

THE WORLD BEFORE JESUS

In this chapter we will talk about the condition of the human race before the birth of Jesus, asking what was the world like when He was born. The Bible tells us that Jesus was born in the fullness of time. What does this mean ? Why was He born in that particular moment in history? What was so special about it? In the next chapter we will talk about the condition of the chosen people, the Jews, the nation from which came Jesus. what were they like? Were they aware of His coming ? Were they ready to receive Him?

One of the questions that faced us, as we began thinking about these two chapters, is how far back shall we go in history, to accomplish what we want? One option would be to concentrate on the conditions under which the Jewish nation lived at the time Jesus was born, their problems, their aspirations, and avoid going too far in the past, by considering what actually happened in the few years that preceded His birth. Using the same approach we could focus on the conditions under which the rest of the world lived, when dealing with that topic. This would be the easiest way to deal with these two chapters, but it would be the least effective way to show the background against which Jesus was born. To fully understand the present, one must go back to the past and study it with special attention to those elements which influenced the present which we are interested in. Sometimes a similar question is raised by Christians, how far should we go back in the past, if we want to understand Christianity? Do we have to study the Old Testament? Many of these do not wait for an answer, because they have already decided that they do not need the Old Testament to understand the New Testament. But, they soon find that there are many things in the N.T. that they don't understand. The reason is simple, the N.T. is the end of the story, while the O.T. is the beginning, and it does not make any sense to try to make heads or tails of the end of an episode without knowing the beginning.

This is why we decided to go to the past, treating those aspects

of it which are related to what we are interested in, with brevity and accuracy, ignoring the details which are irrelevant, and focusing on those which are relevant. As we approach the coming of Jesus, more details will be dealt with, in the hope of painting for the reader a most vivid picture of what it was really like when the infant of Bethlehem was born.

The coming of Jesus to the world, is the last chapter in the story of mankind and its relationship with God. To fully understand it, one has to read the other chapters that preceded it. And in order to appreciate the full meaning of the most important purpose of His coming; which was to save mankind from disaster, we have to know the whole story, not only the last chapter.

Here is the story from the very beginning, summarized, abbreviated, but, complete and concise.

Chapter 1:

The Lord God creates the universe, several billions of Galaxies, each made of billions of stars, planets, moons, meteors, comets,..etc. He also creates billions of angels to serve Him, and carry out his orders. The exact date of this creation and how long did this phase last was never revealed by God.

Chapter 2:

One of the chief angels called Lucifer decides to wrest the control of the universe from God. For an unknown reason, he felt that he is more worthy than Him, to be the master of this vast empire. He was able to recruit one third of the angels of heaven for this cause, and one day he tried, but he failed and was banished from heaven, with his followers.

Chapter 3:

The Lord God decides to create another creation; mankind, and selected the planet earth to put it. But the planet was not in the shape that could support the new life form , so God made some changes to make it suitable for the new creation, and then planted

a garden in Eden to be the home of Adam and Eve. It took six days from God to do that.

Chapter 4:

Adam and Eve lived in the garden happy, loving each other and loving God, until Lucifer whose name became Satan, outsmarted them, telling them to eat of the forbidden fruit, which God told them not to. When they did, they were both kicked out of the garden, and were separated from their creator. Satan did that for the purpose of upsetting God's plan in creating man. He and his followers may have thought that they have succeeded in defeating God. But God had a plan to save His beloved man from the destiny that he deserved. After He made aprons for Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness, He promised that from the seed of the woman, there will come the one who will bruise the serpent's (Satan's) head, and thus defeat Satan, and upset his plans for mankind.

