clean water. He lives in a room built for 20 people that houses 80 who share one toilet. “Feces and urine leak from the ceiling above,” she said.

Abedini is also suffering from two medical conditions that doctors say require surgery, but Iran has refused treatment.

In early June, the families of four American prisoners in Iran testified on Abedini’s behalf before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee. “The Iranian government has repeatedly told Saeed he holds the key to his freedom—but this key would be to deny his faith and return to Islam,” his wife, Naghmeh, said. “Yet Saeed has refused to deny his faith in Jesus Christ in the face of torture and abuse.”

Continued on page 23
Galatians 4:4 is a statement that never fails to thrill:

But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.

It speaks of God the Father’s timing in transitioning the world from the age of the Mosaic Law to the age of adult sons in the family of God (the apostle Paul’s theological description of the Church Age in Galatians 4).

Yet it also reminds us of the many historical factors that came together perfectly in preparation for Jesus’ entrance onto the world stage.

The Hebrew Scriptures provide inklings of God’s special preparations for His Son. Abraham and his descendants were to live in a specific place, the “Promised Land” (Gen. 12:1).

Amazingly, this land lies between the three great continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. In fact, God calls Jerusalem the “center” of the earth: “Thus says the Lord God: ‘This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the midst [center] of the nations [Hebrew, goyim] and the countries all around her’” (Ezek. 5:5).

The nations were arrayed around Israel so the Jewish nation could be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6) and represent God to the Gentile world (Dt. 32:8). Almost all of the books of the Bible were authored by Jewish men. In the future, after God removes the true church from the earth through the Rapture, He will reignite Israel as His spiritual light (see Revelation 7, 11, and 14).

As the Messiah’s birth (through a Jewish woman) approached, we can imagine God the Father monitoring certain factors for peak ripeness:

(1) Adequate lapse of time for the Jewish people to appreciate the Law of Moses and for humanity to demonstrate its inability to obey that Law.

This was the theological setting. The books of Galatians and Hebrews specifically explain Jesus’ superiority as a High Priest and the New Covenant’s superiority over the Old. However, it would require centuries of laboring under the Law for people to understand these truths. The freedom we enjoy through Christ can only be appreciated in contrast to the Law.

(2) A specific number of people on Earth.

God the Father did not bring His Son into a world that contained a mere handful of humans. He waited until an impressive number could observe Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. An estimated 300 million people inhabited the known world in Christ’s day.

Amazingly, Jewish people constituted about 1 percent (3 million) of that total, with about 50,000 Jewish individuals living in Jerusalem. That is a far different ratio from what exists today, with a mere 15 million Jewish people in a world population of 7 billion.

(3) Adequate development of languages capable of explaining legal and abstract principles and the rise of one accepted language of international communication.

We need look no further than the inscription over Christ’s cross to realize the significance of the precise Greek and Latin languages: “Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS… And it was written in Hebrew [some translations say Aramaic], Greek, and Latin” (Jn. 19:19–20).

Latin was the legal language of the executing authority. Greek was the international language, used to be sure all could read and heed. Aramaic was the local language to ensure those most likely to rebel would understand the consequences.

Hebrew and Aramaic are picturesque languages. They are ideal for telling stories and moving emotions. However, they lack the precision of Greek and Latin. Three hundred years before Christ was born, God the Father was already priming the rise of Koine (“common”) Greek to international stature.
The sophisticated poets, philosophers, and orators of southern Greece (“Achaia,” with Athens and Sparta) did not respect the people of Macedonia (northern Greece). Macedonians were considered “backward.”

Amazingly, Philip II of Macedon (382–336 B.C.) hired Aristotle to tutor his son Alexander. Aristotle had been trained by Plato and had sat at the feet of Socrates. Alexander became Alexander the Great, who blitzed the world militarily and brought Greek culture and Koine Greek to the Mediterranean basin, Mesopotamia, and India. Three hundred years later, “in the fullness of the time,” Paul used Koine Greek to pen his penetrating defenses of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(4) A specific degree of sophistication in technology for the speedy spread of information, enhanced by a political situation that allowed for unfettered international travel.

The rise of the Roman Empire accelerated the spread of the gospel. If Jesus had come into a world divided into thousands of closed-off, heavily fortified kingdoms, dissemination of the good news would have been painfully slow. The famous Pax Romana (“Roman Peace”) was not pleasant for those it dominated, but it did provide freedom of movement across political frontiers.

Moreover, Roman industry forged great transportation systems by land and sea that made traveling relatively convenient. If you map Paul’s three
October 16

Octavian. Born Gaius Octavius in 63 B.C., he became the greatest Roman leader of all the Roman politicians were developing in such a time as this, when conditions were completely right, that “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5).

major missionary journeys, you will see he traveled more than 5,000 miles in 11 years (A.D. 47–58). These trips were possible due to well-paved roadways with mile markers, bridges over rough terrain, and Roman soldiers who kept robbers at bay.

In addition, the Roman Empire had postal routes and commercial sea travel, although the New Testament mentions neither. The apostle’s epistles appear to have been delivered by fellow believers.

Perhaps the most impressive element of Roman culture in Christ’s day was that it was at the zenith of its success and power militarily, politically, and culturally. Scholars refer to the first century B.C. as the “Golden Age” of ancient literature.²

There were three major phases in Roman history:

- **Monarchical Period:** 753–509 B.C.
  It had seven influential kings.
- **Republic Period:** 509–31 B.C.
  Powerful, wealthy families instituted Senate Rule.
- **Imperial Period:** 31 B.C. – A.D. 476

A.D. 312—Under Emperor Constantine, Christianity became a protected religion. A.D. 476—The Western Empire fell to the Barbarians.

New Testament history falls entirely within the Imperial Period, in the aftermath of the assassination of Julius Caesar. Ironically, though the senators plotted Julius Caesar’s death out of fear of his growing power, his assassination paved the way for the strongest of all the Roman leaders, Caesar Augustus, also known as Octavian. Born Gaius Octavius in 63 B.C., Caesar Augustus was the emperor when Christ was born in Bethlehem.

While the murderers of Julius Caesar were sorting things out (including the intrigue involving Cleopatra in Egypt), the Roman politicians were developing another family that would greatly impact Christianity: the Herods. Four generations of Herods are mentioned in the New Testament. Herod the Great’s friendship with Marc Antony and then Caesar Augustus led to the family’s impressive, long-term political leadership in the territories surrounding Jerusalem.

Called Idumeans in Latin, the Herods descended from Jacob’s twin brother, Esau, the father of the Edomites. During the 100 years (164–63 B.C.) the Jewish Hasmoneans controlled Judea, the Idumeans were forced to convert to Judaism. Therefore, Herod the Great was “king of the Jews” by Roman decree and religious conversion, combined with a close biological connection to the Jewish people through Esau.

His pathological paranoia and fanatical desire to hold on to his power led Herod to order the murder of all males ages two and under (Mt. 2:16) after the wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem looking for the baby whom they said “has been born King of the Jews” (v. 2).

**IN DESCRIBING CHRIST’S NATIVITY,** the Gospel of Luke says, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Lk. 2:1). Augustus (“reverend”) was the title the Senate eventually bestowed on Octavian.

He, along with Marc Antony and Lepidus, fought against Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar (d. March 15, 44 B.C.). Octavian was Julius Caesar’s grandson nephew and had already been named his successor via adoption. Only 18 at the time, Octavian shrewdly rose to dominance, promoted by the famous orator Cicero,³ and influenced Rome successfully for the next 57 years, 40 of them as emperor.

