

Bun on Flores to discuss the 'Hobbit' finds. His thesis was that the universally common legend of little people may have originated from contact with the folks of this remote island; remember these are the Spice Islands, so most of the ancient world had at least second-hand contact with them. Though his tone was certainly not dismissive of the archaeological establishment's views on the remains in the cave, he went on from there to a nearby hill village where he introduced us to a tiny little man—about four feet tall—with whom he sat and talked at length.

The men of this village are all similarly short, but the gene is only passed down to the men; women are of normal size. For all his diminutive stature the old gentleman was the ruling elder of the village, held in high regard by his neighbours. He and Dr Blair, who speaks the local languages

fluently, sat late in the afternoon in deep discussion, apparently unfazed by the fact that the small man's head was barely half the size of his six-foot visitor's, an elegant mockery of the concept that brain mass and intelligence are proportional. This episode is a fairly strong demonstration that the remains in the caves nearby are probably those of recent relatives of Dr Blair's charming host.

The documentary *Myths, Monsters and Hobbits* was last shown in the UK on Sky3 in the early hours of the morning, and was shown several times before that, so it may turn up again. Dr Blair was the co-maker with his brother Lorne of the acclaimed documentary series *Ring of Fire*, released in 1988, which portrayed the traditional societies of Indonesia.

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# The greatest event of all time

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*In looking for the coming of Christ to set up the Kingdom, it is easy to overlook the significance of what occurred in the first century, from the ministry of Christ to the judgements of A.D. 70. We need to look again at this pivotal time in human history to appreciate its significance.*

**M**ANY YEARS AGO a favourite topic for special lectures—taken from a CALS leaflet of the same title—was 'The Greatest Event of All Time About to Happen'. The event referred to was the return of Christ. At the time it seemed to me a perfectly valid way of describing it. However, it now seems more Scriptural to refer to it as 'the greatest event of *our* time'. For a consideration of Israel's wilderness journey—in which the pivotal events took place at the beginning, rather than the end—suggests that the greatest event of *all* time has already happened.

If there had been no Passover, no Exodus from Egypt, no crossing of the Red Sea, there would have been no entry into the Promised Land. And this is true of the antitype also. The entire course of human history hinged on Christ's death and resurrection. It was the climactic confrontation between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, a conflict from which Christ emerged

victorious. Christ himself declared, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (Jno. 12:31,32). At that one point in time, the outworking of God's purpose hung in the balance.

By contrast, the outcome of any future conflicts between Christ and his Gentile enemies is a foregone conclusion. The Christian apostasy is fond of depicting the 'end time' as an apocalyptic confrontation between the forces of good and evil. And this idea of a single archenemy embodying all human opposition to Christ's authority has unfortunately influenced our understanding of latter-day events. This viewpoint ignores the fact that Christ has already triumphed, and the world—although it does not realise it yet—has already lost. What remains for the future is to demonstrate that victory to the world at large.

## **The uniqueness of the apostolic age**

The [table](#) overleaf lists the events that took place in the apostolic age. What the table is intended to convey is the great difference between the apostolic age and our own day. It should be quite obvious that the apostolic age is of unrivalled

<b>Events prior to the comings of Christ</b>	<b>In A.D. 70</b>	<b>In the latter days</b>
Personal ministry of Christ	Yes	No
Crucifixion of Christ	Yes	No
Resurrection of Christ	Yes	No
Christ receives "All power . . . in heaven and in earth" (Mt. 28:18)	Yes	No
Ministry of the apostles accompanied by signs and wonders	Yes	No
Widespread outpouring of Holy Spirit gifts on believers	Yes	No
Unprecedented expansion of inspired Scriptures	Yes	No
Testimony before kings and governors	Yes	No
Overt manifestations of Divine judgement	Yes	No
Widespread persecution of believers	Yes	No
Martyrdom of saints at hands of Jews	Yes	No
Martyrdom of saints at hands of Gentiles	Yes	No

importance. Consider what took place in just over forty years from A.D. 27 to A.D. 70.

