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# BibleTalks

## An Introduction

Originally these notes related to a series of 'talks' during 2011, to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication of the King James, or Authorised Version of the Bible. They were delivered less as a series of sermons but more as 'talks' about the Bible. Each was based on some aspect of the Bible, since each book represents a different type of biblical literature. Over the course of the year the talks were followed by an opportunity for discussion.

The motivation for producing the King James Version was to give people a translation of the Bible in the language of their own day, so an acknowledgement of the anniversary of its publication will be helping people to read and understand the Bible in whatever version rather than suggesting that anyone should revert to using the Authorised Version itself.

The Bible is a library, containing many different types of literature. The Old Testament contains history books, story books, inspirational books by the prophets, a book of proverbs and one of hymns. There are legal books and there are myths. The New Testament contains the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, a whole lot of letters by different church leaders and the Book of Revelation.

The Gospels have to be the most important books for us and it is interesting that we seem to have no difficulty acknowledging their human authorship, yet regarding them as inspired by God. What is true of them is true of all of the books in the Bible. We understand that they were all written by people, but under the inspiration of God. Just as we believe that God was at work, through his Spirit, in the writing of the Bible, so we also believe he is at work today in the same Spirit, helping us to hear and understand it in our times.

It is important when we read any part of the Bible that we make the effort to understand what sort of literature we are reading; and it is clearly wrong to give the same weight to every passage. God gave us our brains; we should use them when we read his book. Overall, this series is about helping us understand the different parts of the Bible, what they are about and what we might expect to gain from reading them.

Putting the Old Testament in context: In the Twenty-first Century we live two thousand years after Jesus walked the earth. The historical sections of the Old Testament, those parts which tell the story of the Children of Israel go back almost another two thousand years, and start in the twelfth chapter of Genesis with the story of Abraham. The Patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were the founding fathers of the Jewish race and they existed as shadowy figures at the dawn of known human history. Before them lie the Bronze Age, the Neolithic Age and six millennia of the existence and development of Planet Earth.

Once we have categorised all the books of the Bible, and recognised that, like the Gospels, each and every one of them was written down by human hand, under divine guidance, as we believe, we need to know that there were many other similar writings at every age and stage, and that decisions were made at different times as to which should be counted in as the authentic Word of God and included in the canon of Scripture, and which should be excluded.

From the Babylonian Exile onwards, the everyday language of the Jews began to shift from pure Hebrew into Aramaic, which had become the common tongue by Jesus' day. As fewer people could understand Hebrew, translations or targums, of different sections of the scriptures were made in local dialects following the Exile. In the second century BC, work was begun on a Greek translation of all of the sacred writings. Known as the Septuagint, because it took over seventy scholars to produce, it became recognised by some as the official canon of the Old Testament, although it included writings, now in the Apocrypha, which are not in our Bibles today. The canon of the Old Testament, which excludes these writings, was set at the Synod of Jamnia as late as 100 AD.

With the New Testament Canon there was again a long period of debate, and a whole list of writings around in the first centuries AD, including the Gospel of Peter, which were not later included. It was at

a Council held in Rome in 382 AD that a complete canon of both the Old and New Testaments was agreed, which is the one we are familiar with today.

The rest of these notes will look at different sections of the Bible and describe one book from each as representative of its type of literature. For example, the Old Testament divides into three sections: the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Writings. The Pentateuch is the first five books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - which, throughout the rest of the Old Testament period is referred to as the Torah, and was effectively the Bible of the Children of Israel. The Prophets include the historical books of Joshua, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles, which tell the story of the Children of Israel through the Old Testament period, and then the three longer prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, along with the twelve shorter ones. The Writings include everything else, such as the Psalms, the Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations, along with the story books of Ruth, Esther and Job.

The next section will look at the Book of Genesis, out of the Pentateuch, noting especially the Creation Narratives. Later sections will look at one book out of each of the other components of the Old Testament followed by one of the Gospels, the Book of Acts, one of the Epistles, and finally the Book of Revelation.

## Bibletalk 1

### The Book of Genesis and the Creation Myths

Readings: Genesis 1. 1 – 13 and John 1. 1 – 14.

God gave us our minds, and so we must assume He wants us to use them just as much in understanding the Bible as everything else in the world, not to treat it as a magic book or a collection of fairy tales. That is why we start with the Creation Myths at the beginning of the Bible. They are perhaps the most important stories in the Old Testament, but they are also the most likely to be discarded by the modern mind as fairy tales or unscientific fiction.

It is important that we understand the time span of the Old Testament. It covers roughly two thousand years. It is helpful to remember that just as we now live two thousand years after Christ, so the Old Testament covers two thousand years before.

The earliest historical or real figures in the Bible are the Patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the founding fathers of the Jewish people (c. 1950 B.C. - 1700 B.C.). They first appear in Genesis, chapter 12, and exist as shadowy figures at the very dawn of known human history. Before them lie the Bronze Age, the Neolithic Age, and six millennia of the existence and development of Planet Earth.

Genesis, from chapter 12, deals with the stories of the Patriarchs, and then of the third of them, Jacob's son Joseph, being sold into slavery into Egypt, his rise to a position of power there, followed by the emigration of the rest of the Children of Israel to escape famine, and to enter into what later became slavery. All of which sets the stage for the main story in the Book of Exodus: their almost magical escape from Egypt.

But before that are the Stories in Genesis 1 - 11

If Abraham appears in chapter twelve of Genesis as the first historical character in the Old Testament, what are we to make of the first eleven chapters? The short answer is that they are not historical, but contain myths - which raise the next question: what are myths?

Myths are like parables - stories with a meaning - stories told to help people understand a lesson and remember it.

Parables, such as the ones Jesus told, are deliberately and carefully constructed, and made up by a single author.

Myths grew out of the folklore of a people in an age when memories were good, writing was poor and television and computers had never even been dreamed of. Myths are handed down from one generation to another. They grow, rather than being deliberately constructed. They contain the accumulated wisdom of the people they belong to and they express the attitudes of those people to life and to the world as they found it. The Biblical Myths in Genesis 1 - 11 are therefore not to be taken as literally true. Adam and Eve need not be thought of as real people. Those who told and retold the myths never meant them to be taken literally. The myths are not scientific or historical accounts of the beginning of the world. There are, for instance, two Creation stories given. There is therefore no conflict with what science or history can tell us about the beginning of things.

The Genesis Myths contain religious truths about our world, about life, about God and our relationship to Him, and about the very real existence of evil as the early Israelites experienced it and as we know it in the world today.