Beyond question, Caesar Augustus was the greatest Roman leader of all the ages. His brilliant political skills enabled him to accomplish the following:

1. Create the Roman Empire from the ashes of the Roman Republic.
2. Judiciously use false humility to make the Senate think the republic still operated, while actually commanding more control of the empire than any leader to date.
3. Close the doors of the Temple of Janus, the two-faced god of war, thus indicating “peace throughout the empire.”
4. Promote laws to encourage marriage and families for the sake of raising a stable next generation of Roman citizens.
5. Shrewdly reward faithful officers and soldiers.
6. Shrewdly arrange marriages so that the longer he lived, the more young, influential noblemen were his own relatives.
7. At great expense (upwards of 50 percent of the Roman annual budget), maintain an army of about 250,000 men who were idle a good percentage of the time.⁴ The census in Luke 2 would have been for taxation purposes toward this expense.
8. Carry out extensive construction projects of both sacred and secular buildings.
9. Institute a 1 percent sales tax and 5 percent inheritance tax.⁵

In addition to these feats, Caesar Augustus was proclaimed Pontifex Maximus, head of the official Roman State Religion, in 12 B.C.⁶ Upon his death in A.D. 14, he was deified.⁷ The Senate renamed the month of August in his honor.

It was in such a time as this, when conditions were completely right, that “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5).

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**ENDNOTES**

¹ Joseph Jacobs, “Statistics,” The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1906 ed. <jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13992-statistics>: Ancient statistics are considered highly unreliable, although these numbers are conservative estimates.


⁴ McGeough, 77.


⁷ Goodman, 91.


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The Roman Effect

Seven insights into the life and culture of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus.

It is difficult today to imagine life in the ancient Roman Empire. We are far removed from the first century, and the motion picture industry has molded the way we perceive Roman society. However, here are some biblical insights based on facts that have been revealed to us:

(1) Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus to the Romans for 30 pieces of silver (Mt. 26:15), was possibly motivated by political ambition. The apostle John called him a “thief” who stole from the disciples’ treasury (Jn. 12:6). But 30 pieces of silver was not much money. According to Exodus 21:32, it was the value of merely one slave. Judas may have hoped to use Jesus to spark a revolt against Rome. For more than three years, he observed Jesus’ miraculous powers and saw how the crowds adored Him. Judas may have wanted Jesus to use His powers to fight.

(2) The word Iscariot normally would refer to either Judas’s father or the city where he was born, yet there are no good candidates for those two traditional associations. However, Iscariot is similar to the Latin word sicarius, which means “assassin” or “murderer.” The Sicarii (plural) were a group of assassins dedicated to throwing off the yoke of Rome. This fact might explain Judas’s sudden remorse. He may not have intended Jesus to die; and when He did die, Judas thought his hope of political victory over Rome was gone.

(3) Archaeologists have discovered game boards etched into the paving stones in the Fortress of Antonia, where the Roman soldiers abused Jesus during His trials. The boards were for a game called The Game of the Kings. It involved moving pieces through the various positions on the game board, with the winning soldier mocking the prisoner as a king. This might be the cultural background behind the mocking of Christ, the crown of thorns the soldiers pounded into Jesus’ head, and the substitute scepter given Him.

(4) It is clear in Scripture that the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, did not have the authority to execute Jesus. The Talmud affirms that the Sanhedrin lost the right of execution 40 years prior to the destruction of the second Temple.1 So God had His Son die a blood-soaked death after being “pierced” (Zech. 12:10) by Roman soldiers and “lifted up” (Jn. 3:14) on a Roman cross.

(5) The New Testament uses the proper word for Pontius Pilate’s position in the Roman government: governor (“prefect”), rather than procurator, which was a later development in Roman leadership. Historians Josephus and Tacitus, by way of contrast, got it wrong.2

(6) Jesus was not considered a Roman citizen, as the apostle Paul was. Historians explain that Pilate’s “governorship” would have given him absolute control over all non-Roman citizens.3

(7) As civilized as Rome may have appeared superficially, its callousness and cruelty to non-Romans were epitomized in the barbaric gladiator spectacles.4 In fact, Rome’s extreme paganism made followers of Jesus stand out.

ENDNOTES
1 Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, ed., Soncino Babylonian Talmud, trans. Jacob Shachter and Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman, Tractate Sanhedrin, Folio 41a <come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_41.html>.
3 Peter Connolly, Living in the Times of Jesus of Nazareth (Tel Aviv: Steimatzky, 1988), 48.
Beyond the Manger

A look at who Jesus is and the miracle of His incarnation.

I love to read. In fact, I come from a family of readers. Last year my mother read more than 150 books, as well as reading through the entire Bible—something we both do each year. “The Bible,” wrote noted scholar Dr. Charles Ryrie, “is the greatest of all books; to study it is the noblest of all pursuits; to understand it, the highest of all goals.”

The Bible is a storehouse of true wisdom and knowledge; and if more people read it and believed what it said, the world wouldn’t be in such horrific condition.

Even at this time of year, when we celebrate Jesus’ birth, most people don’t know who Jesus is. The Bible has much to say about the One who was born in a manger in Bethlehem.

**His Arrival—Prophesied.** From Genesis to Malachi, the Hebrew Scriptures point to this specific Person and His First Advent as the suffering Messiah of Israel.

Genesis 3:15 is the first proclamation that God would do something unique to combat the sin that polluted His creation: “And I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”

This verse means the woman’s “seed” (a man born with no human father) would crush the head of the “serpent” (Satan, God’s enemy), destroying him for rebelling against God, deceiving Eve, and bringing sin into the world.

This prophecy was fulfilled at the cross, when Jesus delivered the death-blows to Satan and his evil rule over lost humanity. Today, through faith in Christ, God pulls people out of Satan’s kingdom one at a time (Col. 1:13) until the day when He will throw the “serpent” into the Lake of Fire forever (Rev. 20:1–3, 10).
The Hebrew Scriptures teach that the King-Messiah would be a descendant of Shem (Gen. 9:26); Abraham (12:1–3); Isaac (26:24); Jacob (28:13–15); Judah (49:10); and, of course, King David (2 Sam. 7:12–16).

Jesus was a direct descendant of David through both His mother, Mary (Hebrew, Miriam; Lk. 3:23–38) and stepfather, Joseph (Mt. 1:1–17).

His Nature—Divine. Although Jesus was born like everyone else, He was not like anyone else. The prophet Micah revealed Jesus’ eternality 700 years before His birth: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2).

Jesus existed and was active before He was born because He is God. The apostle Paul told believers in Colossae, “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16).

The prophet Isaiah also revealed the Messiah’s eternality: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6).

The term everlasting Father literally means the “Father of Eternity” and applies to God alone. Hence, Jesus was and is “Immanuel,” “God with us” (Isa. 7:14).

Jesus spoke of His eternality many times, perhaps none clearer than when He prayed, “And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (Jn. 17:5).
His Being—Holy. The Bible also explains that Jesus was born of a Jewish virgin. This truth is critical because if Jesus had had an earthly father, He would have had a sin nature like everyone else. The sin nature is passed through the male’s seed. By being virgin born, Jesus circumvented the sin nature: He was perfect, sinless, and holy.

Many people find this fact difficult to believe. But it is no more incredible than Sarah giving birth to Isaac when she was 90 or God tormenting Egypt with 10 plagues prior to the Exodus. As God told Abraham, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14).

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS” (Lk. 1:30–31). She replied, with obvious surprise, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” (v. 34).

The angel told Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. For with God nothing will be impossible” (vv. 35, 37).

The virgin birth declared Jesus’ holiness, allowing for His once-for-all, perfect sacrifice for sin.

