

for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going . . .” (8:14)

- “We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from” (9:29).

The Pharisees, therefore, cannot seem to make their minds up as to where they think the Lord is from, perhaps even casting the aspersion of fornication onto the circumstances of the Lord’s birth. The origin of the water-made-wine is only known by the Lord’s disciples. The wine epitomises every aspect of the Lord: his origins, teachings, life and sacrifice.

To summarise, the heifer being slain in a manner which seems to be almost independent of the Mosaic Law, and the Lord bringing forth the new wine of the everlasting covenant at Cana, both signal that the Aaronic priesthood was soon to be superseded by a new order, the order of Jesus Christ. He is our priest for ever after the

order of Melchizedek, and “is . . . able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

Indeed, Melchizedek is inextricably linked with the overall theme from the red heifer and the water-made-wine: an ecclesial bride who is born of blood and water, and who has prepared herself for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Melchizedek is a symbol of the everlasting covenant, the very covenant which unites the Lord Jesus with his bride forever.¹²

(To be concluded)

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12. Notice that, after Abraham chooses fellowship with Melchizedek and the things of God rather than subjection to the king of Sodom in Genesis 14, God confirms His covenant with Abraham in chapter 15. The words, “After these things” (15:1), clearly link the events of the two chapters.



Principles, Preaching and Problems

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The baby in the manger

Trevor Maher

EARLY IN SEPTEMBER 2003 the mainstream churches in Britain revealed details of their advertising campaign for the Christmas period. Central to this is a poster campaign which has adapted a seventeenth-century painting by the Flemish artist Gerrit van Honthorst. The poster consists of stable scene, showing Mary gazing down at the infant Jesus, who is clad in a red and white Santa suit, and the poster bears the caption, “Go on, ask him for something this Christmas”. This poster is to be displayed on billboards and church notice boards throughout the country, and will be supported by an advertising campaign targeting younger listeners to local and music radio stations.

A spokesman for the organisation which came up with this promotion, The Churches Advertising Network (which includes representatives from most churches but not the Roman Catholic), said, “The shops start doing Christmas ever

earlier and they are always trying to steal Christmas so we are fighting them on their own territory”. He said that using an image of Jesus as Santa Claus, in the so-called traditional red and white outfit (originally designed to promote Coca Cola in America), was not intended to confuse children but to start a debate: “The aim was to make a link between Santa Claus and Jesus in terms of being able to ask for something”.

Debasing the Lord Jesus

This last point shows very clearly how debased and corrupted have become the teachings about, and presentation of, the Lord Jesus Christ today by so-called mainstream churches. This carries a grave warning for those responsible for preaching the true gospel. To depict our Lord in the manner they have chosen borders on the blasphemous, and displays the tendency, so prevalent in this world, to bring Christ and God down

to our level in a mistaken attempt to make them more acceptable. To link the Lord Jesus with a pagan custom now submerged in cynical commercial exploitation is to do what Israel did in Old Testament times in their worship of God, for which they suffered the severe judgements of God.

The whole emphasis of Scripture is totally in the opposite direction, drawing attention to the glory and awesome majesty and power of God, and the greatness of His Son, who now sits at His right hand: “. . . He raised him from the dead, and set him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of Him That filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:20-23). When words such as these are joined with those from the prophet Isaiah we see the foolishness of trying to package the gospel as a commodity in this present age: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, *neither are your ways My ways*, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8,9). Notice that God says our ways are not His; but this generation, like many before, thinks they are. What we see happening is not man being created in the image of God, but God being created in the image of man!

Mammon rules

The commercial and secular world of today has long had a grip on Christmas, which they are not going to relinquish willingly because it is the source of vast financial wealth and profits. Once summer turns to autumn, thoughts in the temples of mammon turn to Christmas. Companies have been planning their strategies since January, and, as soon as the ‘back to school’ promotions are over, retailing and manufacturing organisations commence their steady drive to put pressure on the public to spend for Christmas.