Genesis 1 - 11 contains five pre-history myths:

Creation in Six Days  
The Garden of Eden  
Cain and Abel  
The Flood  
The Tower of Babel

Each has a different meaning and teaches us different but related things. They are all very important for our understanding of life and of our Christian faith. We will deal with the first one and give a brief synopsis of the others.

### **CREATION IN SIX DAYS** (Genesis 1.1 - 2.4)

The story of God creating the world in six days is the first of the two accounts of how the world was made which the Bible gives us. Remember, it is not to be taken literally, but as a story or myth in which we must look for the hidden meanings.

There are lots of ingredients for the story, some of which are so primitive that they need not concern us now. For instance, verses 6 - 8 speak of the earth and the sky, the latter thought of as a great dome set by God to separate two lots of water. Rain is thought of as showing that there is a great reservoir of water suspended above the earth, kept up there by the sky! The oceans, seas, lochs and puddles indicate that there is water below the ground, which has broken through. God separated the waters by wedging the earth between them with a vaulted canopy to keep up the waters above. Details like this are clearly unscientific and unimportant for today, except that they give us a charming glimpse of the cosmology of these earliest of people. Many other details, however, matter a great deal, so we must pick our way carefully through all the material.

### **God behind Creation - the very first Cause of All**

Verse 1, line 1, tells us that God created the universe, and then throughout the story, we are told how God made things on each day by speaking or commanding.

This is a statement of faith. Science, or history, or the two together, can, or may, one day, be able to tell us the real story of how the world came into being; but no matter what they tell us, about the splitting of an atom, or the friction between two molecules, the Big Bang or anything else, there will always be a mystery. In the chain of causal events they describe, what caused the first event, who or what set it all in motion?

Two things only are possible: either it all happened by accident, pure chance; or else there is some prime mover, some spirit/mind, who we may call God, who willed and caused it all. When we say God created the world, we are not saying anything about the science or history of the evolution of the world, we are expressing our attitude, our conviction that it was all meant to be, that life is not an accident but there is a purpose - there is a God.

### ***The World is good, and so is everything in it***

This is something that many people find surprising, for to listen to the teaching of the Church throughout the centuries, or at least to some of its teaching, one might have thought that the Church was against the world and thought of it as a bad place.

This is a misunderstanding. Right from the very first page of the Bible we are told that God looked at each of the things he had made each day and that "He was pleased with what he saw".

This is an important statement of the Bible's attitude to the world: it is good, life is meant to be enjoyed, and things in themselves are good. Nothing is bad in itself; it is the use to which we may put it that may be bad. Thus, to take one example from our day, nuclear power may be used for healing, or for death and destruction. The world itself is good; it is up to us to see what we do with it.

### ***A Special Place for Human Beings***

When in the story God makes human beings on the sixth day, we are told that we shall be like God and resemble Him. We must be careful! This does not mean that God is like us, with a body and a head, two arms and two legs - God is Spirit; though Jesus did tell us to think of Him as our Father, if it helps us so to do.

Verses 26 - 31 tell us how we are like God. This, like our belief in God as Creator, is a statement of the Bible's conviction about us and our place in the world. Human beings are different from all the other creatures in this world. Weaker than many, naked and seemingly more helpless, yet by our intelligence we have been able to dominate, subdue and control the rest of the animal and natural world. Again, this is either an accident of evolution, or it was meant to be. The Bible teaches us here that God set us over everything else. He meant us to have the special position we have in the world, and it is in this that we are like him. Under God we share his control over the whole creation. He has made us stewards of the world - its animals, plants and eco-system. Such a view need not rule out the theory of evolution and is quite compatible with it.

We are also different from all other creatures in that we have a latent faculty for knowing God and communicating with Him. Only human beings have the religious sense that there must be a god, something greater than ourselves, but it is latent - almost completely lost in many people today - but that is a theme of the next Creation Narrative, the story of Adam and Eve.

### **A Day of Rest**

At the end of this first beautiful myth, we are told in Chapter 2, verses 1 - 4, that God rested on the seventh day and set it apart as a special day. The Jewish people before Christ, and Presbyterians in Scotland since the Reformation, have often taken this too narrowly. Think what Sunday used to be like in the past, or read in the New Testament how often Jesus or his disciples were criticised for doing quite simple or good things on the Sabbath.

The insight of these verses is that human beings need to have built into their lives a pattern for rest and renewal. Just as the day is for working and the night for rest, so we need week-ends after we have worked all week, and summer holidays after we have worked all year. Anyone who never goes to bed at night will soon collapse, and in the same way a person who works all the time without ever taking week-ends off or proper holidays will sooner or later crack up.

Sundays and holidays (literally 'holy days') are for rest and renewal of our minds, our bodies and our spirits. This means that we should do the things which we find relax and renew us, whether playing football or just lying around; but we should not forget about worship. Real worship, which brings us closer to God, opens us up to all his love and renewing power for us. Recreation is re-creation. As God created us, so He also gives us means of re-creation. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath". Mark 2: 27.

### **THE GARDEN OF EDEN (Genesis 2: 4 - 3, 24)**

This is the second account the Bible gives us of how the world was made. The first few verses cover the same ground as the previous story, though in a different order and with different emphases. Briefly:

God made the universe  
Mankind has a special place, including power over animals and nature  
Men and women were made for each other  
The world was originally a beautiful place - or should be such  
It is men and women who have spoiled the world

The story of Adam and Eve sets out to explain why certain things are as they are: why the world is not a happy place; why life is all hard work and suffering; why human beings feel cut off from God.

The explanation it gives is that the human race is in rebellion against God, even that people are trying to be God and to run the world without him. People want to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. It can only be when they learn to acknowledge God and accept his wisdom that the world can become the happy place it was meant to be.

### **CAIN AND ABEL** (Genesis 4: 1 - 15)

The main themes in this story are:-

- that human warfare and violence stem from man's rebellion against God.
- that evil and violence bring their own destruction.
- that humanity can only have the life which would have been Cain's - the life of prosperity and fertile crops - when people both respect God and love each other.
- that God's anger is not without mercy.
- that people who insist in doing their own thing and ignoring God have to live as if in a world without God and without God's help (East of Eden).

### **NOAH AND THE FLOOD** (Genesis 6: 5 - 9, 18.)

The story has three themes - judgement, mercy and promise:

- God's judgement in condemning and destroying the world
- His mercy, is saving Noah and his family
- His promise, in the rainbow, never to destroy humanity again.

### **THE TOWER OF BABEL** (Genesis 11: 1 - 9)

This myth would seem to be an explanation of why people speak different languages, but its real meaning is deeper than that.

The myth contains again the idea of judgement, or the consequences of human beings over-reaching themselves, the result of which is a failure in communication, which lies as the root of almost all of our ills.