His Birthplace—Humble. The Hebrew Scriptures teach that the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). Mary and Joseph lived in Galilee. God brought them to the right place using the Roman census:

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child (Lk. 2:1, 3–5).

As the weary couple arrived in Bethlehem, “the days were completed for [Mary] to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn” (vv. 6–7).

So the eternal God, “whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting,” was born in a humble stable devoid of all royal trappings.

His Arrival—Proclaimed. It appeared that this monumental event would go unnoticed. But God had another plan. He sent an angel and then a multitude of angels to announce that He was fulfilling a promise He had made to the Jewish people hundreds of years earlier:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Lk. 2:8–14).

The angels could have visited the high priest or someone of prominence in Jerusalem. Instead, God sent them to lowly shepherds. Shepherding has always seemed important to God. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David all were shepherds; and Jesus would later tell His disciples, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11).

Giving His life for His “sheep” was His destiny at His First Coming. The prophet Isaiah stated,

But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:5–6).

Joseph probably recalled Isaiah’s prophecy when an angel told him in a dream, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins (Mt. 1:20–21).
her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS [Hebrew, Yeshua], for He will save [Hebrew, yoshua] His people from their sins” (Mt. 1:20–21). The only way to remove sin is by blood sacrifice, something Joseph no doubt understood (see Leviticus 17:11).

**His Destiny—Glorious.** Ruling as King of Israel is Jesus’ destiny at His Second Coming. To confirm that fact, God used the magi:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him” (Mt. 2:1–2).

The magi came to the capital city of the Jewish people, looking for the One who was “born King.” Traditionally, an heir is born with the right to rule. Jesus was born King. This phrase looks to the future, when He will rule as King over Israel and ultimately over all the earth. The magi confirmed what Gabriel had told Mary:

*Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end (Lk. 1:31–33).*

Isaiah saw this future day: “He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness the belt of His waist” (Isa. 11:4–5). One day, the Bible declares, Jesus will return to Earth as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Joseph learned of the First Advent; Mary learned of the Second. The Bible communicates both. The first time, Jesus came quietly, as the Lamb of God; but the second time, He will come as the Lion of Judah, with great fanfare, majesty, and power (Zech. 14:3–5; Mt. 24:29–30). What a glorious day that will be!

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**ENDNOTE**

No Room at the Kataluma

A good story requires tension. Tension keeps readers sitting on the edge of their seats until the resolution, which generally comes near the conclusion of the story. Often the source of tension is the bad guy, the villain.

When it comes to the account of Jesus’ birth, it seems like the villain was the poor innkeeper. After all, he was the one who turned Mary and Joseph away “because there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk. 2:7). Right?

Perhaps not. Although many people picture a motel with a large, neon “no vacancy” sign out front, that is not the biblical concept of an inn.

The Greek word translated “inn” is kataluma. Traditionally, there are two possible interpretations. The first is that the word refers to an “Oriental caravansary or kahn,”¹ according to Dr. G. Coleman Luck, late chairman of the Bible Department at Moody Bible Institute.

He suggested the following: The caravansary is a large square edifice built around an open inner courtyard. In the center of the courtyard a well is provided. Often the building is two stories, with the lower one containing stalls for beasts and the upper consisting of small rooms for use of the human travelers. . . . The inn where there was no room for Joseph and Mary (Lk. 2:7) has traditionally been thought of as a caravansary.²

Dr. Luck said some people believe such shelters “still exist in rural areas of Asia.”³

However, the word also could mean something entirely different:

Some authorities, however, hold that the Gk [Greek] word here used . . . refers not to a caravansary at all but to a guest chamber or lodging place in a private home. . . . According to this view Joseph and Mary planned to stay at the home of friends or relatives, but the small dwelling and its guest chamber were so full that they had to be housed in the lower portion where the animals were quartered.⁴

By the time the magi arrived at “the house” where Jesus was living (Mt. 2:11), the family would already have been moved upstairs.

Tradition suggests Jesus was born in a cave, or grotto, that also served as a stable. Clearly, Mary and Joseph were housed with animals: “So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger” (Lk. 2:6–7). A manger is a feeding trough.

Today in Bethlehem, there is a grotto under the Church of the Nativity, which traditionally is considered Christ’s birthplace. However, no one can say for sure where Jesus was born. And no one can say for sure when He was born, even though we celebrate the Savior’s birth in December.

In the end, whoever moved Mary and Joseph to the stable probably did them a favor because it provided privacy for their Son’s birth. So if there was a kataluma keeper, he wasn’t such a bad guy after all.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dr. G. Coleman Luck, Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia, Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard Vos, and John Rea, eds., paperback ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1983), 845, s.v. “inn.”
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.

by Tom Simcox
large pro-Israel organization in the United States, said CUFI is increasingly prioritizing the plight of Mideast Christians and sees the situation as “one of the greatest human rights tragedies of our day.”

President Barack Obama, meanwhile, has defended his administration’s decision to separate the Iran nuclear deal from the cases of American prisoners, arguing that Iran would use the prisoners as bargaining chips.

Brog rejected that argument, saying the “administration’s excuse for not insisting on the freedom of all the prisoners is pathetic.” While the White House does not want to link the nuclear deal to “extraneous issues like the prisoners,” it allowed Iran “to do exactly that,” he said.

“iran is getting relief from its embargo, it’s allowed to pursue its ballistic missile program, and they don’t even have to stop their support for terrorism.”

by Sean Savage/JNS.org

According to Open Doors USA, a nonprofit Christian human rights group, Iran ranks seventh on the list of countries “where Christians face the most persecution,” and the magnitude of that persecution rates as “extreme.”

“According to the Iranian state, only Armenians and Assyrians can be Christian. Ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates,” Open Doors USA said. “This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in Persian languages, from evangelism to Bible training to publishing Scripture and Christian books or preaching in Farsi,” the group added. “In 2014, at least 75 Christians were arrested. More Christians were sentenced to prison, and pressure on those detained increased, including physical and mental abuse.”

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Pastor Abedini Still in Prison in Iran from page 13

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It is not difficult to picture the scene Jesus’ disciples witnessed when the resurrected Lord ascended from the surface of the earth, rising higher and higher. Their squinting gaze no doubt focused on the clouds into which the Lord had vanished from their sight.

Yes, He had ascended into heaven; but a few moments earlier, He had given final instructions. As the disciples continued to stare into the sky, two angels scolded, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Embedded in the reproof was a message of hope that has brightened every Christmas season for centuries: Jesus is alive and is coming again.

Celebrating His final Passover with the disciples on the night He was betrayed, Jesus announced, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward” (Jn. 13:36). Naturally, the disciples were distraught that He was leaving. They believed Jesus would usher in the Messianic Kingdom, which is why they had followed Him.

Jesus reassured them, *Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also* (14:1–3).

Jesus wasn’t simply leaving them; He was going to a specific place for a particular purpose with a definite plan to return. He described to His disciples a unique scenario that will culminate in a specific, identifiable event with clearly outlined details.
Both Paul and John used the word *we*, expressing their confidence that Jesus Christ could return for His church at any moment.

It is evident Jesus’ words in John 14:3 speak of an exclusive event that defines the “blessed hope” of every born-again Christian (Ti. 2:13). The early church eagerly anticipated Christ’s return and greeted one another with the word *maranatha*, meaning “Our Lord, come.”

Throughout church history, born-again Christians have looked forward to meeting the Lord Jesus in the air. That moment is closer now than it has ever been. The Rapture is the next event on the prophetic calendar, and world events underscore its nearness.