The practice of giving gifts to family and friends, and indulging in bouts of eating and drinking to excess for several days, will be encouraged by all means possible because it generates millions of pounds of turnover and profit. The cynical use of a ‘baby Jesus’ is encouraged because of the sentimental value, and the oft

repeated expression will be heard, “It’s really a time for children”, as parents are encouraged to outdo each other with more and more extravagant and expensive gifts for their offspring. The fact that nowhere in Scripture are we instructed to make a festival out of the birth of Christ is considered irrelevant. “We can worship in any way we choose”, is the thought, although the teaching of Scripture shows the opposite.

The giving of gifts to one another is a tradition without Scriptural support. Some claim that, because the wise men brought gifts, that is why we exchange presents. A brief reflection on the Scriptural record shows how spurious this is. The wise men came some time after the birth of Christ; they firstly worshipped him, then they presented their gifts to him, not to each other. The gifts represented the work of the Lord Jesus, that which he was to accomplish in his life, his death and resurrection, and as King over the Kingdom of God on earth. We come to Christ week by week and present our gift to him, that of our lives in his service. As Deuteronomy 16:16 shows, we should not come to worship empty-handed, but it is our hearts and minds that are to be given to God and Christ, not the things of this world.

The world has such a stranglehold on Christmas activities that nothing we say or do will dramatically change the situation. Christ will do that when he returns. When Paul and the believers preached the true gospel in Ephesus and Asia, it caused those who responded to turn their back on the pagan customs of their day and to divest themselves of items that reflected those customs and practices. Disturbing the religious practices of those days had a dramatic effect because it affected the commercial structures. The tradesmen were roused by Demetrius, and full-scale opposition to Paul’s activities swung into being, culminating in a two-hour-long protest and near riot in the theatre.

The basis of the protest is clearly stated in Acts. At a meeting of all the tradesmen the point was made, “by this craft we have our wealth”, and, “not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana [will] be despised” (19:25,27). Nothing was to be allowed to dilute the earning potential offered by their involvement with the religious organisation that dominated society. To that end they would support the religion, regardless of whether it was true or false. Such is the world we live in.

The ecclesias surrounding Ephesus would soon hear of these events, and when Paul wrote to those in Colosse he stressed the need to avoid becoming involved in the practices of the day: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col. 2:8).

In vain do they worship me

The baby Jesus does not challenge the thinking or behaviour of men and women; after all, "he's just a baby", and even in religious circles the acceptance of the concept of the Virgin Birth is in doubt. The baby in the manger does not make the majority of people feel uncomfortable, nor does he make them question their lifestyle. After all, babies are dependent on adults!

So, whilst most religious festivals in the church's calendar are ignored by the people, they are happy to accommodate this one because they can virtually ignore the one around which it is meant to centre. An adult Jesus, one who says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (Jno. 14:15), a suffering Saviour on the cross who requires his followers to crucify the flesh daily, a resurrected triumphant Jesus who promises to return to the earth, is beyond their comprehension and would demand too much from them. And so the real Jesus is buried beneath a mound of superstitions and pagan customs.

Virtually all the customs associated with the 25 December celebration have their origins in Babylonian and Egyptian idol worship. The holly, the mistletoe, the yule log, the exchanging of gifts, the time of year the festival is held—all these were incorporated from the pagan rituals into the state Christianity of the fourth century A.D. When people view the baby dressed in a red and white Santa suit in the advert, few will realise that Santa Claus is a corruption of the name St Nicholas, a Roman Catholic bishop who lived in the fifth century. An encyclopedia entry states:

"St Nicholas, bishop of Myra, a saint honoured by the Greeks and Latins on the 6th of December . . . A legend of his surreptitious bestowal of dowries on the three daughters of impoverished citizens is said to have originated the custom of giving presents in secret on the eve of St Nicholas, subsequently transferred to Christmas Day".

Records show that this particular custom goes right back to pagan Babel, and Nimrod, the

grandson of Noah and founder of what became the Babylonian system that is condemned in Scripture.

Some will say, however, "We don't believe all that pagan rubbish, we are not honouring some false idol, and at least it gets people thinking about Jesus once a year. Surely singing hymns about Jesus and honouring Jesus, even as a baby, has some merit?". We can turn to Scripture to answer that. When Israel entered the land with clear instructions on how to worship God, they were told: "take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them [the nations of the land of Canaan] . . . and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which He hateth, have they done unto their gods" (Deut. 12:30,31).