This particular stating of the problem in the Old Testament is met in the New Testament on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples were able to speak to the crowds each in his own language.

A modern version of the Tower of Babel would be the Millennium Dome. Built for the Millennium, it celebrated the achievements of science and technology, rather than two thousand years of Christianity. And look what became of it!

## Bibletalk 2

### Amos – the Earliest of the Prophetic Books

#### Introduction to the Prophets

The Old Testament is the story of the Children of Israel – the Jewish People – who believed themselves to be God's Chosen People.

It starts in the Book of Genesis with God entering into a covenant with Abraham and promising to make him the father of many people. Abraham has a son, Isaac, whom he is challenged to sacrifice to God; then Isaac, in turn, has two sons, Esau and Jacob or Israel, the latter of whom gains his brother's birthright and goes on to be the father of twelve sons, thus founding twelve tribes – the Children of Israel.

Joseph, the second youngest is the apple of his father's eye, causing immense jealousy amongst his older brothers, who trap him and sell him into slavery in Egypt, where he eventually triumphs to become Pharaoh's Chancellor.

Hard times fall on Jacob's brood, and they end up in Egypt, unwittingly seeking aid from their wronged younger brother. All this results in the Israelites settling in Egypt, where generations later they find themselves oppressed as slaves. But God has not forgotten them, and he raises up Moses to lead them from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land – a land flowing with milk and honey, which turns out to be Canaan, a fertile agricultural area.

From the Exodus onwards, the Children of Israel are led by heroic men of God who appear from time to time, whenever a strong leader is needed. These men were judges or prophets, and their role was always to call the people back to their true faith, to their acceptance of the Lordship of God.

Essentially the early Israelites were a loose confederation of twelve separate tribes, spread out over a large area, living independent lives, united only by their historic faith in their God, whom they called Yahweh – Jehovah to us.

Because they settled in an alien, but fertile land, where they had to fight for their very existence against those who already possessed it – is there nothing new in history? – there was always the risk of cross-culturalisation and the assimilation of the beliefs and practices of their neighbours into their own.

The first sign of this was in the demand for a king, which the judge/prophet Samuel at first resisted, but then sought to control, to see that the chosen monarch, Saul, should always acknowledge that his kingship was subordinate to that of Yahweh.

This lasted through the reigns of the three great, but entirely different, kings: Saul, David and Solomon. After that there was an internal split into two kingdoms; Israel to the North and Judea to the South were created, each with their own kings.

Amos, who we will look at in more detail, was by no means the first prophet - there had been many before him, whose acts and teachings are recorded in the Books of Judges and 1 and 2 Kings - but he was the first whose teaching was written down and recorded for us in a separate book bearing his name and included in the canon of the Old Testament.

The prophets were not priests in holy orders, but ordinary men, from different walks of life, whom God called to speak his word in times of national crisis. Indeed, as with Jesus himself, they most often had to be critical of the priests, the guardians of the sacred traditions. Amos was a hill shepherd and Isaiah of Jerusalem – there were three Isaiahs – a courtier. Jeremiah did come from priestly stock, whilst Micah seems to have been a peasant farmer. Each, in his time, responded to the call of God to proclaim his word: "Thus says the Lord ..."

## **Amos: his message and his relevance for us today**

Amos appeared as the scourge of the public policy and behavior of the wealthy Israelites in the middle of the eighth century BC, when Jeroboam II was king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, over which he ruled for forty years, in a time of unprecedented prosperity. The Children of Israel had well and truly assimilated themselves into their new neighbour's culture. They had corrupted their religious observance with external practices, as we shall see, but above all they had 'lost the plot' in terms of what their God really wanted of them. True Jewish religion meant obedience to God and fair dealings with one's neighbor and with the poor, and these they were not giving.

As already mentioned, Amos was a hill-farmer. He came from Tekoa, a desolate spot twelve miles south of Jerusalem, in the southern Kingdom of Judah. His knowledge of what was going on in Israel must have come from fairs and market days. His trenchant declarations of God's judgment on his people are more his own observation of how corrupt the prosperous nation of Israel has become, than as a direct or sudden revelation from on high. The divine calling is his sense that God vindicates his views and is calling him to declare them not as his personal views, but as the judgement of God.

There were several factors which drove Amos's trenchant criticisms: the empty formalism of their religious practices, combined with the adoption of alien rites from Canaanite religion; the flagrantly unjust and cruel behavior of the rich towards the poor, in total disregard of God's revealed will; and the rising threat of Assyria, to which Israel seemed blind.

In Israel, under Jeroboam II, religion was observed scrupulously, but robbed of its meaning; whilst the rich, including the priesthood, grew ever richer, at the expense of the poor, who suffered as never before. All of which was a total travesty of God's will for his chosen people. While all the proper feasts and festivals were observed by the letter, if not by the spirit, this lifeless orthodoxy blinded them to the distortions in their way of life, where their opulence was corrupting them in almost every sphere of life. On top of all of that, whilst the essentials of their faith were observed, alien elements from Canaanite religion were also introduced, including the use of temple virgins, with whom fathers and sons would sleep, whilst imposing chastity on their wives and daughters and sisters.

Part of the formalism of their religious practice was to invoke the Day of the Lord: a bland assumption that as God has saved them in the past, so a day would soon be coming when God would do it again, despite their disregard for his laws. Amos pours scorn on this, asserting instead that for them the Day of the Lord will be a day of bitterness and judgement, because of the way they have been misbehaving and playing fast and loose with God's covenant and laws.

Parallel to all of this, a new imperial power, Assyria, was emerging, which would threaten the independence and future existence of Israel as an independent kingdom, but to whose potential threat all but Amos were blind. No-one saw the rising danger of Assyrian imperialism. The assumption was, as with the day of the Lord, that should Assyria threaten Israel, God would save them and destroy their powerful new enemy. Amos pours scorn on this, seeing Assyria instead as the instrument of God's punishment of Israel.

In the end, at the culmination of an excoriating sermon he delivered in chapter 7, Amos is reported to King Jeroboam, by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, who successfully has him banished back to Tekoa. His prophetic voice would thus have been silenced, had not loyal disciples collected his teachings and published them in the book which bears his name, making Amos, as previously mentioned, the first of the prophets to have a book accredited to him.

Although 2,750 years divide us from him, Amos is surely important to us as he gives us some of the best and most forthright of all of the prophetic utterances, and in that he, along with many of the others, though speaking to his own day, is remarkably relevant for us today.

Ours is the opulent society that has lost its way and lost its sense of justice. Our practice of our faith is also often reduced to formalism, so that it too is dead and has no power to influence our lives. If the Church would live today, and recover any relevance to the society in which it has to bear witness, it must find the courage of Amos, to speak out boldly and clearly against all the distortions, injustices and nonsenses of our day.