As we celebrate the Lord’s First Coming this Christmas season, we can also rejoice that, at any moment, we may hear His shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God announcing His return for His church.

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**ENDNOTES**


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With Justice for All

(iStock/Getty Images. Digital enhancements, Thomas E. Williams.)
Imagine a world where all nations are at peace, and there is no war and no threat of deadly terrorism; all politicians and government officials are honest, trustworthy public servants with no personal agendas; and the poor and most vulnerable are gently cared for and helped.

Hard to imagine, isn’t it?

In 1971 John Lennon, the late composer and singer with the Beatles, released his famous song *Imagine*, which challenged listeners to picture such a world: no war, no killing, no corruption, no countries, and no greed—only peace, through the brotherhood of man.

However, Lennon’s idyllic world lacked one critical thing: God. Humanity cannot accomplish Utopia without Him.

Nowhere does Scripture teach that, through the acts of mankind, the world will gradually morph into a state of perfection. Instead, God’s Word says the opposite: As time advances, wars will devastate the planet, famine will lead to starvation and economic woes, and true peace will be unattainable. Even today, with all the amazing advancements in global technology and communication, the world is slipping into a state of dystopia.

So is there any hope? Yes!

Humanity’s universal desire for worldwide peace, true justice, and righteousness will be realized at the return of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the day when Israel’s King-Messiah will bring long-lasting, sustainable peace. All mankind will benefit from His righteousness and justice, and all of God’s creation will be made new.

### Enacting Peace Through Divine Strength

Peace is a true universal desire. Though the world is full of evildoers who prefer mayhem and destruction, the majority of people want peace on Earth. Yet, despite all our diplomats, politicians, religious leaders, treaties, and negotiated settlements, we’ve made very little headway.

When Jesus returns to Earth, the world will be in complete turmoil. The prophet Zechariah said that, immediately prior to the Messiah’s arrival, all nations will be focused on destroying Israel. Their corrupt leaders will try to capture Jerusalem for themselves, as empires and rulers have done in the past:

> The burden of the word of the LORD against Israel. Thus says the LORD, who stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him: “Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem. And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it” (Zech. 12:1–3).

The prophet Isaiah said when the King-Messiah of Israel comes, He will be called “Wonderful, Counselor” (Isa. 9:6). These powerful titles do not mean He will be a professional psychologist. The Hebrew means “Extraordinary Strategist,” suggesting He will be perfect in establishing and enacting military strategy against His enemies.

Jesus’ ability to quash rebellion will produce a sustainable peace throughout His 1,000-year Kingdom reign. Thus Isaiah called Jesus the “Prince of Peace” (v. 6). As King Jesus enacts peace, economic stability will spread throughout the world.

When the Messiah returns to Earth, the battle will be over, as the King simply speaks the words of victory:

> Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (Rev. 19:15–16).

No leader or nation will defeat His military strategy.

### Upholding the Government on His Shoulders

When Jesus returns, His feet will touch down on the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:4). From there, He may go the short distance to the Eastern Gate of the Temple Mount, where He will reestablish the long-collapsed throne of David. God promised through Isaiah that the King-Messiah will rule “upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever” (Isa. 9:7).

Jesus’ government will be global, extending to all of His creation, as David’s throne was intended to do:

> He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, and His enemies will lick the dust.

Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him (Ps. 72:8–9, 11). In that day, there will be no party politics. Jesus will “deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy. He will redeem their life from...
oppression and violence; and precious shall be their blood in His sight” (vv. 12–14).

Jesus’ government will be invincible, inviolable, and incorruptible. It will uphold the virtues of the Law of God, which were designed to benefit everyone, and enact Christ’s words, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mt. 20:28). This philosophy alone is counter-cultural and contrary to the understanding of people who have the power to rule today.

Ruling With Justice and Righteousness

Outside many courtrooms stands a statue of Lady Justice. She is blindfolded to represent her supposedly unbiased stance, with her arms stretched out wide to display her impartiality. In one hand she holds a set of scales, balancing the strength of a case’s support against its challenger’s arguments. Her other hand grips a sword, which symbolizes imminent punishment for the guilty. Justice is supposed to be blind to money, power, and identity.

Although the Western system of justice is probably the best ever implemented, in many ways it is still extremely flawed. Sometimes even Lady Justice lifts her blindfold to reveal her own bias. The best human attempts at justice are limited because those who manage and uphold the system’s virtues are still sinful, flawed human beings.

Jesus, however, is perfect. He is the sinless, flawless Son of God whom the Father promised to send to the Jewish people to be their Messiah (Prov. 30:4; Isa. 96; Mic. 5:2). The Babe born in Bethlehem, who was slain as the Lamb of God to pay for the sins of the world, will return as the Lion of Judah to rule the world. He will need no blindfold to help Him maintain impartiality.

From the throne of David, Jesus will rule and judge the world with perfect justice and righteousness (Isa. 9:7). He will know the exact judgment necessary to govern His Kingdom and to keep peace.

One day citizens of Jesus’ Kingdom will enjoy a peace on Earth unlike anything ever before experienced. The gracious love, mercy, and kindness of the King of kings will fill the world as the Messiah takes His rightful place on the throne of David.

No one will have to worry about having a corrupt king, ruler, politician, or judge again because the scepter will never depart from Him. His “is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (Dan. 7:27).

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S
ince June 26, when five Supreme Court justices issued their majority opinion in Obergefell v. Hodges, the millennia-old idea of religious freedom in America has been colliding with the newly minted concept that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry.

Kim Davis, a county clerk in Kentucky, went to jail briefly for refusing to issue marriage licenses. Oregon Judge Vance Day’s judicial “fitness” is being investigated because he sent same-sex couples to other judges for civil marriage ceremonies. Ohio Judge Allen McConnell said that, as a Christian, he can’t facilitate same-sex marriages and has petitioned the Ohio Supreme Court for an exemption. Alabama Judge Wes Allen and judges and clerks in Texas have also resisted.

As followers of Jesus, how do we decide between obedience to government as outlined in the Bible and the exceptions Scripture also embraces? The task is challenging.

The apostle Paul clearly said we should “be subject to the governing authorities,” adding, “for conscience’ sake” (Rom. 13:1, 5). Yet Paul also disobeyed the Roman order to exit the jail in Philippi, deciding to remain incarcerated temporarily to protest his illegal arrest and beating, both of which violated his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 16:35–37).

The apostle Peter’s first epistle teaches, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake” (2:13). Yet when the ruling Sanhedrin commanded Peter not to preach Christ, he replied boldly, “We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 6:10–20).

Negotiation, compromise, and accommodation do not inherently signal spiritual defeat. I believe Jesus’ paradigm to “render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mt. 22:21) suggests both are possible and, in many situations, can be accomplished simultaneously, without contradiction.

Daniel later faced a worse dilemma: Stop praying to the Lord and live; or disobey the king, pray to the Lord, and be executed. Daniel chose prayer. He was then thrown into the lions’ den to die. But God rescued Daniel, which resulted in the pagan king’s profession that the God of Israel was indeed God (Dan. 6:10–20).

As we navigate the troubled waters of post-Christian/postmodern (and increasingly neo-pagan) America, we need to apply these scriptural principles. There are two other considerations, as well.

First, we should be open to counsel from fellow believers. When Paul was ready to charge into the amphitheater in Ephesus to confront a bloodthirsty mob, his friends counseled him to refrain. He heeded their advice, and it probably spared his life (Acts 19:30–31).

Second, follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. When Paul was convinced the Lord wanted him to return to Jerusalem, he insisted on returning, even though he knew the risks and his friends warned him against it (21:4–14). If our action is in line with Scripture and consistent with the leading of the Holy Spirit, is there any other route for us to follow?