Chapter 5:

Man goes out into the world and continues to listen to Satan, and continues to disobey God. After thousands of years God decides to put His plan to save man into action. So, He selects a man from a city called Ur whose name was Abram, and asks him to leave his people, and his home and promises to make him a great nation, in whose seed all the tribes of the earth will be blessed. Abram obeys God, and follows Him to the promised land. But Abraham's wife (his name was changed by God) was barren, but God gave her a boy called Isaac, who had two sons, Essua, and Jacob. God chose Jacob and made a covenant with him, as He did with Abraham and Isaac. And Jacob had twelve boys, who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Up to this point in history the Israelites were about seventy people, and they came to live in Egypt, because there was a famine in the promised land; Canaan, and Joseph one of the twelve was prime minister over the land of Egypt.

Chapter 6:

The Israelites remain in Egypt, and become many thousands. When they are mistreated by the Egyptians, God sends Moses to liberate them from the oppression of Egypt, and to establish them as an independent nation, from which the promised Messiah who will save mankind is supposed to come. From this point on, the nation of Israel appears on the world stage as a new force that will interact with the existing nations, especially those who are in the immediate vicinity. This interaction affected both Israel and its neighbors, and began the series of events that determined the circumstances against which Jesus was born.

Chapter 7:

The new nation had to deal with the nations which the Lord God had decided to take their land and give it to Israel. These were the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. A brief biography of each of these nations will be helpful in describing the world that the Israelites faced as they attempted to establish themselves as a new nation.

The Canaanites:

These are the descendants of Canaan, who was the fourth son of Ham, one of the three sons of Noah. Canaan was cursed by Noah, when he said, "Cursed be Canaan, a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (Gen 10:25). They were mainly traders and inhabited the coast land. They worshipped many gods, of whom the most famous were Baal, Dagon, and the goddesses Asheresh and Ashtroth; the goddesses of war and sex, who were followed by a cult of prostitutes.

The Amorites:

These are also descendants from Canaan through his first born. They dwelt in the land of Canaan, in the hill country. Abraham formed an alliance with them, and with their help he conquered the four kings who invaded Sodom and Gomorrah. They are also known for

their

great infiltration into Babylonia, where they established an Amorite dynasty, the most famous king of whom was Hammurabi, who

conquered the other two Amorite states; Assur, and Mari. At the time of the Israeli invasion Sihon of Hesbon and Og of bashan were Amorite kings. The tribes of Gad, Reuben, and half of Menassah occupied their land. Also the men of Ai, Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmouth, Lachish, and Eglon were Amorites. They were all conquered

by Israel, and gradually absorbed in the general population.

The Hittites:

They were also an ethnic group which descended from another of Canaan's children; Heth. They inhabited the central ridge of Judah. They were migrant groups from the Hittite empire which they established in Asia Minor. Abraham dwelt among them, and bought from them the field of Ephron at Machpela, to use as a burying ground. These were the people from whom Esau married his two wives

to the chagrin of his parents. These too were gradually absorbed in the general population.

The Hivites:

These were also another ethnic group which descended from another one of Canaan children. They dwelt in what is known now as Lebanon.

They were laborers who worked for king Solomon as slaves. They were

also mentioned in the days of king David, when he sent Joab to count the population, who, during his travels came to the fortress of Tyre and the cities of the Hivites. They too were gradually absorbed in the general population.

The Jebusites:

These were also another ethnic group which descended from the third son of Canaan. They dwelt in the hills around Jerusalem. One of their kings; Adoni Zedec was mentioned in Joshua as king of Jerusalem, who feared the Israeli conquest, and made an alliance with several kings as a protection against an Israeli invasion. But Joshua conquered them all. They nevertheless continued to rule Jerusalem, until Judah conquered them in the early days of the judges. They regained control of the city after that, until David defeated them and took Jerusalem for good.

The Perizzites:

These were not an ethnic group like the others, but they were people who probably got their name from the place that they lived in. The word "Peraza" means "hamlet", and the fact that these people dwelt in hamlets scattered along the hill side, and the fact that they were not mentioned with the other groups in the account that came in Genesis about the descendants of Canaan (Gen 10:15), makes a good argument in favor of that conclusion. But the fact that God mentioned them when He promised the Israelites to give the lands that these nations occupied, points to the fact that they were a group to be reckoned with as any other group that lived in the promised land. These too were absorbed in the general population.