May God help us so to do.

## Bibletalk 3

### From the Writings, the Book of Job

#### General Introduction to the Writings

The Writings are the final of the three sections into which the Old Testament is traditionally divided – the first being the Pentateuch (the first five books); and the second, the Prophets, including the historical books.

The Writings comprise a varied collection of books – Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles.

Written after the Exile, the Writings generally show an interaction with literature from neighbouring countries, cultures and religions. For example, the language and imagery of Psalm 104 have often been compared to the Egyptian Hymn to Aten, the solar disk, whose worship was fostered by the heretical Pharaoh, Amenhotep IV. There are many other interesting parallels.

As well as the priests and prophets, who contribute so much to the content of the Old Testament, both as authors and as subject matter, there were also sages, wise men, who would give shrewd practical advice.

These wise men in Israel can be shown to have drawn on a wide tradition of wisdom which can be traced from Egyptian, Sumerian, Babylonian, Canaanite and Aramaic sources. These wise men, and their teachings, feature in most of the Writings, which is why the Writings are regarded by some as less important for faith than the other two sections.

The Book of Job, which we are about to look at, is about a man of a troubled mind. There is another book similar to it, the Book of Ecclesiastes, which has a similar theme but draws a much more despairing conclusion. Where Job's faith eventually triumphs, the speaker, who is the narrator in Ecclesiastes, is clearly very skeptical and comes to the depressing conclusion that life has no discernible meaning at all. *"Futility, utter futility, says the Speaker, everything is futile."* It is for this reason that the place of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament canon was for long disputed, whereas that of Job was always secure.

#### Job and the Big Question it seeks to answer

##### Introduction

The Book of Job purports to deal with one of the most fundamental questions facing humankind in every age: that of human suffering, and why evil falls on good and bad alike; or, as in Job, why the good suffer and the wicked seem to get away with things, contrary to the perceived teaching of the prophets.

Throughout the tortuous history of the Children of Israel, it became clear that when they, as God's Chosen People, were faithful and obedient, they prospered; but when, as was most of the time, they strayed from the path of obedience and righteousness, they suffered conquest and exile.

In the post-exilic times in which the Book of Job was written, a once proud nation was now a small community ruled by the priesthood. The doctrine of national responsibility had now been individualised, so that it now reads that if a man was faithful, he would prosper, if he was not, he would suffer. This was patently, in the people's own experience, untrue.

It is important to note at this stage that the Hebrews had no belief in the afterlife, and so all matters of divine reward and punishment had to take place in this life. In Job there is the faintest glimmer of a different faith.

## Summary

It seems to be agreed by most scholars that this book is based on an already existing myth about a good man who suffered and was later vindicated and restored. The unknown author takes up the folk story and uses it as the basis for his extended exploration of his subject. His prologue and epilogue are in prose, but the rest is in poetry.

The prologue introduces Job, and then takes us to the Court of Heaven, where Satan persuades God to let him send afflictions against Job to test him. At first the afflictions are external – to his children, livestock and property, to which Job faithfully responds: “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord”.

Back in the Court of Heaven, Satan suggests that that was too easy as Job wasn't suffering in his own flesh. He is then allowed to inflict Job with horrid boils, an unpleasant form of leprosy. This time Job cracks, and the prologue ends with strong outpouring of anger and complaint at this injustice.

Hearing of his suffering, Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come to support him. So shocked are they by his plight that they sit with him in silent empathy for a week.

The bottom line is, that though shocked by his plight, and previously admiring of his virtue, they can only conclude that his plight is a just punishment from God for some hidden vices, which God knows about and which Job ought to confess and repent of.

All of this is expressed in the bulk of the rest of the book, with three cycles of speeches by each of Job's friends, accusing him and encouraging him to repent, and Job's angry and hurt responses that he has done nothing wrong and he cannot understand why Jahweh is treating him so suddenly in this cruel way.

Happily for us, the editors of the Revised English Bible have put headings to each of the sections and each of the speeches, so that we can know where we are.

Sometimes his friends are gentle in their approaches and at other times more firm and judgemental, but always their theme is the same. God is good, righteous and just, and for him to be inflicting Job in this way can only mean that Job has done something pretty bad. The only way out for Job is to confess and throw himself on God's mercy, when he will surely be forgiven.

Job cannot bring himself to do this. He is adamant he has done nothing wrong and has lived only the good life. Though he rails against God and is confused and upset as to why he is being made to suffer in this way, he somehow refuses to let go his faith in the God he has always trusted.

After the third cycle of speeches, there is, in chapter 28, a passage describing God's unfathomable wisdom, in which we should all trust. Then in chapter 29, the desperate Job surveys his situation and gives a despairing defense of his life.

There then follows a speech by a young man called Elihu, who says at the beginning that he has kept quiet so far out of deference to his seniors, but now in anger at what he sees at their pussyfooting, he feels he must have his say. In fact there is nothing new in his speech. He just says it all with much more force and anger, insisting on God's righteousness and pouring scorn on Job's vain assertions that he is entirely innocent.

In the end, Job is vindicated and restored to even greater wealth and respectability, but the fundamental question about suffering is not answered. The author's main achievement is his challenge to the teaching of the priesthood that the good always triumph in this life and that all evil is a punishment from God, so that, if a man suffers, as Job did, he must have done something wrong.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ, reaches down into our suffering to rescue and save us. The God in whom Job ultimately puts his trust, does in the end take pity on him and restore his fortunes.

## Comment

From a Christian standpoint it would seem that the priesthood, in offering the teaching which the author of the Book of Job is railing against, have really lost their way. There is undoubtedly a foreshadowing of the passion of Christ in the growing awareness through the pages of the Old Testament that, first of all the people could only be saved if they were faithful to God; then, since it seemed they never would all be faithful, that the whole people could be saved if one tribe alone was faithful for them; and then, by the time of the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah, their salvation would be through the obedience and suffering of one man – surely a foretelling of the passion of Christ.

Somehow all of this has been lost when individuals are seen as being punished or rewarded, as in the simplistic teaching of the priests.

One other important aspect, which seems to be missing, is any understanding of the Fall, as portrayed in the story of Adam and Eve. The result of the disobedience of the representative, but mythical, figures of Adam and Eve is that we all live in a fallen world, in which, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *“only so can you be children of your heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on the good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked.”*

In our fallen world, good and evil fall indiscriminately on good and bad alike, as do the sun and the rain. The ultimate salvation, wrought for us all on the cross by Jesus Christ, is the redemption of the whole fallen world to a new state in which evil and suffering are vanquished forever.

All discussion of punishment and reward for individuals must surely be conducted in the face of that much larger canvas and divine promise.

