

From the Editor's postbag

Comments on items received from readers

Rapid growth of a rain forest

It is widely accepted that various features of our planet took many millions of years to develop, and that this fits evolution rather than creation, but every so often something emerges which blows apart this view. An example of this appears in the *New Civil Engineer* magazine for 23 September, the item being derived from the *Independent* newspaper. It reads as follows:

"Scientists have been puzzling over a rainforest that has apparently grown in just 150 years. Grown from a 'mixed bag of botanical scrap' brought over by the Royal Navy in 1843, the forest on Ascension Island defies previous assumptions that such forests take millions of years to develop".

Zipporah and the circumcision

In "Zipporah and the circumcision" ([Sept. p. 350](#)) there is a reference to "Zipporah's strong language" when she circumcised her son, and to her being "shamed and angry". I have been referred to a different view of her words to be found in Brother Aleck Crawford's book *Proverbs*,¹ as given in the following extracts:

"Zipporah perceives the cause of Moses' affliction, and takes it upon herself to do what Moses should have done. She circumcises the boy and associates Moses with the act by touching him with the blood from the circumcision wound. To think of the remark ['a bridegroom

of blood' (RSV)] as upbraiding is more than likely a by-product of the unfortunate AV translation ['bloody husband']. Her words are more probably of relief and gratitude that her marriage, threatened with termination in the death of Moses, is thus renewed. He has become her bridegroom once again thanks to the blood of the circumcision" (as cited by Brother Crawford from the *New Bible Commentary Revised*);

"There is one further point that needs to be clarified. The phrase 'cast it at his feet' (AV) is misleading and causes some writers and readers to wrongly assume that Zipporah was either angry at Moses or disgusted with the rite. The following translations give the more accurate wording 'made it touch his feet': AV mg., RV mg., ROTH mg., NASB mg., RSV; or 'touched him', NEB; 'touched his legs', New Jewish Version; cf. also NAB, New World Translation, and NBCR".

Russia resurgent

A reader has passed me a copy of a *Times* supplement entitled "The New Russia" (14 October). With the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, following the loss of its domination over Eastern Europe, Russia, by far the largest of the fifteen countries which made up the Soviet Union, went into a period of political, military and economic decline under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, culminating in a near economic

collapse in 1998. Businessmen, often referred to as oligarchs (an oligarchy is rule by a small group), dominated politics and economic affairs hand-in-glove with Yeltsin. With the handing over of the presidency to Vladimir Putin on 31 December 1999 things took a different turn, however, and Russia is now rapidly growing in power, wealth and influence, as we would expect from Bible prophecy. An article in October drew attention to the increasingly autocratic nature of Mr. Putin's rule.²

The following extracts from the introductory article to the supplement illustrate the change in Russia in recent years:

"... Russia's economists and businessmen remain buoyantly optimistic. The economy, floating on a rising tide of oil wealth, continues to grow at an unprecedented rate and foreign investment is pouring in";

"For Russians, the key component of prosperity is stability. Since Putin came to power four years ago, the return of a more authoritarian form of government after the turmoil of the Yeltsin years has been widely welcomed. Russians have a fear of anarchy, inculcated by history. Russians believe, instinctively, that only a strong figure, exuding unquestioned authority, can govern their sprawling country".

1. Vol. 1, p. 22. Available from the Christadelphian Scripture Study Service.

2. ["Towards an autocrat of Russia"](#), Nigel Bernard, p. 392.

Significant points highlighted in the supplement are:

- Russia's economy has enjoyed "robust growth" for six years now; the rate of growth in the second quarter of 2004 was 7.4 per cent
- Foreign investment in Russia doubled in 2003
- Russia is the world's biggest natural gas exporter and second biggest oil exporter, accounting for up to 25 per cent of GDP, and rising world oil prices are strengthening her position
- Russia's once mighty aerospace industry is being revived and a new car industry is being developed
- The government is investing extensively in agriculture
- An information technology (IT) industry is being rapidly developed, with Russian computer programmers proving to be some of the world's best, and Russian companies competing with India to outsource IT work for companies in the West.

Declining numbers

In the "[Publishing Editor's column](#)" for August (p. 305) I referred to declining numbers of Christadelphians in Britain, due to lack of interest in the Truth by those outside and fewer young people accepting the Truth. This has attracted three letters, though none were intended for publication, from which the following has been extracted.

One letter suggests that our failure to attract converts to the Truth is partly due to lack of personal commitment, but partly due to the higher standards of belief and conduct which we require of people than do churches which have more success in attracting people. It suggests three ways in which we

might be successful in attracting more people to accept the Truth:

- 1 Making more effort to welcome non-members at our meetings, rather than giving them the impression that we are a members' club in which outsiders are not welcome. Our correspondent recognises the need to balance this with our position on fellowship, particularly regarding the partaking of the emblems.
- 2 Being more pro-active in going to meetings and classes organised by others and seeking to use discussion as an opportunity to open people's minds to the true gospel.
- 3 Making more effort to spread the gospel personally to friends, neighbours, work-mates, etc.