These were the nations which had to be destroyed, and whose land the Israelites had to take, under strict orders from God. They all worshipped idols, and in order to survive in the world at that time as independent nations, they had to be physically tough, militarily strong, and psychologically belligerent. So the Israelites had a big job ahead of them as they crossed the Jordan to possess the land that God has promised them. This was the state of the region that the Israelites had to face. This is a small corner of the world. How about the rest of it?

While this was happening in the land of Canaan, there were other

people living in the rest of the world. The most important of these were the people living in ancient Egypt, and those living in Mesopotamia. In those two places an advanced civilization was developing, with the one in Egypt ahead of the one in Mesopotamia. These two civilizations had advanced knowledge, and sophisticated technology, in many branches of science, and other branches of knowledge. Their accomplishments were so advanced to the extent that they were ahead of the rest of the world almost in every field of endeavor. As a result, they developed formidable war machines, and had control over vast empires that they ruled with iron and fire. It is interesting to note that these two nations were involved with the nation of Israel several times, and had a strong impact on it. A comparison of these two early civilizations, and what happened to them as time got closer to the beginning of the first century, will reveal the kind of world that Jesus was born in.

Egypt:

The Egyptians very early in history, while most of the human race lived a primitive life, were able to build a civilization, unparalleled in the history of mankind. They excelled in almost every phase of their life. Their accomplishments in the fields of writing, medicine, architecture, astronomy, mathematics, art, military conquest and agriculture, just to mention a few, made some of the historians who studied the ancient Egyptian civilization marvel at the level of sophistication of those accomplishments, to the extent that some of them, claimed that such advanced results could not have been attained by the ancient Egyptians themselves, but must have been the work of an advanced race who came to earth from another planet.

What makes the ancient Egyptian civilization unique is the fact that it was established earlier than any other. It flourished before the Minoans of Crete built their palace at Knossos, and more than 900 years before Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Another distinction is the fact that it sustained its achievements for more than 2500 years, a span of continuous success that no

other country can equal in the long history of humanity.

Egypt was helped by its location. And while the other early civilization which flourished in Mesopotamia stood on an open plane, and consequently spent much of its time and energy fighting off invaders, Egypt enjoyed the protection of arid deserts on both sides, which discouraged most invaders, which meant that the people lived in relative security. Such security often produces a strong organization, and may be it was the gift of organization more than any other that enabled the ancient Egyptians to establish such a dominant and enduring civilization.

To understand these unique people, one has to study their beliefs and convictions, which, no doubt were the motivating forces behind their accomplishments. The ancient Egyptians believed in themselves, they believed in a variety of gods, which were regarded as personal gods. Pharaoh was considered a god, with a small "g". They enjoyed life to the extent that they looked on death as something that transfers them from this life to another where they will continue to live. This is why they embalmed the bodies of their dead, and buried with them the things that they enjoyed in this life, so they will continue to enjoy them in the life to come. This reflects the determination of the Egyptians to keep things as they were for the longest possible time. Their prayers were for the gods to maintain the status quo. They, by and large, were a content and happy people, and their aspirations were to continue that way of life for ever. They did not want anything different, they wanted only more of the same.

The Egyptians lived on a much higher standard of living than the rest of the world. This kind of life, made them look on other nations as inferior to them, and when they conquered them, their military superiority deepened their feeling that they deserve whatever standard of life they enjoy.

This arrogance was evident in the way they treated the Israelites when they lived in Egypt. The Bible tells us that they made slaves out of them, and used them to provide the bricks that they used in building their cities. They despised them and, did not mix with

them even when Joseph was alive, because ,as the Bible tells us that,"every shepherd was an abomination unto the Egyptians" (Gen 46:34). This treatment was the only reason that brought the Israelites back to God, and began the series of events that ended in Moses leading them to freedom, thus beginning the independence of the nation of Israel.