Of course, obedience to God does not guarantee personal comfort or deliverance in the here-and-now, as Paul’s later hardships illustrate. But isn’t that the very nature of faithful obedience in our walk with Christ? We never know with certainty how our personal stories will end. Having taken a stand, however, we do know who will write the ending.

We also know this promise in Philippians 1:6: “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” And that is something we can count on.
Deeply rooted within the consciousness of the Jewish people is the belief in the coming of a Messiah. However, time, traditionalism, and tribulation have clouded many people's views of Him.

This ambiguity led medieval Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) to simplify the Jewish understanding of the Messiah in the 12th article of his 13 Foundations of Judaism: “I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though He may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that He will come.”

Maimonides also advanced the now widely accepted notion among Jewish people that the Messiah would be merely a “superhuman” king—not a divine Savior of sinners.

How do we know what is true concerning the promised Messiah? Scripture states, “Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). So we should expect the prophets to have something to say on the subject.

One prophet, Isaiah, had a great deal to say: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” ( Isa. 7:14).

The Gospel of Matthew reports Jesus' fulfillment of this prophecy: “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus [Hebrew, Yeshua], for He will save [Hebrew, yosheea] His people from their sins.”

So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us” (Mt. 1:21–23).

More than a mere man, Jesus is called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.”

Isaiah also recorded another prophecy 700 years before Jesus' birth: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And
Jesus brought that peace through His substitutionary sacrifice. This is the Good News—that God declares us righteous when we have faith in Jesus, and He gives us “peace with God” (Rom. 5:1).

“For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ [Messiah] the Lord” (Lk. 2:11); and then a host of angels announced, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (v. 14).

Because so many people today look for political and national peace, they fail to see that Jesus’ First Advent brought spiritual peace between man and God by enabling forgiveness of sin for everyone who believes, “for the Jew first and also for the Greek [Gentile]” (Rom. 1:16).

Jesus brought that peace through His substitutionary sacrifice. This is the Good News—that God declares us righteous when we have faith in Jesus, and He gives us “peace with God” (5:1).

Jesus told the religious detractors of His day, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (Jn. 5:39). The prophets foretold of Jesus, and the ancient teachers bore witness that the Messiah would be more than a man. Who is Jesus to you?

“ISRAEL MY GLORY” 31

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Quoteworthy

“We are under the mistaken impression that divine love cannot coexist with human pain. Such thinking is one of Satan’s most effective strategies. It must be attacked with the gospel of grace.”

—Edward T. Welch
Tears streamed down Sandy Yao’s face as she stood by her mother’s bed. God felt so far away.

She had trusted His Son as her Savior. She believed God had opened the door for her to leave her homeland, come to America, and get a job teaching high school Chinese in West Virginia, not far from where I serve as pastor at Independent Bible Church (IBC).

She was so excited to have her parents come for a visit over the Christmas holidays. When they agreed to go with her to a Christmas Eve candlelight service at another local church, it was Sandy Yao’s prayer that her parents’ limited English would be enough to help them understand the message of that silent night and ask Immanuel, the Lord Jesus, to live in their hearts too.

They did not come to faith; and her hopes were further dashed when two weeks later, her mother suffered a massive stroke. Her mom now hung between life and death in a local hospital bed.

Where, Sandy wondered, was the God of Bethlehem?

“Are you Sandy?” Sandy didn’t know the man with the kind face who was standing at the door. She didn’t attend IBC. “My name is Curt,” he said. “I’m one of the pastors at Independent Bible Church, and a member of ours who works at the hospital asked me to visit your mom. And this is Anna, from our church, who speaks Chinese.”

“Yes, I’m Sandy,” she replied. “These are my parents; but Mama isn’t doing well at all.” She nodded toward her mother, who was conscious but obviously paralyzed on her entire right side.
Pastor Curt and Anna visited and prayed with the hurting family. They wondered how much Mrs. Yao comprehended, though Anna translated the pastor’s words into Chinese. They agreed to visit again.

Sandy was amazed that a Chinese speaker was available at a church in West Virginia. Immanuel (meaning “God with us”), who seemed so far away, was beginning to show He was not only “with her” but had been working on her behalf all along.

Anna had married a military man and had come with him to West Virginia. After several years, she had become curious about Christianity. One Sunday, she appeared at IBC’s door and told the greeter, “My name is Anna. I’m Buddhist; and I want to learn about Jesus.”

A few months and many Bible studies later, Anna trusted in Christ and became a bold witness. She enjoyed meeting other Asians to tell them about her Savior; so she was happy to visit the Yao family with Pastor Curt.

Pastor Curt, his wife, and Anna visited and prayed with the Yao family in the hospital repeatedly. They rallied the body of Christ to pray. Mrs. Yao had not been expected to live, let alone become strong enough to fly home; but Anna, newly aware of God’s presence, asked everyone to pray.

The Yao family’s needs were great. They had little money, no insurance, and Mr. Yao was diabetic and needed medicine.

Several years earlier, a doctor at IBC had started the Good Samaritan Free Clinic to help the underinsured in town and share the gospel. Though the free clinic was only open one night a week, Pastor Curt arranged for Mr. Yao to go there. He took Sandy with him to translate for her dad. Not only did Mr. Yao receive the medical help he needed, but he listened intently as a counselor from the church shared the gospel through translation. That night Sandy’s prayers for her father’s salvation were answered. Mr. Yao placed his faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Savior.

As people prayed, Mrs. Yao became well enough to be released from the hospital, though she could still not walk or speak. She would need extensive therapy. Would it be a surprise to find out that both the physical therapist and occupational therapist assigned to visit and care for her were Christians from IBC? By this time, the church was becoming acutely aware that God had His hand on this situation. Immanuel was using His family of believers as His hands and feet and mouth to minister to the needy who had come from the other side of the globe.

The Yao family’s financial needs were considerable. Many wanted to give, including Sandy’s colleagues from school. The church not only gave a benevolent gift, but also opened a fund so that church members, as well as the community, could channel monies for medical expenses and anticipated travel.

Sandy’s fellow educators learned what was happening and conveyed their appreciation. The Father in heaven was glorified as people saw the good works through the body of Christ (Mt. 5:16).

Pastor Curt, his wife, and Anna made many visits to the Yao family’s little apartment. There were many Bible studies and tearful times of prayer. Mrs. Yao warmly received the gift of a Chinese study Bible. Soon, like her husband, she also received the gift of Jesus as her Savior.

To the amazement of all, Mrs. Yao became mobile enough to fly home on a commercial flight three months after her stroke. Anna, the extended Yao family in East Asia, and the local community in West Virginia knew that God had answered many prayers lifted in faith.

But now what? Would God continue what He had begun in the Yao family? At the next pastoral team meeting, Pastor Curt asked where in East Asia the missionary doctors who were sent from IBC served. More than 10 years earlier, a husband and wife team—he a family physician and she an ophthalmologist—stood before our church and announced they were selling their medical practice and going to the mission field. When I told Pastor Curt the city, he got a funny look on his face. “I think that’s where the Yaos live!” he said.

What are the chances? The city has a population of more than 6 million; but one of the families there was indeed Sandy Yao’s, and another of the families was the medical missionary couple sent by IBC several years earlier.

Connections were made; physical therapy was arranged; and a month later, when the missionaries visited West Virginia, they brought a video they had taken of Mrs. Yao walking and of Sandy, her parents, and her aunt and uncle joyously thanking IBC and sending their love. Plans were made for the Yaos to become part of a local house church in their city.

