

on the island it was cold and wet (28:2). Snakes always hibernate about that time of year, and a heap of brushwood would be a likely place for hibernation. Evidently, in scooping up his bundle of sticks, Paul unknowingly carried with him a snake, which was suddenly awakened out of its sleep. As the bundle reached the heat and brightness of the fire, the snake more likely used Paul's arm as an escape route rather than something to attack. Having disturbed three snakes at different times myself, it was noticeable that their

first concern was getting away quickly, and this snake was escaping from fire. Nevertheless it is true that most snake bites here in Australia happen in the creature's self-defence, in which case Paul may well have been bitten. However, I am also informed that immediately after hibernation venomous snakes have no venom. But, as Luke comments, the islanders understandably thought this one had.

*Malcolm Edwards*  
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# From the Editor's postbag

## Comments on items received from readers

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### Thoughts on the Kennedy family

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**T**HE NEAREST thing to a royal family that the USA has had since the Second World War has been the Kennedy family. Though only John F. Kennedy actually made it to the president's office, his brothers Robert and Edward have been prominent in American politics also, his glamorous wife Jackie was seldom out of the news from her marriage to her death, and the various Kennedy children have received much attention from the media over the years, though this seems to have faded more recently. A reader has sent me some thoughts on this prominent family.

John F. Kennedy was the first Roman Catholic to become president of the USA. He came to office in January 1961 and was assassinated in November 1963. As well as being Roman Catholic, the family tended to be anti-Jewish, especially the father Joseph, who was ambassador to Britain at the commencement of the Second World War, despite being an admirer of Hitler's achievements, which caused him to advocate appeasement with

Germany. When Churchill came to power, Joseph Kennedy soon found himself on his way back to America.

The removal of John Kennedy from office led to his vice-president, Lyndon Johnson, taking office and winning the election the following year. As has been pointed out more than once in these pages, Johnson had a Christadelphian background and a resultant propensity to support Israel, which led to him being there to support Israel in the Six-Day War, something that John Kennedy would never have done.

When Johnson decided not to stand for re-election in 1968, the favourite to succeed him, John Kennedy's brother Robert, was assassinated and Richard Nixon came to power. Though widely vilified, and forced out of office over the Watergate scandal in 1974, he was there in power to provide crucial support to Israel in the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, when Israel came perilously near to being overwhelmed by Arab forces in a surprise attack.

A third Kennedy brother, Edward, was also prominent in politics, and a prospective presidential candidate, but he was

discredited when a young female assistant, the sole passenger in his car, died in a mysterious late night drowning incident. Scandals and problems subsequently dogged some of the children of the three brothers, with no member of that generation attaining to high office.

As our correspondent points out, these things demonstrate that indeed "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will" (Dan. 4:17), and His hand can particularly be seen in America's relationship with Israel over the years.

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### America abandons democratic ideals

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**I**N an article, passed to me by a reader, entitled "Promoting democracy? Well, it was a nice idea", published originally in the *New York Times* and reprinted in the *Observer* on 10 February 2008, C. J. Chivers comments on the way the USA is abandoning its ideals of promoting democracy across the world. Besides the well-known example of Iraq, the USA has encouraged the development of democracy in the various countries of the former Soviet Union, notably

those in Central Asia, but this only tended to damage relations with these countries. Chivers comments:

“Democracy promotion is not gone. But it has taken its place in a wider portfolio of interests. These include access to oil and gas, improving trade and transportation infrastructure and expanding military, counter-narcotic and counter-terror cooperation—all informed by a sense that in the competition with Russia and China for regional influence, the United States has lost ground”.

The USA has always been selective in pursuing these policies, for no effort appears to have been made to promote democracy in the Arab kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula, which is where we expect her influence to predominate at the time of the end. We can expect her attempts to have a significant influence in Central Asia to fail, for these nations will form part of the confederacy that invades Israel under the leadership of Russia.

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## The establishment of the doctrine of the Trinity

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**F**OLLOWING a suggestion by a reader, I looked on the website of *History Today* magazine ([www.historytoday.com](http://www.historytoday.com)) for an article “Threefold mystery” by Charles Freeman, subtitled “Charles Freeman explains why AD 381 was a defining moment in the history of European thought”. The article was published in the February 2008 issue and is based on Freeman’s book *AD 381: Heretics, Pagans and the Christian State*, published by Pimlico in February 2008. (A summary of the article can be

read on the website, but the full version can only be accessed by paying.)