The Christian understanding is surely that God does not will evil anywhere - it is always the indiscriminate consequence of the Fall – but that in the context of evil and suffering we can find Christ beside us, sharing it and bearing it for us, and enabling us to triumph over it, in whatsoever way.

## BIBLEtalk 4

### Mark – The Earliest of the Gospels

#### General Introduction

Although the four Gospels appear at the beginning of the New Testament, they were not the earliest Christian writings, nor were they necessarily written in the order in which they appear. We have to remember that after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the disciples, who were the founders of the early Church, expected that he would come again in power within their own lifetime. At first, therefore, no need was felt for a written record of his story. It was only as time wore on, when Christ did not come as quickly as expected and the original disciples grew old, that the need for a permanent record was felt and the Gospels came to be written.

The earliest Christian writings no longer exist, except that traces of them can be found within the Gospels and the Epistles or Letters. They were the ancient world's equivalent of loose-leaf note books or jotters - rough scrolls, which would contain collections of different helpful notes: either sayings and teachings of Jesus, or miracle stories from his ministry, or the parables. These would be given to young men in the second generation of the Church, who had never met Jesus but had become believers and were sent out as missionaries. They would be given such notes to help them. No doubt the original notes would be copied for use by yet others, and gradually different versions would appear in different parts of the Mediterranean, so that a version of the sayings of Jesus found in Antioch, in Asia Minor might differ from a similar scroll found in Alexandria in North Africa.

Next, and perhaps dating from about the same time, came the Epistles - pastoral letters written by the great missionaries themselves, Peter, Paul and others, to the congregations they founded in different places and then left behind. Most of the Letters are by Paul, but there are some by Peter, James and John, and one, the Letter to the Hebrews, by an unknown author. No doubt, there will have been many more, but the ones in our New Testament survived and were chosen to be part of the Scriptures. They are very important documents for the Church as they show how the first Christians struggled to understand their new faith. They had to work out what it meant for them: Jesus had come and lived and taught in this world, had been crucified and had then miraculously risen from the dead, had gone up to heaven, and finally sent His Spirit upon His Church. The Letters are mostly theological - to do with the faith of the Church - but in the final section of each there is nearly always a practical bit about Christian behaviour in the world.

The Gospels themselves were finally written when the first disciples were getting old and it was becoming apparent that Jesus was not going to return quite as soon as they had expected. If the first eye witnesses were to die before Christ came, then the Church would need their reminiscences written down and kept as sacred until he came. Again, there may well have been more than the four Gospels which have survived, but these were the ones favoured by the early Church and chosen to be put in the New Testament when the Canon, or list of books to be included in the New Testament, was agreed towards the end of the second century.

The Gospels should not be thought of as biographies. They lack much of the personal detail we would expect in a modern biography of anyone famous. It has also been found impossible to write an exact history of the life of Jesus from them. They are not unbiased, but written with a special purpose.

They seek to take the reader through the same experience the disciples had, so that by the end - but not necessarily at the beginning - he or she may also come to believe in Jesus Christ. The Gospels are not so much the story of Jesus Christ alone, but of Jesus and his disciples, or Jesus and the Church. Jesus' life, work and mission are rooted in the Church. It could be said that the purpose of His incarnation was to found the Church.

Of the four Gospels, three belong together, and are called the Synoptic Gospels. This name is from a Greek word from which we get our word 'synopsis', but the meaning has changed. 'Synopsis' today means a summary, which brings together all the main points of a book or an argument. In the Greek, it means a similar or almost identical view. So the Synoptic Gospels - Mark, Matthew and Luke - read very like each other and have roughly the same general view of the life, meaning and significance of Jesus Christ. John's Gospel is the one which is different in style and outlook. Luke alone of all the Evangelists (Gospel writers) gives us a second volume in the Book of Acts. While the Gospels cover

the story of Jesus Christ up to the resurrection, Acts goes on to tell of what happened afterwards in the founding of the Church and its early growth. It is a great pity that the others did not also give their versions of this very important chapter in the history of the Church.

### **Mark's Gospel**

Mark's is the shortest of the three synoptic Gospels, and for that reason was thought for centuries to be less important than the others - a sort of abbreviated version. Scholars now realise that the opposite is true. A story told and passed round grows longer in the re-telling, not shorter. Just about ninety per cent of Mark appears, sometimes in expanded form, in both Matthew and Luke. Almost certainly therefore, Mark is the original, and Matthew and Luke had Mark's Gospel open in front of them when they wrote their expanded versions.

Mark's Gospel is also very simple. Its language is plain, its sentence structures uncomplicated and it has no other purpose than to tell the story of Jesus Christ to help others to believe. Matthew and Luke both have additional aims in that they are directed towards special audiences or readers.

Mark's Gospel is very important; first of all, because it seems to be the earliest, which must make it the most authoritative; but also because it is believed to have Peter behind it. John Mark, the reputed author, was the son of Mary, at whose house Jesus and His disciples often stayed. He was a companion of Paul on his first missionary journey, and had a close relationship to him to the end of Paul's life. He was also a close companion of Peter. Both Paul and Peter ended their ministries and their lives at Rome where they were executed in 65 A.D. A close reading of Mark's Gospel shows that there are passages in it which are clearly the work of an eye-witness. Scholars now believe that either Mark wrote his Gospel to the dictation of the aged Peter, or that around the time of Peter's death; Mark wrote it from all that he remembered Peter telling him. Either way, Peter's reminiscences form the basis of the work, and since Peter was chief among the disciples and very close to Jesus, Mark's Gospel must be counted as a very important early Christian document.

It is just possible that Mark himself was witness to some of the events around the time of the crucifixion. There is a little cameo picture of a young disciple having his loin cloth pulled off him and running away naked at the arrest of Jesus in the Garden. This could be a little autobiographical detail by Mark, included as a sort of signature or way of identifying himself with his work; saying "I was there".

Mark's Gospel, like John's, and also like many surviving early manuscripts of Matthew's and Luke's, has no account of the birth of Jesus (the Nativity). Mark starts with John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness in preparation for Jesus' ministry. He first introduces Jesus in his account when Jesus comes to John for baptism in the Jordan. His Gospel then falls into two halves, the first telling of our Lord's pastoral ministry in Galilee, in which he builds up a picture of the impact and effectiveness of Jesus, but also describes the thread of growing opposition to Him. In the second part Mark describes the tumultuous events in Jerusalem which culminated in the crucifixion and resurrection.

Mark gives virtually no account of our Lord's teaching, which leads scholars to assume that if the Gospel was written in Rome around 65 A.D., just after the deaths of Peter and Paul, it was meant to supplement already existing collections of the sayings or teaching of Jesus by giving a rough outline of his public ministry, death and resurrection.