Though God can seem far away, He never forgets His children. He is sovereignly at work worldwide to call individuals to Himself, even if it means bringing them across the globe, allowing a serious stroke, or having His people “just so happen to be in the right place at the right time.” Don’t give up praying for unsaved loved ones or for that unreached people group God has put on your heart.

The body of Christ is made up of many members, all of whom have the privilege of being His hands, feet, and mouth to fulfill their roles in what Jesus is doing through His people “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10).

Like the apostle Paul, we have every reason to be “confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6).

What a God! He truly is Immanuel, “God with us.” He still seeks and saves the lost and allows us to be a part of that mission.

Editor’s Note: Some names were changed to protect the individuals’ privacy.

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Jesus, Zionism, and the Millennial Generation
The Millennials are the 2.5 billion people born roughly between 1980 and 2000. Approximately 85 million live in America.

Jesus will say to the nations that persecuted Israel,

\[\text{Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it [provide help] to one of the least of these [the Jewish people], you did not do it to Me (Mt. 25:41, 45).}\]

Jesus Will Establish the Jewish Kingdom in Israel. Following Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples asked Him, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Christians who deny the literal, future millennial reign of Christ in Israel often criticize His disciples for asking such a question.

Notice Jesus’ answer: “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority” (v. 7).

He did not say, “Guys, you’re missing the point! The Kingdom is already reigning in your hearts!” Rather, Jesus affirmed their question’s legitimacy by saying that the time when He will restore the Kingdom to Israel was not for them to know.

In the last days, the Jewish people, persecuted on every side by the anti-Semitic nations of the world, will cry out to their Messiah, “Save now, I pray, O Lord; . . . Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Ps. 118:25–26). Then the Messiah will return to Earth to rescue them and establish the promised, literal Kingdom of David (Mt. 23:39).

Jesus Will Reign as King of Israel. Jesus’ Zionism is most evident in the fact that He will rule over Israel as King. At His Second Coming, Jesus will assume His rightful seat on the throne of David (Isa. 9:7; Mt. 24:31). As King of Israel, He will rule not only the Jewish state, but also the entire world.

The prophet Isaiah wrote,

\[\text{The government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isa. 9:6-7).}\]

Jesus the Messiah is the ultimate Zionist, and His Father clearly established that the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. Jesus will set up the long-awaited Messianic, Jewish Kingdom in Israel, where He will reign eternally and execute justice on the world, seated on the throne of David.

Zionism’s Origin

Modern Zionism is often traced back to Theodor Herzl’s World Zionist Congress in 1897. But its origins actually go back much further—all the way to the book of Genesis.

In Genesis, God promised a Chaldean man named Abram a piece of real estate known then as “the land of Canaan” (Gen. 12:5). This promise is called the Abrahamic Covenant.

God said, “All the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever” (13:15). This promise was unconditional—no strings attached. Thus God the Father was the first Zionist, giving Canaan (Israel) to Abram and his descendants through Jacob as an eternal possession.

Jesus the Zionist

The most ardent Zionist of all is Israel’s Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Scripture clearly reveals Jesus’ support of the nation of Israel and His Zionist views.

Jesus Will Destroy Israel’s Enemies.

Someday, when Israel calls to Him for deliverance, He will return to Earth and destroy Israel’s enemies: “It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem” (Zech. 12:9; cf. Ps. 2:8; Rev. 19:15).

Wear the Label

Fellow Millennials, if ever there were a label followers of Jesus should wear proudly, it is the label “Zionist.” We don’t have to wear it as a sign of political affiliation or as a statement of agreement with all Israel does; but if we seek to imitate the Jewish Messiah, we must stand in solidarity with the very nation He stood with and died for.

The Lord Jesus Christ will one day rule the world from the throne of David in Israel, where He will judge the nations based on their treatment of the Jewish people. Now is the time to choose whether you will wear the Zionist label—proudly standing with the Lord’s Chosen People—or side with the world in its rejection of Israel.
A Beloved Servant

Churches are like families: full of members with differing personalities, dispositions, and temperaments. Some members are friendly, loving, truthful, generous, and hospitable, while others are unloving, arrogant, and abusive.

The apostle John addressed this situation in his third letter to Gaius—a truthful, loving, and hospitable servant of Jesus Christ. He commended Gaius for his testimony and warned him about Diotrephes, an arrogant, abusive church leader who refused to receive John or his emissaries.

The books of 2 and 3 John share many similarities:

- They resemble each other in appearance, grammar, vocabulary, theme, and organization.
- They address specific people (the elect lady in 2 John and Gaius in 3 John).
- They praise the addressees for knowing and walking in truth.
- They instruct the addressees on how to treat traveling teachers who seek opportunities to minister in the local church.

The format of 3 John follows the typical style of letters during that period. The salutation mentions both the writer and recipient, praises Gaius’s commitment to the truth, and includes a prayer for his health and welfare (vv. 1–4).

The body of the letter praises Gaius’s treatment of traveling preachers (vv. 5–8) and warns him about Diotrephes (vv. 9–12). John concluded his letter by stating his desire to see Gaius in the near future and wishing him well (vv. 13–14).

Most scholars believe John wrote this letter from Ephesus around A.D. 90.

John never emphasized his apostolic authority by addressing himself as the author. He simply referred to himself as “The Elder” (v. 1; cf. 2 John 1), stressing his position as a loving shepherd over the flock.

Elders (Greek, presbuteros) were overseers in the first-century church (equivalent to bishops). They were the spiritually mature leaders of the local assemblies (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1–7). There are two types of elders: ruling elders and teachers—“those who labor in the word and doctrine” (5:17). They function as undershepherds of the Lord and stewards who administer the affairs of a local church.

Since John is not named as the author of 3 John, some Bible scholars have questioned his authorship. However, John never identified himself by name in any of the books he wrote. In the Gospel of John, he simply called himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:20; cf. 13:23; 20:2; 21:7).

Style, vocabulary, time frame, and message provide convincing evidence that John wrote all three epistles bearing his name.

Praising Gaius

John wrote, “To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth: Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” (3 Jn. 1–2).

Gaius was a common New Testament name. Four men bore it:

1. Gaius of Macedonia, who traveled with Paul and Aristarchus to Ephesus and was seized along with them in the riot there (Acts 19:29).
2. Gaius of Derbe, who traveled with Paul from Corinth to Troas (20:4).
3. Gaius of Corinth, whom Paul baptized while in that city (1 Cor. 1:14).
4. Gaius to whom John wrote this letter.

Scholars generally agree the Gaius in 3 John is different from the others associated with Paul.

Although John did not state where Gaius lived within the Roman province, he probably lived far from Ephesus, where John resided. Nothing in the letter indicates Gaius functioned as a leader within his local church, but he must have been a moral, loyal, and trustworthy man in his assembly.

The word beloved (3 Jn. 2) is the Greek word agapetos, which means “well-beloved.” It expressed John’s deep, ongoing relationship and affection for Gaius. John, as well as believers in Gaius’s local church, highly respected him. John called Gaius “well-beloved” four times (vv. 1, 2, 5, 11). Although John continually encouraged believers to love all people as God does, John dearly loved Gaius as a brother in Christ.

He used the phrase whom I love in [the] truth (v. 1) to emphasize the type of love he possessed for Gaius. He did not say “in [the] truth” to underline the genuineness of his love (although it was genuine) but, rather, to denote that his love was a brotherly love that functioned in the
circle of believers—those who know and practice the truth. This is the type of love believers have for one another (cf. vv. 3, 4, 8, 12).