There was the personal ministry of the Son of God to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, when Jesus "went throughout every city and village, preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God" (Lk. 8:1). This was accompanied by an unparalleled manifestation of Holy Spirit power. As Jesus pointed out to the disciples of John: "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Mt. 11:5). And could there be any greater indication of the importance that God attached to this ministry than the fact that "last of all He sent unto them His Son" (21:37)? This culminated in what we have already described as the pivotal event in the outworking of God's purpose, the death and resurrection of Christ.

Then followed a forty-year period at the end of which the "acceptable year of the LORD" gave way to "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2). Has there ever been forty years like it in the course of human history? This short period saw the outpouring of Holy Spirit gifts "upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17), an unprecedented proliferation of miraculous powers. The gospel "was preached to every creature which is under heaven" (Col. 1:23), and "their sound went into all the earth,

and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18).

Christ had warned his disciples, "ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles" (Mt. 10:18), and so they were. Paul became Christ's "chosen vessel" to bear his name "before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). The faithful witness of the apostles brought them before the very highest civil and religious authorities of the day, even before the Roman emperor. Nothing remotely comparable to this has been achieved in our day.

Even more surprising is the tremendous increase in the written Word. Although the inspired Scriptures had been compiled gradually over a period of 4,000 years, almost one quarter of the writings that comprise the canon of Scripture came into existence in the forty years that followed Christ's resurrection. Never before had so many books of the Bible come into circulation in so short a time.

And it would be impossible not to mention the extreme persecution that faithful believers were subjected to. It is doubtful if the combined experiences of all the present readers of this article could even begin to match what the apostle Paul alone went through during his thirty years in the Truth's service (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Besides the martyrdom of brethren such as Stephen (Acts

7:58-60) and James (12:2), there must have been many others who suffered similar fates, as indeed did Paul himself and Peter. We have Paul's own testimony that "many of the saints did I shut up in prison . . . and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them" (26:10); and he goes on to confess that he "punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme" (v. 11), so his own persecution of believers must have reached horrendous proportions. Our first-century brethren did indeed undergo a "fiery trial" (1 Pet. 4:12). Saul of Tarsus was not the only persecutor of the early church, nor was he the worst. Although not explicitly described in the New Testament, the sufferings of the early Christians at the hands of Nero are too well known to need recounting here.

The apostolic age *was* unique. Christ's mission to the Jews, and the subsequent apostolic mission to both Jews and Gentiles, jointly represent the greatest preaching campaign that the world has ever seen. And it is beyond dispute that Christ's death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, and his elevation to the Father's right hand, are events which by their nature cannot be repeated. So New Testament prophecies, whether uttered by Christ or by his apostles, which relate to the circumstances of first-century believers or to the nation of Israel at that time are hardly likely to apply equally to our own day.

### **Where does the Olivet Prophecy fit in?**

Many brethren and sisters regard the Olivet Prophecy as one of the most important of latter-day prophecies. Although it was obviously intended to provide guidance to first-century believers, some believe that the entire prophecy will have a latter-day fulfilment, even to the extent of requiring a rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem prior to Christ's return. Even those who are willing to contemplate at least a partial application of the prophecy to the end of the Jewish era are generally keen on applying significant portions of it to our day. Only a relative handful of brethren have seen the prophecy as having a predominantly first-century application. Yet the [table](#) demonstrates that the Olivet Prophecy describes events that belong, and could only belong, to the apostolic age.

The preceding chapter of Matthew's Gospel to that recording the Olivet Prophecy records Christ's condemnation of the Jewish elders, culminating with the threat that upon *them* would come "all the righteous blood shed upon the

earth" (23:35). And to remove any possible doubt, Christ went on to declare emphatically, "All these things shall come upon *this* generation" (v. 36). Which generation? Surely the generation to whom Jesus was speaking.