Freeman begins his article by referring to the doctrine of the Trinity as “an article of faith that lies at the core of Christian belief” and declared by the Roman Catholic Church as being “a mystery hidden by God, inaccessible by reason alone, and only known because God has revealed it”. He then states that so important a matter should be the concern of historians as well as theologians, stating, “the historian has to ask how this particular doctrine ever became embedded at the centre of Christian thought”, since, “while it is clear that the scriptures do refer independently to God the Father, His ‘son’ Jesus, and a Holy Spirit, there is virtually no mention of them as a Trinity”. He points out that they only occur together in Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14, and “neither of [these passages] describes any relationship between them”.

Freeman dates the origin of the doctrine to the early fourth century, although we know that the idea of the pre-existence of Jesus developed in the early church some time before that. As is well known, it was the Council of Nicea in 325 (convened by Constantine) that first formulated a doctrine resembling what later emerged as the doctrine of the Trinity, although the phrase ‘the Trinity’ was not used. Freeman claims that, “Almost at once, the bishops realised that, in the heat of the moment, they had accepted a formula that had no scriptural backing”. The Council was called because of a heated dispute that arose as a result of Arius, a priest of the church at Alexandria, stating that Jesus was a created being (though pre-existing his birth to Mary),

and Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, aggressively asserting that the Son had existed alongside the Father throughout eternity.

The dispute raged amongst followers of the two views over several centuries, since the Council of Nicea in fact did not settle the matter. Bishops with a background of classical Greek philosophy developed ever more complex and sophisticated arguments to support the Trinitarian view, but Freeman claims the debate would have fizzled out had it not been for the intervention of the Emperor Theodosius, who issued an edict in January 380 “proclaiming that the only acceptable way of being a Christian was to acknowledge Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be of equal majesty”. Freeman continues: “All other formulas would be considered heretical and their holders subject to punishment both by the state and by God. Presumably he felt that only by imposing doctrinal unity could he strengthen his precarious position”. At this time Theodosius was emperor only in the east.

He rapidly reinforced the decree by appointing a supporter of his edict to be bishop of Constantinople, and by banning those who did not support it from the churches and forbidding them to build their own churches. In 381 he called a council at Constantinople, inviting only bishops who supported him, with the intention of consolidating his control of the Church on the basis of his edict. A creed today known as the Nicene Creed was agreed but not used till 451. Theodosius then established his control over the western division of the empire, and his successors issued more and more severe decrees against holding any other views.

Freeman then asks, "Why is it not common knowledge that the Trinity became part of Christian doctrine only as a result of a series of imperial decrees?". His answer is that the tradition arose "that the Council of Constantine had confirmed what the Church already believed. This is still the official explanation given in both Protestant and Catholic traditions". The fact that for political reasons the Roman emperor suppressed any views other than that enshrined in the Nicene Creed is now overlooked.

In conclusion he states, "It is possible to argue that the year AD 381 is one of the most important moments in the history of European thought. From then on genuine debate over theological issues was not permitted . . . Authority replaced reason as the arbiter of truth . . . It was not until the seventeenth century that the concept of religious toleration was revived".

Regarding that last statement, although there is no space here to consider the 1,260 time periods of Revelation, it is surely worthy of note that 1,260 years from the Council of Constantine in 381, the date which, according to Freeman, marked the beginning of the suppression of religious freedom, takes us to 1641, the period when "the concept of religious toleration was revived".

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## The uncertain foundation of the papacy

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**A**T the time of Theodosius, the bishop of Rome had not been established as supreme leader of the Church. This came later but is very much linked with the destruction of religious freedom instigated by Theodosius.



Picture: © iStockphoto.com

**Distant view of St Peter's, Rome, from one of the bridges over the River Tiber.**

The foundation of the papal claim to spiritual supremacy is the idea that the authority and commission given to Peter by Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 16:17-19 and John 21:15-17, was passed onto successive bishops of Rome. This, of course, depends amongst other things on Peter actually moving to Rome and becoming the leader of the church there, something which cannot be proved from Scripture. In support of this, the Roman Catholic Church cites a tradition that Peter was put to death in Rome and buried there, and in 1939 the Vatican announced that his bones had been found.