**Praying for Gaius**

Rather than include a standard greeting, John began his letter to Gaius with a specific prayer and wish for him: “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” (v. 2).

This is the second time John called Gaius “beloved” in his salutation, indicating his close bond with his brother in Christ. These words probably greatly encouraged and strengthened Gaius, especially since they came from John. John wanted Gaius to know how much he appreciated his commitment to serve the Lord in order to undergird him for the problem he would later mention in this letter.

John’s prayer for Gaius was two-fold: First, John wished that he “may prosper in all things” (v. 2). The word *prosper* means “way, path, road, route, course, or journey.” The idea is to be led along in one’s trip and brought to a safe, successful end upon arrival. John used the word not to wish Gaius a successful trip but, rather, to wish him God’s help on his path in serving the Lord.

Some preachers misuse the phrase *that you may prosper in all things* to promote what is called “the prosperity gospel.” They teach that God wants all believers to be healthy and wealthy—free from all physical afflictions and financial woes.

These preachers also seriously misinterpret and misapply Deuteronomy 8:18, which states God has given His people “power to get wealth.” They rip the passage from its context. God does not promise believers health and wealth in this life. To the contrary, Jesus promised, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

Second, John wished Gaius would “be in health” (3 Jn. 2). This expression does not mean he believed Gaius was sick. Rather, John wanted to know about Gaius’s welfare so that he would not burden him by asking him to house missionaries if he was not healthy.

John added “just as your soul prospers” (v. 2) to indicate he knew Gaius was a dedicated man in character and conduct who was growing spiritually as he served the Lord. John wished Gaius’s physical health would be as hardy as his spiritual health.

**Pleasure Over Gaius**

John then concluded his salutation: “For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth” (v. 3). The apostle “rejoiced greatly” at the good news he received about Gaius’s well-being.

The “brethren” who reported to him were most likely Christian workers whom John sent from Ephesus to evangelize surrounding cities and teach within the churches. Upon their return, these workers reported to John on the churches’ spiritual conditions, their leaders, and their hospitality.

Such reports kept John informed on the assemblies under his administration, enabling him to provide counsel and correction if needed. Since he received a glowing report on Gaius and his ministry, John praised him for a job well done and encouraged him.

John wrote to Gaius, “[The] brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth” (v. 3). The brethren not only heard of Gaius’s godly walk with the Lord, but they personally witnessed it.

While staying with Gaius, they would have observed him daily in all types of situations and could have evaluated him and vouched for his obedience to Christ.

John used the word *truth* three times in verses 3 and 4 to refer to two things: (1) doctrinal truth in the gospel of Christ (cf. 1 Jn. 2:21–23) and (2) the individual’s character and conduct in living daily for Christ (cf. 1:6; 2:4; 3:18–19). Gaius’s possession of the truth manifested itself in the love he showed to fellow Christians (3 Jn. 6).

John was so pleased by Gaius’s commitment to truth and love that he wrote, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (v. 4). In other words, hearing of Gaius’s godly life and sincere commitment to serve the Lord was the greatest news John could have received.

The phrase *my children* (v. 4) could be interpreted in two ways:

(1) It could refer to those John led to the Lord. Paul used a similar phrase when referring to his converts (1 Cor. 4:14; Gal. 4:19). Thus John might have led Gaius to the Lord.

(2) It could refer to those under his spiritual care and supervision since he was the elder over many churches in the region. The latter is more likely, though either interpretation could be true.

The phrase *walk in truth* (3 Jn. 4) conveys the idea not merely of accepting the truth of the gospel, but also living out one’s Christian beliefs.

The report John received on Gaius is the commendation all Christian leaders long to receive about those whom they have led to the Lord, discipled, or oversee in a local church. It is thrilling to be used of the Lord to lead others to Christ, and it is an added delight to watch them grow and mature in the faith. How does your commitment measure up to Gaius’s?

David M. Levy is the director of International Ministries and a Bible teacher for The Friends of Israel.
What Must Be Done?

Because of these differences and disagreements, it is essential that all Christians have guidelines for conduct. But it would be disastrous for one Christian to try to enforce his or her personal code on others. That is where the Bible comes in. It provides objective, authoritative guidelines from a higher authority.

True Christians recognize the Scriptures as divinely inspired and intended to guide believers in faith and practice. Within the Scriptures, God reveals unchanging moral standards for Christian conduct, despite transient societal mores.

If only one person inhabited the universe, standards for conduct would be unnecessary. It would be impossible for a lone individual to offend others. Any action that person chose would seem pleasing and right.

However, many people live in this world. No one can act without affecting someone else. Even if someone chose to become a hermit in a cave—entirely cut off from the rest of humanity—that individual still would be unable to act or think without affecting God, who is omnipresent.

Since everything we do and say affects others, Christians need guidelines for their conduct. So here is the first of four biblical guidelines that you can apply in your walk with Christ.

GUIDELINE NUMBER 1: Do Not Offend the Holy Nature of God.

Since God observes the actions and thoughts of Christians (Heb. 4:13), our thoughts and actions should glorify Him and not offend His holiness.

In the Scriptures, God expresses His holy nature in the form of clear, absolute moral standards. Because His holy nature never changes, His moral absolutes never change. They remain binding on all people, in all places, at all times.

No one has ever had the liberty of choosing to accept or deny the responsibility to live according to God’s moral absolutes. Although some people
may doubt, question, deny, debate, and attempt to change them, these absolutes still remain valid. The only way they could be altered or abolished would be if God Himself changed or ceased to exist.

God’s moral absolutes reveal the following actions are wrong:
- Engaging in any form of sexual immorality—fornication, adultery, or homosexuality (1 Cor. 6:9).
- Lying (Eph. 4:25).
- Murdering (Rev. 21:8; 22:15).
- Participating in spiritism (21:8).
- Committing idolatry (1 Cor. 6:9).
- Coveting (v. 10).
- Rebelling against God-ordained authority (Rom. 13:1–7; Eph. 6:1).
- Abusing the body or soul and allowing either to be controlled by anything (alcohol, narcotics, food) or anyone except God (1 Cor. 6:10, 19–20; Eph. 5:18).
- Using offensive speech (Eph. 4:29).

Christians must understand the extent to which God applies His absolutes. They pertain not only to outward actions, but also to inward thoughts and attitudes.

In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Christ taught that people who get angry with others without a cause have committed murder in their hearts, and a man who lusts for a woman who is not his wife has committed adultery in his heart (Mt. 5:21–28). Therefore, even sinful thoughts and wrong attitudes break God’s moral law.

Thus Christians must not only control their actions but also guard their thoughts by controlling what they look at, read, and listen to (Phil. 4:8). The patriarch Job said he made a covenant with his eyes not to look at a young woman, for he knew the heart walks after the eyes (Job 31:1, 7).

The apostle John warned about “the lust of the eyes” (1 Jn. 2:16), meaning “the lust which the eye begets by seeing.” Christians should not look at, read, or listen to immoral, suggestive things. In fact, they should not even talk about the immoral practices of the pagan society around them (Eph. 5:12).

Instead, God’s Word instructs believers to set their minds on things above, not on things of Earth (Col. 3:2).

### Contemporary Culture and Christians

Clearly, a genuine conflict exists between God’s moral absolutes and our culture’s moral standards. However, Christians should not be surprised by this conflict because Satan, God’s enemy, dominates the culture of this age (2 Cor. 4:4).

After Adam and Eve sinned, Satan introduced elements into the culture that completely contradict God’s absolutes. Thus all people grow up in a Satan-dominated society that educates and conditions the conscience to accept as right things God says are wrong. The conscience, then, becomes a false guide to determine right from wrong.