The view that latter-day Israel will bear the full force of Divine wrath, and that the catastrophic events of A.D. 70 will be eclipsed by the horrors that will befall Israel in the future, is surely wrong. There can be no greater crime than putting the Son of God to death. No future generation could ever bear a greater burden of guilt. The Jews of this present age have not witnessed the preaching of the Christ and the apostles, nor have they witnessed the miraculous powers of the Holy Spirit, as their forefathers did. They will experience tribulation in the future but it will not be on the scale of their past sufferings at the hands of the Romans. It would send a strange message to the Gentile world if the time to favour Zion (Ps. 102:13) were to be heralded by a slaughter of Jews on an unprecedented scale. Notwithstanding the anguished cry of the latter-day Jewish exiles, "Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts" (Ezek. 37:11), their story will have a happy ending. There was no such silver lining to the dark cloud that enveloped Israel at the end of the apostolic era.

The burden of the Olivet Prophecy is not the return of Christ to a humbled and repentant nation of Israel and its restoration to Divine favour. It is a prophecy of Israel's *desolation*, not its *restoration*. It relates to the time and circumstances foretold by Christ in the preceding chapter: "Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth" (Mt. 23:34,35).

The nation of Israel was about to commit the greatest crime against God in history, and would compound that offence by continuing its campaign of persecution against His faithful servants—a campaign that would extend beyond the borders of the land itself. And, in a frenzied attempt to suppress the preaching of the gospel, the Jews would make common cause with those in the pagan Gentile world. The prophecy looks forward to the (then) future desolation of Israel, the destruction of the temple, and the scattering of the Jews into all parts of the earth. The apparent difficulty of reconciling one or two verses with a first-century application does not justify wresting

the entire prophecy from its obvious context and seeking to apply it where it does not belong.

Christ's rejoinder to his disciples when they pointed out the magnificence of the temple is a strong indicator of the ensuing prophecy's theme: "There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (24:2). This prediction would be fulfilled in A.D. 70, and the prophecy therefore spans the forty-year interval that lay ahead, with only a brief acknowledgment that the downtreading would eventually come to an end. So Jesus describes circumstances that could only be true of that time: "But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake" (Lk. 21:12).

And Christ promised to aid his faithful servants as they witnessed before these kings and rulers: "Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer: for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist" (vv. 14,15). Where is the latter-day counterpart to such events? Have we, or those of any generation since the days of the apostles, been given "a mouth and wisdom" to confound our adversaries? Could it be said of us that "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (Mt. 24:9)?

### **"All power . . . in heaven and in earth"**

In the light of so many allusions to circumstances that could only be true of the apostolic age, it is difficult to understand why there is so much insistence on giving the prophecy a latter-day ap-

plication. Any suggestion that the Olivet Prophecy must relate primarily to the end of the Jewish era invariably attracts a considerable amount of adverse comment within our community. Yet it must be obvious not only that the prophecy relates to that era, but that in doing so it deals with events that cannot, and will not, be duplicated in these last days. The death of Christ was a unique event. A crime that was unparalleled in its hideousness warranted an outpouring of Divine wrath upon the Jewish nation, "such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be" (Mt. 24:21). Hence Christ's declaration: "For *these* be the days of vengeance, that *all* things which are written may be fulfilled" (Lk. 21:22).

In the wilderness parallel, the Passover and the destruction of the Egyptian host in the Red Sea foreshadowed not only Christ's victory over sin but also his ascendancy over his human adversaries: "Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power: Thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy" (Ex. 15:6). Just under 2,000 years ago the balance of power between Christ and his enemies shifted massively and irrevocably in his favour. The man who had stood before the Jewish elders, before Herod and before Pilate—seemingly unable to defend himself against the cruel taunts and abuse of Roman soldiers and powerless to prevent himself from being nailed to a cross—ascended to his Father three days later (Jno. 20:17) and was subsequently able to declare, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Mt. 28:18). From that time onward Herod and Pilate and all other human rulers since—kings, emperors, popes, presidents, prime ministers—have exercised only such power as Christ has chosen to grant them.