Mark has one special theme: the Messianic Secret. In all his writing Jesus is presented as the Messiah, whose Lordship is secret and hidden, visible only through the eyes of faith to believers, such as the disciples. Non-believers, which means most people, would only discover who Christ really was at His second coming, when He would come in glory. This theme in itself explains why Mark has no account of the Nativity, and indeed throws further doubt on the authenticity of the stories of it in Matthew and Luke. A Secret Messiah would not have had his birth heralded by angels, shepherds and wise men or kings.

Anyone who wants to read the Gospels should start with Mark. It is the easiest to read, having simple language and no sub-plot. Its brevity makes it no longer than a chapter in an ordinary book, so that it can easily be read in one or two sittings. Reading a whole book gives one the real flavour and meaning of it, which has to be better than reading it piecemeal, a bit at a time. I commend it to you all. You can read it before you go to bed tonight; or take two nights if you must.

## BIBLEtalk 5

### The Acts of The Apostles

Acts is the second volume of Luke's Gospel - a second chapter, which is the more valuable because none of the other evangelists supplied anything like it. While the Gospels tell the story of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and at the same time show the developing faith of the disciples, Acts tells the story of the emergent early Church which grew out of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ after Pentecost. Acts covers roughly thirty years from A.D. 30 to 60. Its Lucan authorship is not generally questioned. The style of writing is the same, the emphasis on the power of the Spirit, which was so strong in Luke's Gospel, is also evident, and there is the same literary introduction to Theophilus.

Luke must have had several aims in writing. First of all, he wanted to tell the exciting story of the birth and growth of the Church, and to show how the great events recorded in the Gospel did not end with the resurrection but continued in the new Church, where the lives of perfectly ordinary people, such as the disciples, were so changed by the Spirit of Christ that they were able to do great things and start a great movement.

Then too, he continued with the aim of his Gospel in bringing the Christian faith to the Gentile world. He wanted to persuade ordinary, educated people to believe in Jesus Christ. In a sense, his intention was defensive, for he was trying to show that Christianity was not an irrelevance, a minority off-shoot of an almost tribal religion, but a world faith relevant to the needs of people in every land and in every age.

He also wrote in the second part of this book in defence of Paul. A brief glance at Paul's own letters will show that although Paul was undoubtedly the second great figure in Christianity, after Jesus Christ himself, he yet had a continual battle to get himself, his authority and his claim to be a disciple, recognised. Luke, who was his companion on two of his journeys, does much in Acts to enhance Paul's reputation.

Acts divides into two parts. The first half tells of the story of the early Church in general terms and with different characters appearing in the narrative, such as Stephen and Philip, although Peter and John are really the dominant figures. Chapters 1 and 2 tell of the Ascension and of the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, and then the story of the Church begins. Paul's conversion also appears in this half, but is left, as if it were an isolated incident, and the spotlight returns to Peter and John.

The second half, from Chapter 13 to the end, is entirely taken up with Paul. It tells of his three great missionary journeys, his constant struggle with Jewish Christians to allow Gentiles into the Church without them first becoming Jews, and of his last long journey to Rome and his imprisonment there.

An important theme, which runs through both halves, is that of the widening scope of the Church and its message. First of all it is for Jewish speaking Jews, then for Greek speaking Jews from the wider world, then for Samaritans, the ancient rivals and second-cousins to the Jews, and finally it is opened up to the Gentiles - that is to everyone. Paul is the great Apostle to the Gentiles, who first made them the object of his mission; but Peter too overcame his Jewish scruples, and was to the fore in arguing that the fullest meaning of the Gospel lay in its universal application - that it was for everyone, not just for the Jews.

Without the Book of Acts we would be struggling to put together the history of the early church. Much can be gleaned from the Epistles, but without Acts our knowledge would be very fragmentary and we would often struggle to understand events to which they refer. Were it not for Luke's second volume, we would not know how the church started after Pentecost; who the first Christian martyr was; how the church financed itself; and how it eventually broke free from its roots in Judaism.

The story of Jesus, told in the Gospels, is amazing, but its impact is relatively localised. The story of the early Church, told in Acts, starts from that domestic base, but rapidly explodes on to the world stage, establishing Christianity as a world religion. In many ways it is the most exciting book in the Bible. The story it tells is the fruit of all that Jesus did that is recorded in the Gospels. Everyone should read the Book of Acts.

## BIBLEtalk 6

### Galatians

#### Paul's First and most passionate Epistle

##### **General Introduction to The Epistles**

As was discussed, in BIBLEtalk 4, the earliest Christian writings no longer exist; except that traces of them can be found within the Gospels and the Epistles. They were the ancient world's equivalent of loose-leaf notebooks or jotters - rough scrolls, which would contain collections of different helpful notes: either sayings and teachings of Jesus, or miracle stories from his ministry, or the parables. These would be given to young men in the second generation of the Church, who had never met Jesus but had become believers and were sent out as missionaries.

Next, with some perhaps dating from about the same time, came the Epistles - pastoral letters written by the great missionaries themselves - Peter and Paul and others - to the congregations they founded in different places and then left behind. Most of the Letters are by Paul, but there are some by Peter, James and John, and one, the Letter to the Hebrews, by an unknown author. No doubt, there will have been many more, but the ones in our New Testament survived and were chosen to be part of the Scriptures. They are very important documents for the Church as they show how the first Christians struggled to understand their new faith. They had to work out what it meant for them that Jesus had come and lived and taught in this world, had been crucified and had then miraculously risen from the dead, had gone up to heaven, and finally sent His Spirit upon His Church. The Letters are mostly theological - to do with the faith of the Church - but in the final section of each there is nearly always a practical bit about Christian behaviour in the world.

##### **Paul's Letter to The Galatians**

As the Book of Acts tells us, Paul, after his dramatic conversion, became the champion of taking the Gospel to the Gentile world, without all the ties of regulations of the Jewish faith. Throughout his life and ministry, he had to struggle to prove his credentials as a genuine convert and Apostle, and to justify his stand on behalf of the Gentiles. In the Letter to the Galatians, we find him having to do both of these things.

Galatians is reckoned by most scholars today to have been the first of Paul's Epistles. On his first Missionary Journey, he had, with Barnabus, visited towns in the Roman Province of Galatia, such as Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, and successfully planted fledgling churches in them. In Galatians he is writing to those churches, but it is an angry, hurt and passionate letter. He finds himself having to defend his own credentials as an Apostle, and also to rebuke the Galatians for turning away from his pure version of the Gospel, to a corrupt one, which would have all Gentile converts having to be circumcised and to accept the strict dietary regulations of the Jews, and to observe all of their feasts and festivals. Paul saw more clearly than anyone else that, if Christianity was seen to be only an add-on to the Jewish faith, it would never achieve its full international scope and relevance.