When people become Christians, their consciences do not automatically change to conform to God’s absolutes. They must reeducate their consciences to conform to God’s standards.

In Ephesians 4:17—5:17, the apostle Paul told believers not to continue walking “as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened” and being ignorant of God’s ways (v. 17–18). Instead, Christians should “be renewed in the spirit of [their] mind[s]” (v. 23).

Similarly, in Romans 12:2 he instructed dedicated Christians, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” People in Paul’s day used the word translated “conformed” to refer to one’s dress or attitude or to a figure of speech (the “dress” in which an idea is clothed). It signifies that which is opposed to reality and truth; that which is changeable, fleeting, and insubstantial; and that which may change every minute.

Sometimes, people used the word to refer to “the fictitious illusory transformation whereby evil assumes the mask of good.”

The word translated “world” means “age.” Paul contrasted the spirit, pursuits, and domination of Satan’s present evil age with those of God’s coming age of righteousness (Jn. 14:30; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 2:2):
- The spirit of this age is selfishness; the spirit of God’s Kingdom is love.
- The pursuit of this age is pleasing self; the pursuit in God’s Kingdom is pleasing God.
- Satan dominates this age; Christ rules in the age to come.

Therefore, renewing one’s mind involves gradually conforming oneself to the characteristics of God’s coming age of righteousness. Christians must actively pursue this transformation of restoring the moral aspect of God’s image in humanity.

Paul told Christians to avoid succumbing to our culture’s fleeting fads, fashions, and movements. Such things appear real and good but are actually illusory and evil. Instead of adopting this present age’s behavior, Christians should adopt the godly behavior characteristic of the coming divine age.

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**Endnotes**

2. Ibid., 130.

Ronald E. Showers is an author and international conference speaker for The Friends of Israel.
EU boycotts Israeli products

The European Union’s parliament recently voted in favor of a resolution to differentiate labels on products made in Judea and Samaria, eastern Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights from those made in the rest of Israel.

The labels were backed by 525 European Union (EU) parliament members and opposed by 70; 31 abstained. EU officials claim this is not a boycott and represents an extension of existing EU law, which considers the regions beyond Israel’s pre-1967 lines to be “occupied territory” and not legally part of Israel.

“It is simply a distortion of justice and logic,” said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “I think that it also hurts peace; it does not advance peace. The root of the conflict is not the territories, and the root of the conflict is not the settlements.”

Cancer breakthrough

Israeli researchers at Tel Aviv University (TAU) have identified the trigger that transforms melanoma from harmless, non-invasive cells to an invasive killer that accounts for most skin cancer deaths. This breakthrough will allow scientists to catch the cancer early enough to save more lives.

“The trick was to solve the mystery, and we did,” said Dr. Carmit Levy of the Department of Human Genetics and Biochemistry at TAU’s Sackler School of Medicine.

Melanoma is a cancer that originates in the epidermis—the outermost layer of skin, where it is relatively harmless. But it eventually invades the dermis—the lower layer of skin—and the bloodstream, spreading throughout the body.

When melanoma cells come into contact with the remote epidermal layer, that contact triggers the activation of “notch signaling,” which causes changes in the melanoma cells to make them invasive and possibly lethal agents.

“Maybe, in the future,” Levy said, “people will be able to rub some substance on their skin as a prevention measure.”

Israel gives Arabs aid money

The Israeli government will give Israel’s Arab municipal councils $230 million in aid before the end of the year. Many of the predominantly Arab towns and councils in Israel are poor.

“The aid plan is a significant rectification and yet another step designed to integrate Israel’s Arab citizens into Israeli society as equals among equals,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, Israel Hayom reported.

Gazans prefer Israel over Hamas

Prolonged disputes between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have left Gazans without electricity for eight-hour stretches, and Gazans say they prefer Israel over their Hamas rulers as the crisis continues.

Israel gives Arabs aid money

The Internet retail giant Amazon has agreed to remove several products featuring a bloodstained Israeli flag following outrage and condemnation by the Israeli government and consumers.

Items featuring the same bloodied flag were available for purchase on the website through third-party sellers hosted by Amazon.com. Items included a cellphone cover, shower curtain, welcome mat, mouse pad, an umbrella, and a throw pillow.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry said it was “shocked and revolted in light of Amazon’s agreement to sell anti-Israel and anti-Semitic products of the worst kind,” Israel’s Channel 2 reported.

Shenkar ranked fifth in world

Business of Fashion publication has ranked Israel’s Shenkar College of Engineering, Design and Art as the fifth most “influential” design school in the world and the 11th best school of its kind.

The publication wrote, “Situated within the metropolitan area of Tel Aviv, Shenkar blends both the technical and conceptual in its curriculum. During the four-year . . . course, students are exposed to small group peer and faculty critique, where they must defend their concepts and processes in arriving at their finished projects.”

Students graduate Shenkar feeling equipped for professions in the fashion industry. Eighty-three percent of graduates reported they secured jobs in the fashion industry within six months of graduating.

Shenkar President Yuli Tamir called the ranking “an unprecedented international achievement, particularly regarding the design industry,” according to Yedioth Ahronoth.
On five acres of hillside in Jerusalem stands an American flag. It’s not your typical flag. It was carefully crafted of granite, bronze, and aluminum; and its base came from the steel wreckage of the World Trade Center, sent to Israel from the city of New York.

Nor was it built by Americans. Designed by Israeli artist Eliezer Weishoff, the 30-foot structure that curves like a flame is the centerpiece of the 9/11 Living Memorial Plaza commissioned by the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet LeYisrael, JNF-KKL) at a cost of $2 million.

Completed in 2009, it is the largest 9/11 memorial outside the United States and the only non-U.S. monument that lists the names of all the nearly 3,000 who died when Islamic terrorists attacked America on September 11, 2001.

This year, as countries abandon Israel, the Jewish state still stands with America. On September 11, JNF-KKL still held a service at the memorial for the 9/11 victims. “This is a torch for those who want and believe in peace and in the rights of human beings,” said JNF-KKL Chairman Efi Stenzler. “We today salute the fighters and the families of the victims, and we look forward to better times.”

Israel Commemorates 9/11
A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver (Prov. 25:11).

Apples of Gold
by Zvi Kalisher

It is hard these days to find such children,” he replied.

When we arrived in Jerusalem, I helped him off the bus. “If your children were really following the Lord’s commands, they would not leave you alone,” I told him.

“I am 94 years old,” he said sadly. “Every day I wait to die. I have no hope!”

I then told him what King David said in his time of trouble: “Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11).

I told him, “Even in your old age, you can be fruitful for the Lord; as Psalm 92:14 says, ‘They shall still bear fruit in old age.’”

“I know the entire book of Psalms by rote, but I never thought about that portion before,” he said.

I replied, “That is because you know the book by heart, but you do not have it written on your heart.”

We spoke for a long time. Then he asked, “Do you go to the synagogue often?”

“No,” I replied.

“Then how do you pray?”

“From the depths of my heart,” I said, “and the Lord hears and answers my prayers. I do not read prayers written by other people.” Most Jewish people pray only from a prayer book.

I told him, “I have four adult children, and they respect my wife and me because they worship the living God instead of following false teachers.”

“I have five children,” he told me earnestly, “and none of them bring me any satisfaction as a father.”

I replied, “Our God will bestow His love and mercy on those who will receive Him.” I then read John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have
Zvi Kalisher (1928–2014) was known for his unswerving faithfulness to the Lord and his bold witness in Jerusalem. He was with The Friends of Israel for more than 55 years.

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