We must strive to ensure that we worship God "in spirit and *in truth*" (Jno. 4:23). Jesus found that the Jews of his day had turned from the truth, and he quoted the Old Testament to them: "in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt. 15:9). In Mark's record of the same incident, it is recorded that Jesus said: "Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition" (7:9). The world around us is clearly guilty of this. Are we? Is our worship as God would have it, or are we bringing into the household of faith those traditions of the world that we so enjoy, endeavouring to cloak them with a form of respectability?

Engaging in carol services, both in our halls and in public places, and interspersing the music with Scripture readings, on the grounds that the public will be drawn to such activities because they are familiar with it, does not make it right or acceptable to God. The end does not justify the means. Ecclesias take advantage of other public/religious holidays to hold fraternals, study days, etc. Why do we not do the same on the 25th and 26th of December? (The writer is aware that in Australia a Bible School is held over that period.) Surely that is a better use of our time, rather than a self-indulgence of the type the world encourages, and also a better witness.

Take heed

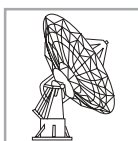
As we prepare for the return of Jesus we must ensure that we do not fall into the trap of mimicking the world and becoming snared in their false ways. Although in our preaching it is right

to use modern methods to spread the gospel (seminars, web pages, newspaper and radio advertising, etc.), we must always ensure that due reverence is accorded to God and Christ. We must also ensure that our worship is acceptable to God, that we have not turned our ears away from the Truth to fables, as Paul warned Timothy that some would (2 Tim. 4:4).

The world treats its religious beliefs like styles in dress or etiquette or diets, constantly changing from generation to generation. "I am the LORD, I change not", was the message Malachi gave to Israel (3:6), and the writer to the He-

brews refers to "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever", and therefore urges believers: "Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines" (13:8,9).

It is an awesome responsibility to bring men and women to a knowledge of the great Creator and Sustainer of the universe, to reveal His great and precious promises made sure in the Lord Jesus Christ: "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire" (12:28,29).



Science

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Science and the Creator

Silk and the silkworm

David Burges

THERE ARE many cases in nature of plants and animals which in the normal course of their lives produce excesses of materials that are useful to mankind for food or other purposes. Whilst these would seem to offer no obvious benefit to the producer and hence no survival advantage for natural selection, they can certainly be viewed as the gracious provision of the Creator, Who has provided a wonderful environment on the earth, and everything in it that is necessary and good for man. Typical examples of products that are produced in abundance, above that required by species for their own reproduction and survival, are milk and eggs, fruits, cereals and seeds of all kinds, providing for human consumption. Similarly, examples of naturally produced materials useful to man include both wool and silk.

An ancient textile

From antiquity, silk has been considered one of the finest and most luxurious of clothing fabrics, and it remains so, even in this age of synthetic fibres. Silk threads are produced by the larvae of butterflies and moths to spin the cocoons in which metamorphosis occurs.¹ But commercial silk is

produced only by the Chinese silkworm, which is actually the caterpillar of the moth *Bombyx mori*. The silkworms' natural food plant is the mulberry tree, although artificial diets have been developed. Today they live only in captivity, all wild populations having become extinct.

The practice of making silk from the silkworm reportedly first began in China about 2,600 B.C. The Chinese kept the secret of producing silk for thousands of years, trading the product to Europe and the Middle East. Silk (Heb. *meshi*)² was known in Israel, and is employed in Ezekiel's prophecy against faithless Jerusalem to symbolise the blessings that God had showered upon her (16:10,13). It is further referred to in the list of commerce of Great Babylon in Revelation 18:12 (Gk. *sērikon*, from *Sēr*, the Greek name for China). During the eleventh century, European traders stole several eggs, and seeds of the mulberry

1. Of course, spiders also produce remarkable silk threads to form their webs: see "The spider . . . is in kings' palaces", Aug. 1999, p. 319.
2. Other references to silk (Prov. 31:22; Gen. 41:42, mg.; Ex. 25:4, mg.) translate the word *shesh*, which is everywhere else rendered as 'fine linen'.