Not only was Paul, from early on, opposed by some of the original Jewish Christians. Even after he had won official agreement from Peter, and James, the brother of the Lord, who was head of the Church in Jerusalem, Judaisers in the Church would follow him round on his missionary journeys, seeking to undo what he had done. They would first of all seek to undermine his authority, casting doubt on the authenticity of his conversion. They would say that he had no commission to say the things that he was saying and that they were detrimental to the true Church, which must clearly be founded on Judaism.

Paul is hurt and very angry. First of all, in the initial two chapters, he vehemently defends his credentials as an Apostle. The Gospel he has preached to them came from no-one else but God himself, through Jesus Christ. It was God who had revealed it to him, and it was God who had commissioned him to preach it. He had eventually gone to Jerusalem and met with the Church leaders there, and won their grudging support, but his commission to preach, and the version of the Gospel he preached, didn't come from them but from God alone.

In Chapter 3, through to the beginning of Chapter 5, Paul passionately defends his version of the Gospel as being free and open to all, untrammelled by the traditions and restrictions of Judaism. He calls them “stupid Galatians” for wanting to adopt the strait-jacket of the Law from which his version of the Gospel has set them free. He develops an argument he is to use throughout his ministry, especially in his later Letter to the Romans. It is that the Law leads to slavery, not to salvation. No-one can ever achieve salvation by trying to live up to the Law – it is simply too hard. Our fallen human nature is such that we will always fail. Put succinctly, however hard we try, we can never be good enough to stand before God. The only way we can be saved is what lies at the heart of the Gospel, as Paul understands it. It is by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, who by his life, death and resurrection, has redeemed us. Faith in Jesus Christ is all that is required of us. That, for Paul is the wonder and grace of the true Gospel.

Faith, however, leads to gracious living. In the final stages of his letter, Paul describes the Christian life and exhorts the Galatians to live it. What greater exhortation could there be than these words: “The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the old nature with its passions and desires. If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct its course.”

## BIBLEtalk 7

### The Revelation of John –The Apocalypse

Ishbel Robertson MA BD

Over this series we have been looking at the variety of literary genres of the library of books which are contained in the Bible. The final part focuses our attention on the only apocalyptic book of the New Testament. For many church members, the Revelation is a closed book; they avoid it, thinking it too mysterious for them to understand. It is often referred to as the Apocalypse because it begins with the Greek word — Αποκάλυψις meaning unveiling / revealing / disclosure. A literary style which is necessarily cryptic frequently code-like, but which would have been understood by the persecuted churches of the time.

The Revelation is distinctive in appealing primarily to our imagination. It's a book that contains a series of word pictures - images and impressions as though a number of slides were being projected on to a screen. Many details of the visions contributing to the total impression are not necessarily understood in isolation. People and places are represented in the form of strange or grotesque creatures and historical events as natural phenomena - it is constantly trying to describe the indescribable. To the first time reader, much of it seems to be 'off the wall' and bewildering. It is entirely composed of dreams and visions predicting the end of the age and of the final outcome of human concerns; focussing on the last age of the world, when good will triumph and evil will be judged and destroyed - and 'paradise lost' exchanged for 'paradise regained'. It is written in the style of the Old Testament apocalypticists and borrows heavily from the apocalyptic book of Daniel – also Ezekial, Ezra, Joel, Zechariah and Zephaniah.

The Revelation was written by a man called John. In the church of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, John was understood to have been the elderly apostle — the son of Zebedee. Though the apostolic authorship is still debated today, it is accepted by the majority of expert biblical critics that it was the work of a Christian Jew from Palestine, who had been banished from Ephesus to the Isle of Patmos to work in the quarries on that rocky island. He is steeped in the Old Testament, from which there are almost 300 quotations used in the 22 chapters of the Book

The tell tale inaccuracy of the Greek he writes - which although vivid, powerful and pictorial - is, from the grammatical perspective, notoriously incorrect and probably the worst Greek in the New Testament. It is not his native language and it is often clear that he is writing in Greek and thinking in Hebrew. We should note that the Apostle John wrote in simple and correct Greek. It is reckoned that the Revelation was written around AD 95.

Nobody can shut their eyes to the complexity of the Revelation. It is by far the most difficult book in the Bible, but perhaps worth the effort of study as it contains the blazing faith of the Christian church in the days when life was agony and people expected the end of time to be near, but still believed that beyond the terrors of the time, was the glory and above the raging and cruelty of men was the triumphant power of God and the blessedness that must follow. The focus of the Revelation is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the final establishment of God's Kingdom.

In the Revelation there is nothing but intense hatred for Rome which is referred to variously as a Babylon, the mother of harlots, drunk with the blood of the saints. The reintroduction and practice of Caesar worship under Domitian and the persecution of those Christians whose refusal to conform to its demands, forms the backdrop of this Book. All were expected say 'Caesar is Lord' — there was no escape.

John had seen brutal things - many Christians had not only been slaughtered, but put to death with insult but John also saw the glory for those who defied the Caesar for the love of Christ. The Revelation comes from one of the most heroic ages of the Christian Church.

The Revelation comes from God through Jesus Christ who communicates it to John by means of an angel – the purpose is to show what must take place. The content is so important that a blessing is promised to the ones who read it aloud and to those who listen and keep these words.

The immediate recipients are seven of the churches of Asia Minor; which needed criticism, encouragement and counsel; it is intended that the entire book and not merely the portion containing the letters in Chapter 2 and 3, was to be included in the communication to the churches. We don't know why he chose the seven - Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis, Pergamum, Thyatira, Philadelphia and Laodicea, except that the number 'seven' crops up right through the book – seven being the number of completeness; the Creation. There were certainly more than seven churches in the region and it is thought that the letters would be passed around the geographical area. John sends grace and peace which also come from the seven spirits who are before the throne - which may be seven archangels or seven spirits: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, godliness and fear of the Lord. He sends grace and peace from Christ "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood". The opening of the book reaches its climax with words spoken by God "I am the Alpha and Omega", emphasising his eternity and completeness; Christ tells John to write what he has seen and what will take place.