A reader has passed me an article entitled, "St Peter was not the first pope and never went to Rome, claims Channel 4", by Jonathan Wynne-Jones and published in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 23 March 2008. It concerns a Channel 4 documentary, *The Secrets of the Twelve Disciples*, broadcast that same day, in which Dr Robert Beckford, a theology lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, says:

"We found that there is no scientific evidence to support the idea that Peter was

buried in Rome, but yet the rival theory has not got out because it challenges the Church. If you undermine its basis for power you undermine the Church. It's tragic that the faith gets reduced to manipulating the facts and to one church trying to make itself superior to others".

Dr Beckford points out that the dig which allegedly discovered Peter's bones was carried out in "total secrecy" and was led by a "personal friend" of the pope. Beckford points to the discovery of an ossuary (a stone bone box) in Jerusalem bearing the inscription "Simon son of Jonah" as indicating the real burial place of Peter. (I have not come across this claim before and it should be treated with caution.)

Needless to say, the Roman Catholic Church went onto the attack when it became aware of the programme, criticising Channel 4 for allowing what it calls "outlandish" claims to be broadcast, and saying that the programme was an "attempt to smear Catholicism". Gerald O'Collins, emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at the Gregorian University in Rome,

says there is a “great weight” of tradition that Peter was buried at Rome, and castigates the documentary as “awful stuff, total nonsense . . . outlandish garbage”, whilst John Medlin, general manager of the Latin Mass Society, said the arguments in the documentary “are on par with Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* and are unsubstantiated. It shows undisguised disdain for the Catholic Church”.

O’Collins gives the game away, however, when he refers to the weight of tradition. The Catholic Church is based on tradition, not the Bible. Whether or not Peter actually went to Rome is not in fact the main issue. The important point is that bishops as understood today did not exist in the first-century ecclesia. Each ecclesia had a group of brethren who managed ecclesial affairs with the authority of the Holy Spirit. Though the AV uses the word ‘bishop’ to refer to them, the word thus translated really means ‘overseer’. If Peter visited Rome it would have been as an itinerant preacher like Paul; he would not have been a bishop in the sense that the Catholic Church uses the term.

As for Dr Beckford’s arguments being like those of *The Da Vinci Code*, this is far from the truth. Though both attack the authority of Catholicism, the ideas behind *The Da Vinci Code* also negate the teaching of the New Testament, and indeed deny its

authority, whereas Beckford’s ideas are an attack on Roman Catholic tradition and not on the Bible.

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### More attempts to diminish the Bible

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TWO articles earlier in the year, both published in the *Daily Mail* and sent to me by a reader, highlight different ways in which the Bible is being diminished today, rather than accepted as the Word of God. The first, published on 22 February 2008, is entitled, “Doing it all by the book” (by Val Hennessy), and is about a book called *A Year of Living Biblically*. The author, A. J. Jacobs, supposedly set out to live for a year trying to follow all the rules found in the Bible. Sadly his motives seem to have been to ridicule the Bible, which he achieves by taking everything he can find as literally as possible and then claiming how impractical it is to live according to the Bible.

I will refrain from citing examples of where Jacobs tries to make the Bible look ridiculous, but will mention two serious matters that the article brings out. The first is the fact that Jacobs says he had great difficulty in refraining from lust because of “the high level of sexual imagery pervading modern life”. The second is brought out by Hennessy’s concluding sentence: “One fact that Jacobs does concede,

though, is that Jesus offers us an exemplary set of rules which, if only we stuck to them, could transform our troubled earth”.

The nature of the second article is revealed by its title, “Thou shalt take drugs, Moses” (published 5 March 2008). The author, Fiona MacRae, is science reporter for the *Daily Mail*, and she reports on an article in the magazine *Time and Mind* by a psychology professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Benny Shanon, putting forward the view that Moses took mind-altering drugs. Basing his article on his own drug-taking experiences, he tries to explain aspects of Moses’ experiences as the result of drugs. To take two examples, taking drugs results in losing the sense of passing time, which is why Moses saw the bush on fire yet not being consumed, and it is common for people taking drugs to ‘see’ objects turning into snakes, hence the account of Aaron’s rod doing this.

Professor Shanon tries to justify his theory by saying that he does not believe in supernatural events but does not wish to regard the Exodus story as merely an ancient legend. It is particularly sad that a Jew should propound such a theory regarding the great ancestral leader of his nation, and sad too that a leading Israeli University should have such a man as a professor.