The Egyptians also looked on the neighboring nations especially if they were strong militarily, as a threat to their high standard of living. This is why they invaded their neighbors, including Israel. Conquering these nations, not only protected their standard of living, but also contributed to it by the material gains that they produced.

Mesopotamia :

Turning now to the other civilization that existed at the time the Israelites began, we find quite a contrast. But before we compare these two civilizations, we should point out that the first father of the Israelites; Abraham came from this civilization. He came from a city called Ur which was located on the Euphrates river, near the Persian Gulf. He was a descendant of Shem one of Noah's sons. There is no doubt that Abraham enjoyed a relatively good life , and that he shared in the benefits of the civilization of that region. At the time of his call by God, it was about two millennia before the birth of Christ. at that time the third dynasty of Ur was in power, and the twelfth dynasty of the middle kingdom in Egypt was also in power. As we mentioned before these two civilizations were quite different. While the Egyptians were content with the level of accomplishments that they were able to attain, and as a result were optimistic, and happy, we find the mesopotamians less optimistic and on their guard all the time. As a result they were harsher, more erratic, less cooperative, and more threatening than the Egyptians. As to their religion, they were never as much at ease with their gods, as were the Egyptians. They blamed them, at least in part for the harsh physical realitiesÔ

that they had to live with. In Egypt where the Nile's annual flood brought a rich deposit of silt on the land, and made the soil respond by producing rich crops, in Mesopotamia the two rivers of Tigris, and Euphrates even though they had a higher annual flow, but in order to take advantage of this, a high level of organization was required, which the Mesopotamians did not quite attain. To add to this factor, it seems that there were other psychological factors, that contributed to their harshness and cruelty. The Babylonians took even their pleasures sadly. there was in their character, as recorded in their literature and art, an inclination toward savagery, combined with a generous dose of sensuality. They reflected the harshness of their life into their religious myths and cosmogonies. The establishment of order, out of chaos, is pictured as a savage and merciless fight between two groups of gods. Their belief in life after death was there, but it was not clear, if they will enjoy it or not. Two or three of their myths picture an offer of immortality being made to man, but each time it is lost, not due to man's fault, by due to the malice of some gods, or due to misfortune.

These two civilizations had a lot of contacts with the Israelites and affected them in a number of ways. Their social functions, their language, their food, their dress, were affected, but the most important influence that they had on them was in the area of worship. The Israelites, disregarding the commandments given to them by God, the most important of which was to love Him and worship Him, and Him only, worshipped a variety of idols, imitating the nations with whom they lived, no matter whether those nations were their masters or their slaves.

The Egyptians first contact with the Israelites happened when Jacob and his family came to Egypt while Joseph was ruler over the land around the year 1700 B.C. This happened during the period of the reign of the Hyksos. The Hyksos were of Semitic origin, and when they ruled Egypt, they posed as Egyptian Pharaohs. But when the true Egyptians regained control of the country, they began mistreating the Israelites. Then God sent Moses to lead them out

of Egypt, which happened between the years 1224 and 1220 B.C. probably during the reign of Pharaoh Merenptah. After this, the Israelites occupied parts of the land of Canaan which were held by the nations which we described before. They were supposed to destroy them, but they did not. As a result they were swayed by them to worship their gods.

The contact with Egypt was not terminated by the exodus, and the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, for the Bible mentions several occasions in which Egyptians either invaded the Jewish state before it was divided into two states, or became an ally of one of the two against the other. Solomon took one of Pharaoh's daughters as one of his wives in an attempt to forge a friendship with Egypt. But this did not improve the relationships between the two nations. After that Pharaoh Sheshonq offered asylum to one of Solomon's enemies, Jeroboam son of Nabat, who later challenged his son Rehoboam, and took from him ten and a half out