## **The Visions**

The focus changes to John in a state of ecstasy on the Lord's Day, being taken in the spirit to heaven. He reports, within the limitation of earthly words, the vision of God in heaven; and with profound awe he attempts to describe the transcendental glory of God and the dazzling brilliance of the scene. Around God there are 24 elders dressed in white robes, which may represent the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles. On each side of the throne four living creatures represent the cherubim: full of eyes in front and behind each with six wings full of eyes suggesting unsleeping vigilance; the four living creatures are engaged in ceaseless worship although this does not imply their sole activity, but rather their constant disposition of adoration. Their song "Holy, Holy, Holy" is joined in by the elders. A scroll is held on the right hand of God and the only one fit to open the seven seals of the scroll is the Lamb with the marks of the slaughter on it. The lamb is described as having seven horns and seven eyes suggesting complete power and watchfulness. The elders offer golden bowls of incense, which contain the prayers of the believers on earth (there are pauses throughout the whole work to allow prayers to be presented to God from the persecuted of the earth). The heavenly cameo comes to a joyful end with the opening of the seals

The first four seals are opened at once and together make one vision of the arrival of the Four horsemen of the Apocalypse which represent conquest, strife, famine and death which the holy wrath of God is about to set loose against an evil world. Thus begins brilliant vignettes of God's judgement working out in history. This is what happens in the sphere of politics, in the military policy and the sphere of economics, whenever men and women oppose the will of God.

There are few chapters in Revelation which speak more directly to our time. In books, newspapers, magazine articles and in media broadcasts we read and hear of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse who are riding the earth today. We hear the cry for justice; we sense that there must be a judgement from which the guilty people from all classes of society make futile attempts to escape from the wrath to come. There is a time of quiet when judgement is restrained and John sees the 144,000 i.e. possibly 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel, then another great number from every nation. They are dressed in white robes which they have washed in the blood of the Lamb; which is a vivid and symbolic way of saying that their present blessedness and redemption has been the gift of the sacrificial Lamb. That episode finishes with words which have brought endless comfort to the bereaved--even today.

"They will hunger no more, and thirst no more, the sun will not strike them, neither will the scorching heat.....he will guide them to the springs of water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (ch7: 16-17)

Generally speaking chapters 4 - 18 of Revelation deal with God's judgements, woes and punishments on the people of the earth. The judgements are not for the church and we learn of God's deliverance of the martyrs. Seven angels are introduced which we may identify as the archangels Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel, and Remiel. Each is given a trumpet -- the blast of which is God's symbolic Old Testament means of communication — they herald devastating earthquakes causing terrible destruction together with outlandish astrological phenomena. Hail stones the size of planets,

fire destroys vegetation and a meteor destroys much of the sea life. Lakes and rivers dry up causing drought over land.

The sun and moon are darkened and a plague of demonic locusts is released. These are like cavalry horses; they have human faces, lions teeth and women's hair, with tails that have poisonous stings like scorpions. The people of the earth beg to die. All manifestations are aimed at bringing the people to repentance.

John introduces us to the satanic trinity — the dragon and the two beasts. The beast from the sea is the Roman Empire as is the woman said to be clothed in purple and scarlet. All are the embodiment of the antichrist — those who pledge loyalty to the beast bear the mark of 666 which is the number of the greatest imperfection. John's imagery becomes increasingly bizarre as he describes a woman with twelve stars round her head — she is giving birth to a son and the dragon is poised ready to pounce on the child — who with his mother are spirited away by divine intervention.

The forces gather for the final battle between good and evil which is to occur in a place called Armageddon (ch. 16-16) a place of important biblical battles.

The word Armageddon has been magnified in popular thinking out of all proportion to its significance. Curiously it doesn't appear in the original texts — where it is called Harmagedon — Hebrew for Mountain of Megiddo. Babylon falls and the plagues end with a bombardment of hailstones each weighing one hundred pounds.

### **The Last Judgement**

The Last Judgement is very sobering and awesome for we never know the time nor the hour. John talks about the great white thrones, in front of which, all the dead — the important and unimportant, are brought to judgement. Two books are opened. One can be called the Book of Merit for it contains a record of all the deeds of each one who stands before the throne of God. The other is the Book of Life which belongs to the Lamb and it can be called the Book of Mercy. Here, the work of Christ, who died to ransom his people and save them from their sin, is put on the credit side of the ledger along with all the names that are destined for acquittal and blessedness. All are judged according to their deeds — the two monsters Death and Hades are consigned to the lake of fire and brimstone — which is a final and complete separation from God. Anyone whose name is not in the Book of Life is thrown into the fire.

The opening of the books suggests that our earthly lives are important and meaningful and are taken into account at the end. But the consultation of the Book of Life shows that our eternal destiny is determined by God's decision, by God's grace, and by God's amazing goodness. The final judgement clears the scene for the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth, from which sin, imperfection and death are banished forever. Now through the Revelation we have seen that if people persist in living contrary to God's universe they must suffer. John's words here mean that the most terrible thing that a person can do, is to deliberately turn away from God. Such torment is forever and ever. This is so, because God respects our freewill and will never force us to turn to him. So this picture of wrath and hell means nothing more or less than the terrible truth that the sufferings of those who persist in rejecting God's love in Christ, are self imposed and self perpetuated. The inevitable consequence is, that if they eternally persist in such rejection, God will never violate their personality, whether any soul will in fact eternally resist God we cannot say.

### **The Heavenly Jerusalem**

The last chapters tell of the New Jerusalem — the Holy City, the bride of Christ - coming down among us adorned for her husband. A symbolic description follows giving details of the appearance of the city — describing its four sides and twelve gates made of pearl and of streets of pure gold. There is no temple in the city, for the Holy City itself is the sanctuary. God is now accessible to all, God and the Lamb will be there, along with the servants who have his name on their foreheads — then the promise of the beatitude will be realised — the pure in heart will see God and he will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and he will be their God and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and

death will be no more, neither will there be any more pain, for the first things have past away. And he who is seated on the throne said "Behold I make all things new It is done. I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end – without price I will give you of the water of life".

Certainly John wrote in order to stimulate faithfulness on the part of persecuted Christians living in the 1st Century, assuring them of the ultimate victory of Christ. But Revelation has a warning for believers down through the ages. Babylon/Rome is symbolic of the idolatry that any nation commits when it elevates material abundance, military prowess, technological sophistication, racial pride and any other glorification of creature over Creator. In these chapters we have an up-to-date portrait of what may occur when we idolize the gross national product, worship growth and become so preoccupied with quantity that we ignore quality. The message of the book of Revelation concerns the character and timeliness of God's judgement, not only on individuals but also on nations and in fact of all principalities and powers – which is to say, all authorities, corporations, institutions, structures, bureaucracies and the like. The book of Revelation contains passages of great beauty and comfort that have sustained Christian believers through the ages.

We know the book was written to comfort the early Christians and to sustain their vision. It ends with the Grace which is so fitting for a book which contains horrible images of great monsters and catastrophic judgements. John closes the book with visions of hope and of heaven, promising that at the last – we shall enjoy the vision of God because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.