A second letter enclosed a copy of a review by Richard Wheatcroft from The Centre for Progressive Christianity of a book called *Saving Christianity: New Thinking for Old Beliefs* by Hilary Wakeman, one of the first women to be ordained a priest in the Church of England.³ She addresses in the book the problem which the mainstream churches in Britain are having in maintaining their numbers.

Hilary Wakeman's theme is that Christianity must express its beliefs in "thought forms and words" which are meaningful to people today. This is true up to a point for ourselves; we need to talk to people about the Truth in language they understand, and write in ways they can understand; and to a considerable extent, in my view, we do this. However, if, as we must, we try to instruct people in Biblical concepts, there is a limit to how far we can go in talking to people in

contemporary language. They have to understand what the Bible actually teaches; we cannot abandon Biblical teaching because it does not correspond to the way people think and express themselves today.

The following paragraph from the review shows what the book is really about:

"The major part of the book is devoted to the exploration of some basic Christian beliefs and how we can find new ways of expressing them. They include beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Birth, the Death of Jesus and its Meaning, the Resurrection, the Logos, the Word of God, Holy Spirit and Trinity. Using a broad spectrum of Catholic and Protestant scholarship, she discusses both the origins of each belief and the historical/linguistic context in which it was expressed. She then suggests ways in which the truth of each belief can be recast and expressed today. In a few cases she suggests abandoning a particular belief as not essential to the fullness of Christian faith".

There are certainly many orthodox Christian beliefs which could do with being abandoned, and Hilary Wakeman may well be including some of them in her book. However, they need to be replaced by Bible truth, and it seems unlikely that Ms Wakeman is proposing to do that. In a quotation from her book in the review she talks about the "original poetic sense" of Church beliefs having been replaced by a belief that they are "literally true", and this sug-

3. Review obtained from a website http://www.tpcp.org/resources/reviews/saving_christianity.htm.

gests to me that she wants to abandon belief in such things as a literal virgin birth and a literal resurrection of Christ. Her conclusion apparently is that the Church will continue to exist in two forms, one consisting of people who take the beliefs expressed in the creeds as literally true and one consisting of

people who are drawn to the teaching of Jesus but who have a variety of views about him.

Hilary Wakeman's book demonstrates what *not* to do in the face of declining numbers, that is, to water down or abandon entirely beliefs that are thought to be unpalatable today, although the doctrines she wants

to water down or abandon are mainly not those which we hold. Not only do we have the duty to uphold the Truth, whether it is popular or not, but the indications are that trying to give it more appeal by modifying it to suit the times we live in will not work anyway.

Tony Benson

The death of Mr Palestine

Nigel Bernard

IN JOEL 3 the gathering of nations to Armageddon is described: "I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for My people and for My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted My land" (v. 2). In this context God addresses some peoples in particular: "Yea, and what have ye to do with Me, O Tyre, and Zidon, and all the coasts of Palestine?" (v. 4). The phrase "coasts of Palestine" refers to the area today known as the Gaza Strip. That this area today has such a distinct identity, an identity which can then be linked with prophecy, is in no small part due to the influence of Yasser Arafat, who died last month.

Arafat's career

In writing of his legacy, one writer stated: "He was commonly described as 'Mr Palestine', the iconic leader of the Palestinians, the symbol of Palestinian nationalism".¹ Shimon Peres, who won the Nobel Peace Prize with Arafat in 1994, wrote of him as follows: "He has done more than any other leader to forge a unique and separate Palestinian identity. He was the voice and symbol of the Palestinian cause. His tireless efforts brought the Palestinian cause to the forefront of the international agenda and kept it there for four decades".² Arafat helped the weak Palestinians to say, "I am strong" (Joel 3:10).

When Arafat appeared before the United Nations in 1974 he said: "I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand".³ These words sum up the paradox of the man.

He proclaimed, and fought, an armed struggle against Israel, a struggle which for him began in 1948 when he fought with Palestinian irregulars against Israel in the area around Gaza. In the late 1950s he helped form the underground Fatah guerrilla group, and by 1969 had become chairman of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Yet, as a result of his role in the Oslo Agreement, incredibly this man was to win the Nobel Peace Prize!

Of course, this did not herald peace. As suicide bombings began as part of the violent reaction to the visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount in 2000, the Israelis blamed Arafat and called him a terrorist. Arafat's life was a microcosm of what we can expect to happen on a greater scale in the future. Out of violence a cry of peace incredibly emerges, only to be followed by destruction: "For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3).

Born in Jerusalem?

In his biography of Arafat written in the early 1970s, Thomas Kiernan wrote about the claim that Arafat was born in Jerusalem:

"It has become the conventional wisdom within the Arab world, and it has been

1. Cockburn, P. (2004), "The man they called Mr Palestine", *The Independent*, 12 Nov., p. 6.
2. Peres, S. (2004), "With the passing of their father, the Palestinians have a chance to emerge", *The Times*, 12 Nov., p. 16.
3. Quoted by Cockburn, *op. cit.*